

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

ASK ANGOLA PRISON: WHAT DIFFERENCE CAN A PLAY MAKE?

LAUREN FLANDERS- When actress Liza Jessie Peterson took her acclaimed one woman show to the Louisiana State Penitentiary, better known as Angola for the massive plantation on which it stands, she had already performed it at 35 other prisons as well as in theaters across the US. The authorities at Angola had okayed the performance long ahead of time and arranged for it to be live streamed throughout the facility, which is the nation's largest maximum security prison. They even gave Peterson permission to bring in a camera crew. But shortly before she took to the stage, that filming permission was suddenly withdrawn. And although she went ahead with her performance anyway, before she could finish, the guards shut her entire performance down. Why? What happened on that stage and in that audience of 800 mostly incarcerated men? What was it that got authorities so concerned? "Angola Do You Hear Us? Voices From a Plantation Prison" is a new MTV documentary from director Cinque Northern and producer Catherine Gund. It tells the story in stark black and white of what happened in that prison in 2020. Clearly the officials at Angola heard something that touched a nerve. What was it? Well, we can't speak for the authorities, but our guests have some ideas about what it was. With me is Liza Jessie Peterson, award-winning playwright and actor, and Norris Henderson, former Angola inmate who co-founded the Angola Special Civic Project while he was incarcerated, and then VOTE, Voice of the Experienced, a group focused on criminal justice reform, upon his release. If ever any of you wondered what difference a play can make or if context for a performance matters, stay with us. Let me start with you, Norris. First, thank you so much for being with us. It's a pleasure to have you, and congratulations on this film, both of you. It's an extraordinary document. For those who don't know Angola, or at least don't know it as well as you do, Norris, tell us who's there. Where we are talking about. What Angola is like.

NORRIS HENDERSON- Angola is 18,000 acres large. It's the largest land based prison in America. The population at the time we were doing the film, at the time I was there, the population went from 5,000 to 6,000. And the population is predominantly people of color. I would venture to say 85% of the population is African American males.

LAUREN FLANDERS- Why was it so important for you to go there, Liza? You'd performed in lots of other places. What made Angola special?

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- 20 years ago when I was starting to write the play, I stumbled upon information about the Angola 3, which were three incarcerated men who served an extremely draconian amount of time in solitary confinement. Albert Woodfox, Herman King, and oh, help me out, Norris.

NORRIS HENDERSON- Hermie and Robert, yeah.

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- Herman and Robert, yes. Thank you, thank you. And so that piqued my interest about the institution, but the fact that Angola sits on an actual plantation was something that horrified me and intrigued me. And the name of the play, "Peculiar Patriot," harkens to a time when the institution of slavery in an antebellum south was referred to as the peculiar institution. So the name of my play is a play on the term that was used for slavery. So I thought what better location to bring this play than to an actual plantation that has been repurposed into a prison?

LAUREN FLANDERS- We're gonna hear a whole lot more about that. Let's check out the trailer of "Angola Do You Hear Us? Voices From a Plantation Prison."

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- Because of the significance of the land I was on, it was more than a performance. It felt like a calling. It felt like, like a mission.

NORRIS HENDERSON- Angola was a plantation.

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- Just because you see prison with your physical eyes, what do you see beyond that?

NORRIS HENDERSON- Start questioning why do we send people to prison and who's actually here?

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- My best friend, she said, you got a story to tell. Write that down. I just put the rage on the page 'because I had to do something.

[Inmate] Man, we need help.

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- I've been to 35 prisons across the country, but this I knew was historical. To be on a prison plantation, not just to perform, but to activate.

NORRIS HENDERSON- Everybody clung on to every word that she said.

[Inmate] I'm telling you, that place erupted.

[Inmate] You jump started our hearts and our minds.

NORRIS HENDERSON- Here was some truth, and somebody couldn't handle it.

[Inmate] Everybody knew why it was being shut down.

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- When I walked out on stage, I didn't even give it any thought. It was instinctive. I said, bam. I was in the presence of a whole bunch of sleeping giants. And I said, oh, they are awake now.

LAUREN FLANDERS- That's a trailer from the film we're discussing that documents the performance in 2020 by our guest Liza Jessie Peterson of her play, "Peculiar Patriot." It ends with the performance being shut down. Can you describe that moment, Liza, what happened?

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- I was performing my play, and I thought everything was going fine. The audience was having a great time audibly and visually, you know, people were laughing. And you know, I was in my zone as a performer. So I went backstage to get ready for my next scene, and there was an officer standing with Norris, and Norris informed me that there was an emergency and the play had to stop. And I just instinctively knew that there was not an emergency. So I just decided to come out and do a curtain call as if the play had officially ended even though it was prematurely ended. And so I went out and my normal curtain call, which is, you know, respectful bow, I just saw the men and the energy that I felt, and I just threw my fist in the air, and that created an uproar.

NORRIS HENDERSON- The thing about this was that it had been preapproved months in advance for Liza to come. And we had sent them the play for them to screen and everything was a go. This was a day that Liza could come in and entertain the guys. And in that moment though, it was kinda like this transformation. It was almost like you were telling a story about how people behave, and then in this moment, you actually saw that truth manifest itself. You know, when we start talking about the prison industrial complex, what it represents, how these folks are making money on the backs of y'all from the telephone, from the commissary, the whole nine yards, you hear people talk about that, but you never see it manifest.

LAUREN FLANDERS- So let me bring you into that, Liza, 'cause that very moment, it didn't happen just any place, as Norris is talking about. The shutdown, that the guards got that uncomfortable at the precise moment that you were hitting a message that had actually hit a nerve with you back in 1998. And in the documentary, you describe that very same truth telling as being what kind of set you on your mission.

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- So when I was a teaching artist at Rikers Island back in 1998, it was actually a correctional officer that referred to the adolescent boys who were 16, 17 and 18 years old detained at Rikers Island, and he told me that I was on a modern day plantation. And he pointed to the boys and he said, they're the new crops, they're the new cotton. And I was so shocked because I had never heard this language before. I had never heard this metaphor of

prison and slavery, you know, being one and the same. And so he sent me down, he literally booted and kicked me down the rabbit hole. And so I started doing research into the prison industrial complex, and it just put me further and further down into the draconian institution that we now refer to as mass incarceration. And the profitability of the industry was, as I said in the film, it was heartbreaking and infuriating. And so the more research I did, it just found its way, I incorporated it into the play.

LAUREN FLANDERS- So fast forward, Norris, how did "Peculiar Patriot," Liza's play, end up coming to Angola? Were you involved in that?

NORRIS HENDERSON- Yes, yes. Matter of fact, it was my initiation. Liza and I are part of an organization called Art for Justice and it's connecting activists with artists. And we had a convening here in New Orleans, and I took a tour of folks to Angola. And while we were there, I was explaining to the group what the inner workings of the institution was. And when I mentioned to Liza that there was a drama club there, that guys would put on plays and skits and stuff for us, she got excited. She was like, oh man, I would sure love to come and perform for the guys. Said, well, let's work on that.

LAUREN FLANDERS- And let's give our audience a little bit more on your history. I mean, you had the pull that you had and the relationship you had with that prison from the inside out. How many years were you there for?

NORRIS HENDERSON- 27 years, 10 months, and 18 days. Spent a while there, but I tell people all the time, prison was a bad experience with good results because I wouldn't be doing the work that I do now had it not been for that negative experience. We wouldn't be having this conversation had I not had that negative experience. So there's value in those lessons learned while I was there, and those relationships that I built while I was there. And it was based upon those relationships that I was able to open the door, not just for Liza to come in, but for hundreds of people to come in.

LAUREN FLANDERS- Liza, I'm still so struck by that phrase in your play where you say, same plantation, new job title. Was that a new thought to the people that were in that audience, Norris, or was she just saying it from a stage something that you from the inside had already been thinking about, aware of, et cetera?

NORRIS HENDERSON- I think what made the moment, it wasn't so much the guys, it was how security responded to that. The guys were kinda like all in, like she was saying earlier. Guys were laughing. Some guys were crying. 'Cause it was in that moment that, you know, you get in this moment where you kinda like become politicized. And in that moment, for those guys who already knew the ugly history of the farm, they were like all in. For the guys, for some guys, this

was that wake up moment. It was that moment that people had been telling them about, and it was like, nah, say it ain't so. But then that moment when she started telling that story, and again, it started reckoning with people. People started reconciling what their own situations like, oh, she's talking about me, you know? Oh, that was similar to my circumstance. And then the bigger picture of the prison industrial complex, they got it. That is a plantation by every definition of a plantation. One of the rude awakenings for me was, we were picking cotton. And in that moment, I got this long sack, and that has to be filled up before the end of the day. And all I can envision going down that road picking cotton, it was like no trash, just the cotton. 'Cause if you had trash in your bag, you were gonna get punished, you're gonna get locked up. And then thinking about, man, this is what my ancestors have been through and reliving that. And for some of us, you know, we kinda like learning to swallow it, you know? It didn't taste good, but you learned to swallow it. But that day it almost woke up that sleeping giant. And that giant was, today, today is the day that this is gonna stop.

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- What I was saying in my play just reaffirmed what they had probably been trying to tell so many people. They were ringing their own alarm, and so I came along and I reaffirmed what they've already been doing. And then the ones who may have been kind of, maybe, is it really? I'm not sure. Then it just ignited them to let them know, yes, it's true. And then when they shut it down, it just affirmed that what I was saying was actually true.

LAUREN FLANDERS- Well, while we're talking about igniting, you say in another part of the film that part of your project is to ignite imagination.

NORRIS HENDERSON- Let me ask you this. If this was your last time to ever say anything, what would be the last thing you would say? What would you tell us?

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- Harriet Tubman, she was born into slavery. That's all she knew, but she saw something bigger than what she saw with her own physical eyes. So just because you see prison with your physical eyes, what do you see beyond that? Because if she could see freedom when all she saw was plantation and slave life, then we can envision a life and a world without mass incarceration.

[Inmate] Sis, and I know it's safe to say 'cause I can speak for every individual in here because I'm the voice of the youngsters, and I'm the voice of the older guys in here. Man, we need help here. We need help.

LAUREN FLANDERS- In that clip, and I love it, Liza, you challenge the notion, in fact, that you can't be what you cannot see. And I've always thought, in fact, generations have been what they could not see. You talk about imagining a world without prisons, a world without

incarceration. To what extent have you seen that imagining take off since this performance, either at Angola or elsewhere that you work or in your own life?

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- So I've seen restorative justice, which is a form of bringing both parties, the injured and the person who did the injuring together as a healing modality. I had never seen that before when I first entered into this work. So many, you know, reentry programs, VOTE being one of them. You know, just really giving people who are justice impacted by information, political infrastructure to use their power to make change.

NORRIS HENDERSON- The last question you kinda like asked Liza about the impact, 'cause we didn't see the impact that it actually had on the guys. But when we were here recently to do a premiere of "Angola Do You Hear Us?" Some of the guys who were actually present in the audience in Angola are actually on the streets. And those guys shared with us that intimacy around what that place was like after we left. And it was like one guy who, when it was live streaming, he was watching it in another location in the prison, and how excited everybody was and how disgruntled it became when they shut it down. And it's like with anything else. It was like, if they didn't want us to see it, must be something good for us to see. And so we channeled that. We channeled that into getting elected a progressive prosecutor. We got a new sheriff in our parish, which is our county. And so, it--

LAUREN FLANDERS- The first black woman sheriff.

NORRIS HENDERSON- First black woman sheriff in the history of this state. And all that came because those guys in that moment realized that you actually do have power, but that power is collective. How do we collectivize our stories, our suffering? And the story of me becomes the story of us, and we turned those stories into action.

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- VOTE had boots on the ground for many years in Angola, and VOTE had the infrastructure, a mechanism already in place. So when I came, I activated the people who were in attendance. And Norris, through VOTE, was able to harness and channel that energy, that electrifying energy into channels that they had already had set up. They had already had the mechanisms in place. So it was a beautiful intersection of art and activism.

LAUREN FLANDERS- This year in 2022, we saw several states pass ballot initiatives banning exactly the kind of prison unpaid labor, slave labor, that you were kind of putting your finger on there in Angola. I wanna ask both of you if you feel like this is the sort of cutting edge, the leading edge of where the movement is today, and what makes that intersection between incarceration and capitalism, our economy and our communities so potent?

NORRIS HENDERSON- This is the cutting edge right now because people are becoming more and more aware about why these institutions exist. And I tell people the fence is not to keep people in, the fence is to keep people out, you know? And so it's people like you, Laura, that will give voice to this because your listening audience or viewing audience, have probably never got the opportunity to speak to some of them or none of them. But this gives us an opportunity to tell the Paul Harvey version of that story.

LAUREN FLANDERS- I always say that your isolation is our isolation too.

NORRIS HENDERSON- That's right, exactly.

LAUREN FLANDERS- Liza, to you, same question. What makes this intersection so potent and perhaps this moment so potent?

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- Because people are ready for something different. People are, I think at the tipping point, the breaking point. I'm hopeful that, you know, they always say, you know, there's a breakdown before the breakthrough. And I think we are witnessing the breakdown. So I'm applauding the breakdown 'cause I know on the other side is the breakthrough.

LAUREN FLANDERS- Before we close, I'd love both of you to address the question we always ask at the end of our show, which is what do you think the story will be that the future tells of this moment?

NORRIS HENDERSON- I think the story the future would tell now is that this was a challenging time. And I think the resiliency or the resistance, I take resiliency back. The resistance of the people was that they felt that if they can look up, they can get up. And so it kept this thing going. I mean, you know, to be in a country that was founded through resistance, I think we're in that moment now. I think if we look at the last election cycle, it was that resistance. We're not going backwards no more. We're kinda like planting our flag, and from this day forward, we would look back at the early 20, you know, the 2000s and say, oh, that was some tumultuous times, but we got through it. And we got through it because the story of me became the story of us. We collectivized our stories.

LAUREN FLANDERS- Well, that's where art and theater come in, right, Liza?

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- Absolutely, absolutely. Art activates people's hearts. When you activate people's hearts, then you can get people to change their consciousness, and their consciousness then turns into action. So I think that people will look back at this moment and scratch their heads at the depths of inhumanity that this country was able to languish in for so

long. And the imagination and the will to create and build something different, to build something that includes empathy and humanity and healing.

LAUREN FLANDERS- We had in Sarah Jones, your Def Poetry Jam colleague on the show not so long ago. She says, hurt people hurt people and free people free people. Thank you all. It's been great having you. Norris, Liza, appreciate it. Congratulations on the film. I wanna encourage people to check it out. We'll put more information at our website. Thanks for joining us.

LIZA JESSIE PETERSON- Thank you.

NORRIS HENDERSON- Thank you.

LAUREN FLANDERS- Isolation, lockdown. We started using those words a lot during the worst of the Covid 19 pandemic to describe the ways that we were living in our homes, socially distancing in order to stop the spread of a pandemic disease. We used the words casually, but the effects were real enough. And more than one person this Thanksgiving told me that what they were most grateful for was breaking out of isolation and returning to a world of human touch. Our experience of isolation though is nothing in comparison to what is experienced by people in this country's prisons and even our jails. The Angola 3 in Angola prison, Louisiana State Penitentiary spent decades in isolation. Two of the three, 40 years each in 23 hours a day lockdown. Think about it. Prisoners can't break themselves out of isolation, but we can. Many states and cities are right now considering ending the practice, as it's used as a means of punishment and control. But isolation is something that people on the outside can do something about too, by adopting prisoners to write to or even visit so that we would learn more about what they're actually going through. The film about the play, "Peculiar Patriot," that was shut down in mid performance at Angola Prison is out now streaming on TV. You can check it out and find my full uncut conversation with today's guests by subscribing to our free podcast. In the meantime, thank you for breaking out of your isolation and for being kind and curious and joining us here on the "Laura Flanders Show." Till the next time, I'm Laura Flanders. Thank you.

For more on this episode and other forward thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast. It's all at laura.flanders.org.