

David Mckenna and **Freddy Gutierrez's** transatlantic collaboration with and alongside individuals in the UK and USA prison systems explores belonging, place and lived experience through movement and poetry/spoken word intersecting notions of masculinity and mental health. In October 2019, they delivered Say Man, Take Heart at HMP Stafford alongside eleven residents and prison staff. Here, they reflect on this journey

Say man, take heart

Freddy Gutierrez. Photo: Antwan Banks Williams.



Beginnings

UK dance artist David Mckenna and USA writer/poet Freddy Gutierrez first met and began working together in 2017 when David was awarded an Artist International Development Fund grant from Arts Council England. This facilitated the beginning of an inspiring and ongoing artist exchange between the two men. During this time, David worked for eight days with members of the Artistic Ensemble at San Quentin State Prison, San Francisco, California, as an artist in residence working with Freddy and his fellow collaborators.

The Artistic Ensemble is composed of incarcerated and non-incarcerated artists and performers, described as being 'inside' and 'outside' ensemble members. Co-founded by Freddy and others in 2013 at San Quentin, the ensemble uses physical movement and storytelling to explore personal narrative and lived experiences, regularly sharing performances and events with family, friends



David Mckenna. Photo: Jenny Harper.

“I have never seen anything like that before. I saw men, not prisoners, in front of me.”

Audience member, HMP Stafford.

and artists inside the prison.

Whilst in residence at San Quentin, David taught movement technique rooted in parkour and contact improvisation to inside members of the ensemble and together they choreographed some original work. David and Freddy also experimented with fusing movement and text, also sharing this exploration with ensemble members. This work continued a few months later when Freddy travelled to the UK for two days to work with David at HMP Berwyn in Wrexham, Wales.

Here was another opportunity to further explore this developing collaborative language and process

facilitated by integrating poetry and dance sessions with prison residents.

Here, Freddy talks about how the artistic partnership developed:

“David and I found that we work seamlessly together. Building on a combined 33 years of creative work and our collaboration in Wales in 2019, we landed a three-week residency at the prestigious Headland Center for the Arts located in Sausalito, California, just across the Golden Gate Bridge.

Headlands Center for the Arts is a multidisciplinary, international arts center dedicated to supporting artists; the creative process; and the development of new, innovative ideas and artwork. The residency offered us the opportunity to collaborate again but this time over a sustained period. This gave us the time and space to develop our working methods and forge a solid working relationship for future projects. The location of Headlands gave a unique opportunity for David to

access the Artistic Ensemble in San Quentin Prison, where we were able to try out some of our findings, share them with inside members, thus continuing their ongoing support and feedback. The residency offered us a viable environment in which to explore creative ideas and create scratch work (testing of ideas) for further development both in the USA and the UK.”

Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, USA

At Headlands, David aimed to make work that incorporated dance with live spoken word poetry. This approach was not only driven by Freddy’s work as a spoken word poet and writer but also in sharing his experience of working as an outside member of the Artistic Ensemble. For incarcerated ensemble members, giving voice to and speaking their experiences and their truths is a powerful and necessary part of the creative process and development of work for performance. The Headlands residency empowered David and Freddy to deepen their approach to collaboration with spoken word, poetry and movement to create several sketches of work. Soldier Boy, a scratch work created during the residency, sought to develop character, action, movement, location, artifacts, writing, sound and themes as a way of mining and realising source material. This work translated into trying out ideas with inside ensemble members and developing some of their existing movement material.

HMP Stafford, UK

In October of 2019, with funding from Arts Council England, Freddy was able to travel to the UK to continue working with David on their creative approach. They developed a three-week residency at HMP Stafford with a group of 11 residents called Say Man, Take Heart. Through their process, they developed a 45-minute performance piece, which was shared with the participants’ friends and family, prison staff and other prison residents. Freddy and David especially wanted the poetry/spoken word aspects of their approach to be shared with a UK-based artist and so invited Derby-based poet and writer Jamie Thrasivoulou to join them for the project at HMP Stafford.

David reflects on this work:

“The Say Man, Take Heart project at HMP Stafford provided fertile creative ground to further mine and Freddy’s explorations with the Artistic Ensemble in the USA. It enabled us to bring our research and work to the UK so that we could start to embed the work in a UK prison. With the ensemble at Headlands we explored themes of belonging, place

and personal experience with intersections into masculinity and mental health. The movement material was created by the participants because of their writing – their poetry became the inspiration for the choreography. Movement was gestural, visceral, dynamic and also included character-based physicality.

The success of Say Man, Take Heart was tangible validation that there is a place for building a group like the Artistic Ensemble inside a prison in the UK and our plans are now focused on doing just that.”

The future

During 2020-21, Freddy and David continued to plan their next steps. Their partnership strives not only to deepen their practice but to develop an authentic collaboration and exchange between San Quentin and HMP Stafford. These as places, spaces and venues where groups of incarcerated people can experience belonging to an ensemble of dancers and performers and to quote the Artistic Ensemble, “discover more about what it means to be human by connecting with each other”.

David and Freddy’s future work is focused on developing a group inside HMP Stafford that is based on the model of the USA Artistic Ensemble. Aims will focus on facilitating opportunities for the groups to connect remotely, to jointly rehearse and potentially create together.

Here, there is a rich opportunity for learning, exchange and partnership, and to continue exploration into ways in which people across the prison system can be creative and expressive, held by artists concerned with care, respect and providing spaces in which stories can be told.

This article was developed by David Mckenna, Freddy Gutierrez and curated by Yaël Owen-Mckenna.

Info

David Mckenna:
rubeingfrank@aol.com
www.beingfrank.co.uk

Freddy Gutierrez:
freddy.b.gutierrez@gmail.com
[@ /fg_manos](https://www.instagram.com/fg_manos)

Jamie Thrasivoulou:
www.jthras.com

Yaël Owen-Mckenna, Project Manager for Say Man, Take Heart in the UK:
ymsowen@hotmail.com