

CATHOLIC MOBILIZING NETWORK



Sister Spirit

A new one act play

by Mimi Gisolfi D'Aponte



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SISTER SPIRIT

A new one act by Mimi Gisolfi D'Aponte

with Marion Defeis

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SISTER SPIRIT

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PRODUCTION HISTORY

SISTER SPIRIT was presented as a staged reading at the Oratory Church of St. Boniface on November 16, 2012. Lighting and sound were by Ric Randig, direction by Mimi D'Aponte. The cast, in order of appearance, was as follows:

NARRATOR/PROSECUTING ATTORNEY	Jana O'Keefe Bazzoni
TOM	Ric Randig
SISTER MARIA	Patricia Robbins
CUSTOMS AGENT/JUDGE/DOCTOR	John Reid Currie
SONIA	Malini Singh McDonald
ATTORNEY BARBARA BENNET	Stephanie Bok
JANET	Elizabeth June
FRANCESCO	Mateo Predergast
BOB GREGORIO	Mark McGovern

SISTER SPIRIT

CHARACTERS

Narrator/Prosecuting Attorney

Tom Moran - Corrections Officer, early 40's, brusque

Sister Maria - Order of St. Joseph - Chaplain at Rikers Island, a shy, quiet-spoken woman in her 60's, becomes more of an extravert during the play

Sonia – young drug mule coerced into bringing drugs into JFK, Haitian accent

Janet – young drug mule tricked into bringing drugs into JFK, Southern accent

Barbara Bennet - Legal Aid attorney - working to help Rikers inmates, tough exterior with a heart of gold

Bob Gregorio - Executive Director of Correctional Association of New York – working to have RDL changed, family man type, strong, committed

Francesco - non-speaking role

Judge/Customs Agent/Doctor

THE SETTING

SISTER SPIRIT is a one-set play. There is a simple doorframe Stage Right indicating a hall outside a room. The room is multi-tasked. It is SISTER MARIA'S Chaplain office in Rikers Island, and BOB GREGORIO'S office at the Correction Association. It also becomes the JUDGE'S courtroom, and the IMMIGRATION OFFICER'S counter in JFK where luggage is searched. It's the DOCTOR'S office, and finally TOM'S office back in Rikers Island. Wall symbols change in the different scenes. The desk, and a few chairs, may be re-arranged. SISTER MARIA addresses the rally from a downstage podium.

TIME

The beginning years of the 21st Century

SCENE ONE

(The Hallway just outside the Prison Chaplain's Office, with background sounds of noisy voices. Enter SR. MARIA SL. CORRECTIONS OFFICER TOM MORAN enters quickly from SR and nearly collides with her)

TOM

(annoyed) Sorry!

SR. MARIA

Well, hello! Are you the new CO we've been hoping for?

TOM

Corrections Officer Tom Moran, that's me. First week in this place. And you're?

SR. MARIA

Sister Maria. Welcome to the Women's Center.

TOM

You're Sister Maria? Oh yeah, they told me about you . . .

SR. MARIA

Oh?

TOM

Yeah. They said there's this Chaplain nun people talk to. But shouldn't you be in a hospital, Sister? Or working with little kids in a school somewhere? I mean, what's a nice nun like you doing in a place like this? You don't think you're going to save anyone on Rikers Island . . .

SR. MARIA

Tom Moran, is it?

TOM

Yeah, Tom. That's me.

SR. MARIA

Well, I hope you'll drop in some time, Tom.

Who? Me? TOM

Any time. And welcome again! SR. MARIA

SCENE TWO

(The Office is now US customs at JFK, with seal on the wall. SONIA is coming through SR, carrying a suitcase. Enter two Customs Agents SL)

Please come this way, Miss. CA 1

Pardon? SONIA

You'll have to come with us. CA 1

Oh? What is this?! What are you doing! SONIA

Don't resist, Miss. It will only make it harder for you. CA 1

(CA 1 takes SONIA's suitcase, as SONIA registers shock. CA 2 opens it on desk. Goes thru contents; nothing. CA 1 begins to pat SONIA down.)

What are you doing? Stop! Please, stop! SONIA

Please remove your coat and jacket, Miss. CA 1

(CA 2 removes SONIA'S coat and jacket as she resists.)

SONIA

Please let me go! I have to go! My aunt she is meeting me! My babies wait for me!

(Together CA 1 and CA 2 feel beneath SONIA'S shirt and underclothes and retrieve plastic wrapped packets that have been strapped to her body.)

CA 1

Do you recognize these?

SONIA

(weeping) They did this to me! I don't know what is it!

CA 1

Come with us please.

(CA 2 keeps drugs, closes suitcase)

SONIA

(shouting) But I do nothing wrong! Please! My aunt she has my children! They wait for me! I don't know nothing of this! Please, my children wait for me!

(The agents exit with SONIA under duress.)

SCENE THREE

(SR. MARIA is in her office. There is a small wooden crucifix on the wall)
ATTY. Barbara Bennet enters SR.

ATTY. B.B.

Good morning, Sister.

SR. MARIA

Hi Barbara. How are you today?

ATTY. B.B.

In a mad hurry, with a crazy request, and just maybe you can help.

SR. MARIA
Help who? Whom?

ATTY. B.B.
Francesco.

SR. MARIA

(Finding file on desk)

He's the young boy from Columbia? The one who won't take a plea bargain?

ATTY. B.B.

You got it. His case comes up next week, and he insists he won't be pleading guilty.

SR. MARIA.

Remind me. He was staying in a friend's rented room?

ATT. B.B.

Right, right. And there was a drug raid - lots of good stuff stowed behind toys in a closet.

SR. MARIA

I see. So what can I do?

ATTY. B.B.

Sit in the courtroom . . .

SR. MARIA

Sit in the courtroom? Barbara, I've ever been inside a courtroom except as a tourist in Washington D. C.!

ATTY. B.B.

Listen! I've learned from a reliable source that the judge in this case is very religious . . .

SR. MARIA

Is he Roman Catholic?

ATTY. B.B.

No, he's an Orthodox Jew, but I think seeing you sitting there backing up Francesco just might help. Obviously you'd have to wear your habit . . .

SR. MARIA

(laughing) Barbara, our habits were disappearing during the 60's, and were long gone by the 70's

ATTY. B.B.

Oh . . . who knew? Well anyway, habit or no habit, your being there is the only fighting chance we've got. This kid refuses to lie and won't take a plea bargain. And Sister, you know as well as I – no plea equals a trial. And if he loses, it's a mandatory 15 to 25 years to life.

SR. MARIA

And he's more than likely to lose.

ATTY. B.B.

15 to 25 to life for a 17 year old who swears by his Mother's heart in Spanish AND in broken English that he knew nothing about drugs in his friend's closet!

SR. MARIA

All right, Barbara. I'll be there.

ATTY. B.B.

I should warn you - the case may drag on.

SR. MARIA

Well, I can always bring along the women's letters . . .

ATTY. B.B.

Not on your life. They won't let you bring in a thing – not even a magazine. Oh, and before I go, we have to talk about Janet's case, too. Now SHE'S trying to decide whether or not to take a plea. And it's coming up, like yesterday.

(There's a knock on the doorframe)

SR. MARIA

(to B.B.) Speaking of whom . . .

ATTY. B.B.

Right. But it's important! Catch you later. *(on way out)* Good morning, Janet.

(JANET enters, ATTY BB exits)

JANET

Morning.

SR. MARIA

Hi Janet. Come sit. How are you feeling this week?

JANET

Not so good.

SR. MARIA

Yes, I can see that. Now, could you remind me where we left off last time?

SCENE FOUR

(SONIA is now sitting in SR. MARIA'S office. She hands papers to MARIA)

SR. MARIA

So - You're Sonia! They said you'd be coming to see me.

SONIA

Yes.

SR. MARIA

Can you tell me about your situation?

SONIA

(burst into tears) I don't know why I'm here! I didn't do nothing! Nothing! And I'm scared for my children!

SR. MARIA

Sonia, would it help if you tell me the whole story? From the time you left home? And then perhaps we can help you.

SONIA

The whole story?

SR. MARIA

The whole story . . .

SONIA

So. I go to Haiti to visit my brother. He is very sick. My Mother she call me to come. She think he is dying.

SR. MARIA

Where were you living then?

SONIA

Queens. With my children. And my aunt. And my aunt's children.

SR. MARIA

Tell me about your children.

SONIA

They are very beautiful. Philippe is four and Michelle is two last week and I don't see her because I am here. (*begins crying*)

SR. MARIA

Sonia, were your children with your aunt when you went back to Haiti to see your sick brother?

SONIA

Yes. But she wait for me to come back. She call me in Haiti and tell me Michelle always cry for me. My aunt she is tired. She have many children.

SR. MARIA

I see. Now, Sonia, about the drugs . . .

SONIA

Sister, (*begins to cry*) I say to you on my Mother's soul, on my brother's life – I have no choice!

SR. MARIA

Tell me about it, Sonia.

SONIA

Yes. I go to airport to take plane back to New York. My brother he is better and my Mother she is happy. I go to check suitcase when two men from my town come and grab me. One is policeman. They pull me and we go to small room.

SR. MARIA

Yes?

SONIA

Sister, they make me sit. First man say I know your Mother, where she live. Policeman say I know your brother. I work with your brother before. You want your brother to live? Yes? Good! You take this package to our friend, and your brother live. No trouble. First man say you want your Mother to live, yes? You wear this. Sister, they make me take off my jacket, my dress. They strap plastic tight around my stomach.

SR. MARIA

You must have been so frightened.

SONIA

I am, how you say, frozen. They take my arm, first man on one side, policeman on one side and we go to check-in with suitcase. I go on plane. At Kennedy airport I start to take suitcase from moving rack and two men with big dog come and take me to small room. They feel me all over. Find package. I scream to see my babies! I cry, my aunt she is waiting for me! They put on (*gestures*) bracelets. They what you say, book me. I don't go to Philippe and Michelle. I come here.

SR. MARIA

Poor Sonia! And you've been here since . . . ?

SONIA

Today is fourteen days. Yesterday Michelle is two year old. (*crying begins again*)

SCENE FIVE

(SR. MARIA is on the phone)

SR. MARIA

Hello, is this the Newsday Office? May I speak with Lois Adams? Thank you, I'll wait . . . Ms. Adams? Hello! My name is Sister Maria DiMarco, and I'm a chaplain on Rikers Island? Yes, that's right, the prison. I'm wondering if I can ask a favor . . . Thank you. I read your fine article yesterday about the inhumane treatment of prisoners with AIDS? And about the Correctional Association? . . . Yes, and I'm wondering if you might be able to help me . . . No, I'm concerned about how the Rockefeller Drug Laws are effecting our inmates . . . No, I just need to find out who to contact at the Association . . .

SCENE SIX

(A nearly empty Courtroom; US seal on the wall. SR. MARIA is seated in the back, the JUDGE behind desk. FRANCESCO stands with his back to the audience as he faces the JUDGE with ATTY. Barbara Bennet on his left and Prosecuting ATTY on his right)

ATTY. B.B.

Your Honor, my client wishes to proceed to trial and will testify that he knew nothing of drugs harbored in his friend's closet.

JUDGE

Any corroborating evidence? Any witnesses?

ATTY.B.B.

No, your Honor. The defendant is a 17 year old boy, willing to risk a life sentence to prove his innocence.

JUDGE

And if the jury does not believe his testimony?

ATTY.B.B.

Your Honor, I've explained the law and the risk he is taking.

JUDGE

Counselors, I have two emergency matters to hear now, and my calendar is tight. I'd like to table, then continue this matter for at least two weeks. Any objections?

PROSECUTING ATTY

No, your Honor.

ATTY B.B.

No.

JUDGE

Ms. Bennet, in the meantime I SUGGEST that you talk to your client again about whether he's prepared to spend the rest of his life in prison, or wants to reconsider entering a plea. Meanwhile, he will remain in custody.

ATTY.B.B.

Yes, your Honor.

(JUDGE looks at SR. MARIA
who looks back at him)

SCENE SEVEN

(SR. MARIA is with BOB GREGORIO
in his office. A large seal, reading
CORRECTIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
NEW YORK, hangs on the wall)

SR. MARIA

But, Mr. Gregorio, isn't there some way to be found around this law?

BOB GREGORIO

Please - call me Bob. Short answer to your question - no way in Hell. What we have to do is change the law.

SR. MARIA

I'm all for that, but how? And what about the Franciscos and Janets and Sonias and hundreds of others stuck with it right now?

BOB GREGORIO

It's Sisyphus, Sister. Like the AIDS problem. We've got to keep rolling the boulders up the judicial hills while we try to prevent this drug law boulder from running over Rikers inmates.

SR. MARIA

Mr. Gra - Bob - I appreciate your metaphor, but is it that hopeless, and what specifically can I do? All I've done as Rikers chaplain for the past several years has been to listen to terrible stories - terrible true stories by incarcerated people - first the young men I worked with, and now with the women in Rikers' new facility. I provide stamps and envelopes and phone calls so these mothers can communicate with their children. Oh, and I provide phone calls to their attorneys. And a couple of times this month I've sat in an empty courtroom staring at a judge.

BOB GREGORIO

Do you really want to do something, Maria?

SR. MARIA

That's why I'm here, Bob.

BOB GREGORIO

OK. Listen to the inmates. Help them write to their children. And begin banging on the doors of New York State legislators.

SR. MARIA

I don't know any legislators – in New York or elsewhere.

BOB GREGORIO

Well, I've got a list right here (*hands paper*): names, phone numbers, addresses. These are the only people who can change the law, and they sure won't do it without being asked.

SR. MARIA

Asked?

BOB GREGORIO

Maybe told - forcefully.

SR. MARIA

Do I look like a forceful person, Bob?

BOB GREGORIO

Behind that sweet smile, Maria, I suspect a will of steel. (*pause*) If I may be so bold, instead of Rikers, why aren't you working in a hospital, or a school?

SR. MARIA

Well, this will probably sound strange, Bob, but I feel impelled by the spirit.

BOB GREGORIO

Impelled by the spirit? Well, with all due respect, I hope you can drive that spirit right into the people on that list . . . Oh, and by the way, the grapevine informs me that your sitting in the courtroom is what put off the sentencing of a certain Francesco.

SR. MARIA

Oh?

BOB GREGORIO

Yes, Sister. So keep the courtroom babysitting on your to-do list.

SCENE EIGHT

(JANET is sitting with SR. MARIA in her Office)

JANET

And I've been thinking and thinking about it since we talked the last time, Sister, and I have to do it, I have to!

SR. MARIA

Janet, as I told you last week, I'll support any decision you make. I know you don't want to lie, but of course you want to get back to your children as soon as possible.

JANET

And you know what else, Sister?

SR. MARIA

What, Janet?

JANET

If you and the lawyer lady hadn't explained how things work here - the law, I mean - I wouldn't even have known the difference between lying and getting 3 to 5, and not lying and getting 15 to life!

SR. MARIA

Well, that's not exactly the difference, Janet. It's the problem of having a trial - if you pleaded not guilty, because, like you, you didn't know there were drugs in your suitcase, it would be very hard to prove. There wouldn't be anyone in court to say that he or she heard your boyfriend tell you to carry his shaving cream. So, it's likely the judge would be required by law to give you the 15 to life sentence.

JANET

But it's true, isn't it? What the lawyer Miss Barbara said - that if I lie and say I'm guilty, then there's no trial and I get 3 to 5 years?

SR. MARIA

Yes, I'm afraid that's the way it works. It shouldn't be that way, but just now - that's the way the system works.

JANET

So then my mind is made up - I'm going to lie. But Sister, you know what else?

SR. MARIA

What else, Janet?

JANET

What else is that I've only been here for a month - no, almost five weeks, and I'm already going crazy. Right now it feels like there's no way I'm going to make it here for even one year. I go crazy thinking about my daughter and my son. You know, my son has asthma, and he's sick a lot of the time, and my Mother, she's getting old and can't pay him so much attention. This place makes me crazy thinking about not being with them!

SR. MARIA

Janet, right now you can take courage from making your decision about the plea bargain. You'll tell your lawyer what you've decided, and then - then it's time to live each day, and write to your children each day - and pray each day. That's what I can help you with.

JANET

I don't know about the prayer part, Sister.

SR. MARIA

Some people say prayer helps when there's nothing else you can do about a situation you're in. Some of the women say it calms them to pray.

JANET

I used to pray when I was a girl, Sister. But that was a long time ago, before everything turned out so bad.

SR. MARIA

May I say a prayer for you, Janet?

JANET

Yes, please.

SR. MARIA

All right. Dear Lord, please help and watch over Janet's son and daughter while she is here. Please make her able to face each day with courage, even when she is discouraged by waiting. Watch over Janet, Lord, and help her to be calm. Please help her, Lord. Thank you. Amen.

JANET

Thank you, Sister. Maybe I'll try praying. Maybe tomorrow.

SR. MARIA

Take care, Janet. See you next time.

(JANET exits. SR. MARIA
looks terribly dejected as she stares at
the crucifix on her wall)

Well, Jesus, here I am asking that young woman to pray while I feel I'm in that sinking boat with your apostle Peter! Only this boat is bursting with these poor, imprisoned drug mules. And it's terrible, Lord! I'm trying to help these young souls and they are sinking! And I'm going down with them - no, before them! Are you really sleeping, Lord? Are you going to wake up and say, "Oh ye of little faith?" Because I'm bursting with rage, Lord! Rage at this terrible system, even rage at You! These young people are so lost, and everything is so stacked against them! Oh God, please help! Please help them. Please help me . . . What? . . . Oh . . .

(SR. MARIA slowly pulls herself
together. Finds a list, looks up a
number, and dials it – slowly)

Hello? Is this Assemblyman O'Neil's Office? May I speak with the Assemblyman, please? Yes, I understand. I'd like to leave a message please. Yes. The name is Sister Maria DiMarco. Yes, Sister. I'm the Chaplain at Rikers Island. Yes, that's correct, Riker's Island. The message is that I'd like to meet with the assemblyman to discuss the Rockefeller Drug laws, and I'd like the meeting at his earliest convenience . . . No, I'm afraid it's urgent - next month won't do. Could you please convey to him my strong hope to meet him next week? Thank you very much! Oh, and I'll call back tomorrow regarding an appointment time.

(to herself) Well, Maria, I didn't know you had it in you! *(looks at crucifix)*
Thank you, Lord!

SCENE NINE

(SR. MARIA and TOM meet in Hall
again)

SR. MARIA

Hello again! How goes it, Tom Moran?

Hello, Sister. Fine. Well, OK.

TOM

Just OK . . .

SR. MARIA

Yup, just OK.

TOM

Would you like to talk?

SR. MARIA

(annoyed) Listen, Sister, I'm not one of your female inmates!

TOM

Of course not, Tom.

SR. MARIA

I didn't mean . . . Oh, hell, Sister, Maybe I'll come see you sometime.

TOM

Any time, Tom.

SR. MARIA

I'll take a rain check.

TOM

Take care, Tom.

SR. MARIA

SCENE TEN

(SR. MARIA is reading a letter on the phone to ATTY BB.)

Do I address it directly to the Judge, Barb? Right. OK . . .

SR. MARIA

Your Honor:

In my capacity as Chaplain in the Women's House on Riker's Island I met Sonia Ste. Marie, who is currently before you in a criminal matter. She has come to my office frequently over the past three months for prayer and counsel. Ms. Ste. Marie has impressed me as a simple, sensitive, and religious woman whose overwhelming concern is for her two children, Philippe, age 4, and Michelle, age 2, who are living in Queens with her elderly aunt.

OK so far? OK, next paragraph.

When Sonia Ste. Marie was leaving Haiti after visiting her sick brother she yielded to the demands of drug dealers to bring drugs into this country. This was done under duress as the lives of her family members were threatened. As the court record indicates, Ms. St. Marie was arrested in Kennedy Airport for possession of drugs.

Since it is obvious that Ms. Ste. Marie is a poor, distraught mother and not a wealthy drug dealer, and since she is willing to give the names of drug dealers operating out of Haiti, may I request that this information be taken and that a plea be negotiated which would result in lifetime probation.

I appeal to your sense of compassion and thank you in advance for any consideration given this matter.

Sincerely, etc.

So - what do you think?

SCENE ELEVEN

(SR. MARIA, ATTY BB, and Bob Gregorio are in his Office)

BG

I think it's a pretty good letter, Maria. What do you say, Barbara?

ATTY.B.B.

I think it's a great letter, and Maria, nothing like starting at the top.

SR. MARIA

You don't think I should write to the Governor first?

ATTY.B.B.

On the contrary, it's perfect . . .

BG

I like the historical/legal approach, melding from the personal and back into the legal - where is it? Here, paragraph 3 - "Although sympathy has been expressed for the plight of these women, the consensus is that Judges who are giving these severe sentences have very little discretionary power . . ." etc. And this is good: "Wealthy drug dealers continue their deadly trade, while poor women are imprisoned in their stead. These women, exploited by unscrupulous drug dealers, are now oppressed by our judicial system." It says it all, Maria. We'll make copies for everyone's desk.

ATTY.B.B.

Well, I think having Maria's letter reach the Governor's desk is the important thing. Now, what next?

BG

You know, Maria, every year The Correctional Association goes to Albany to speak with legislators, and organize a rally. This year we'll be lobbying to repeal the Rockefeller Drug Laws.

SR. MARIA

A rally? In Albany? With someone like Barbara giving a speech . . .

ATTY.B.B.

Whoa there! Our rallies in Albany always have speakers, but a Legal Aid defense attorney advocating for the repeal of the Rockefeller Drug Laws, I don't think so! That's totally ineffective, essentially conflict of interest!

SR. MARIA

Oh, I didn't realize . . .

BG

But guess what? We'll produce the rally and someone like you, Maria, WILL be an effective speaker. You aren't paid by agencies with agendas - you're beyond government, on God's side, and therefore free to speak out as prison Chaplain!

SR. MARIA

Well, I am beholden to my Order. But I think the Sisters of St. Joseph would approve. The problem is that I don't speak publicly, my friends. I mean, I've taught - little ones in Brooklyn and high school girls in Puerto Rico, but that's different. A rally would scare me to death!

ATTY.B.B.

My dear Sister, teaching is perfect preparation for rallying! Just you wait until we get THE Albany rally of a lifetime going to oppose the Rockefeller Drug laws, and just you wait until I coach you in a speech only YOU can write - oh Maria, you'll be terrific!

SR. MARIA

Oh, Barbara, I don't think I could do that! Why did I ever get involved!?

BG

Impelled by the spirit?

(blackout)

SCENE TWELVE

(SR. MARIA in her office)

Well, Lord, I'm in a pickle again. I haven't sunk yet – but things are still pretty bad. Now I'm supposed to become a public messenger for these young people, for their survival really – and Lord, the public part scares me to death. Trying to meet all these important people, trying to convince them that the law is unjust. And making a speech on front of people – a huge crowd? We never learned that in school, Lord, and I've always been a complete introvert. And I feel so tired these days – so many mornings I'm not sure I can make it from the Convent to Riker's. I guess I'm asking for strength, Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

SCENE THIRTEEN

(TOM knocks)

SR. MARIA

Come in! Oh, hello, Tom. How's it going?

TOM

Pretty good, Sister. Pretty good. Just thought I'd drop in - like you said.

SR. MARIA

Well, it's nice to see you. Please sit down.

TOM

Thanks. Don't mind if I do - lots of standing with this gig.

SR. MARIA

Yes, it must get to you. So, Tom, where were you before Rikers?

TOM

Oh, I'm an upstate boy, Sister. Born and raised in Ossining, and worked in Sing Sing - til now.

SR. MARIA

Well, that's interesting. And why the change?

TOM

Got married, Sister. Married a Brooklyn girl, and she wanted to stay near home.

SR. MARIA

Well, isn't *that* interesting. I was born and raised in Brooklyn. We liked growing up in Brooklyn.

TOM

We?

SR. MARIA

My three sisters and three brothers and I. I was the oldest. You remind me of my brother Paul.

TOM

Is Paul a nice guy, Sister?

SR. MARIA

Oh, yes. Paul's wonderful.

TOM

Well, that's good. Funny you should mention siblings, Sister, because right now my brothers and I are A-OK, but I have a terrific sister-in-law problem.

SR. MARIA

Oh?

TOM

Yeah, my wife's baby sister. She's been getting into drugs in a bad way, and everybody's worried about her.

SR. MARIA

How old is she?

TOM

Seventeen. Going on eighteen.

SR. MARIA

Have you told her about the people you work with here on Riker's?

TOM

Only a little. I didn't want to scare her.

SR. MARIA

You know, my father was a policeman, and he used to say that really understanding what could really happen helped a lot of young people stay out of trouble.

TOM

So, like give her an example?

SR. MARIA

A case history - perhaps two or three. But Tom, with the real facts about what happens when you are incarcerated - you have so much experience to draw on, and must know so much about that.

TOM

Yeah, much too much.

SR. MARIA

Even explaining what you see these young women going through every day. . . .

TOM

I guess you're right. I'll talk to my wife about it.

SR. MARIA

That sounds like a good idea. Have you been married long?

TOM

Two years. And we're expecting a baby next month.

SR. MARIA

Congratulations! You'll be a father!

TOM

That's right. Kind of scary.

SR. MARIA

You'll be a good father, Tom.

TOM

You think?

SR. MARIA

I think. Let me know about the baby.

TOM

Will do.

(TOM leaves)

SCENE FOURTEEN

SR. MARIA

(MARIA stands at a downstage podium and addresses a rally crowd of thousands - the audience)

Good afternoon. My name is Maria DiMarco, and I am a Sister of St. Joseph. When I was hired as a Chaplain on Riker's Island, I had no idea that my employment was the result of the Rockefeller Drug Laws. New prisons were being built to accommodate the huge numbers who were being arrested and sentenced under these laws. Most were young, non-violent Blacks and Hispanics, War-on-Drugs prisoners of undercover cops conducting drug sweeps in our poor neighborhoods.

But when I was transferred to the women's jail on Rikers I began to understand the full impact of these laws. Women came to me who were arrested at Kennedy airport for transporting drugs. Some admitted their guilt but many others claimed that they were tricked or coerced. These non-violent first offenders, called "Drug Mules," were told that under the Rockefeller Drug Laws they were being charged with an A 1 Felony and that if they took their case to trial and lost, they would get a mandated sentence of 15 or 25 years to life in prison.

Many of these women had children and couldn't risk with the possibility of a long prison sentence. The advice they were given? "Don't take your case to trial, no one will believe you. Instead, take a plea." Translation: You must go before a judge - in a court of law - swear to tell the truth and then *lie*. Although you are innocent you must say you are guilty.

In the book of Isaiah the prophet we read:

*Remove your wrongdoings from before my eyes;
Cease doing evil, learn to do good;
Seek justice, fight oppression.
Come now, let us set things right, says our God.*

Let us, people of good will, work to set things right and acknowledge the rampant injustice and racism that the Rockefeller Drug Laws have spawned.

Let us set things right and acknowledge that Whites constitute 5% of the total population of drug felons currently in prison in New York State while Blacks and Hispanics constitute 94%.

Let us set things right and acknowledge that there are drug-dependent Whites in the sport, fashion and film industries and that drugs are available in Wall Street firms, in upscale clubs and on the college campus by private suppliers.

Let us set things right and acknowledge that many White drug-dependent people find their way to drug treatment programs as their Black and Hispanic counterparts find their way to jail.

Let us set things right and acknowledge that billions have been spent to prevent the flow of drugs into our country to no avail. When the demand for drug ceases, so will the supply. We must lower this demand through education, prevention and treatment.

Let us heed Isaiah's words - to seek justice for our sisters and brothers - to fight oppression in our midst - by working for the repeal of the Rockefeller Drug Laws. May God inspire and strengthen us and our legislators in this challenging and difficult task. Amen.

SCENE FIFTEEN

(A DOCTOR and SR. MARIA are sitting in his office, DIPLOMA on wall)

DOCTOR

Well, Sister, the results are in.

SR. MARIA

Yes?

DOCTOR

Some good news, some bad.

SR. MARIA

Bad first, please.

DOCTOR

OK. The right breast shows first stage cancer.

SR. MARIA

I see And the good news?

DOCTOR

Your type of cancer is readily treatable.

SR. MARIA.

That is good news. Can you tell me about “treatable”?

DOCTOR

Surgery, Sister. Then radiation five days a week for six weeks.

SR. MARIA

I see. And when would the surgery be?

DOCTOR

Next Tuesday – 9 a.m.

SR. MARIA

So soon! That’s a week from today . . .

DOCTOR

That’s correct, Sister. The sooner the better. Can you arrange to be at Sloan for pre-surgery prep at 7 am?

SR. MARIA

(pause) Yes, Doctor. I’ll be there.

DOCTOR

Wonderful, Sister. I’m sure everything will be fine! Would you like to sit for a bit? I’ll be with another patient across the hall.

SR. MARIA

Yes, please. Thank you.

(DOCTOR exits; SR. MARIA sits quietly)

Well, Lord, that's why so much tiredness . . . Please help me get through the surgery, Lord. It's another boat trip I'm afraid of, and I need your help. In Jesus' name. Amen.

SCENE SIXTEEN

(MARIA'S office. ATTY BB enters.)

ATTY BB

Sister, have you heard? You were a smashing success, a star! Bob Gregorio is sending copies of your speech around to the world of New York legislators! And there's an interview already set up for you with Chuck Scarborough on NBC News! And an article in Newsday is coming up. AND seven assemblymen have been on the phone with Bob about what the next move will be. Seven! We're in business!

SR. MARIA

In business?

ATTY BB

In the business of changing the Rockefeller Drug Laws!

SR. MARIA

That's good news, Barbara.

ATTY BB

Didn't you feel the energy coming from the crowd at the rally?

SR. MARIA

Yes, I did. It was electrifying.

ATTY BB

So I have a meeting scheduled for Bob, you and me, and three of the legislators who have contacted Bob. And it looks like we'll be organizing the next rally to follow soon after the airing of your interview.

SR. MARIA

It all sounds wonderful, and you and Bob are to be congratulated on organizing the rally and pulling in the legislators.

ATTY BB

Now don't go being modest on me, my friend - your speech was the lynchpin, and your interview on the news is going to reach many more thousands than heard you at the rally.

SR. MARIA

Barbara dear, I'm thrilled with our progress, and I'll do the interview if you and Bob tell me to, but then I'm afraid I'll be out of the picture for a while.

ATTY BB

But you're the spokesperson - you can't get cold feet again at this point!

SR. MARIA

Not cold feet again, just a medical challenge.

ATTY BB

Oh, Maria! I didn't realize - what is it?

SR. MARIA

Well, at the advice of my doctor, I saw an oncologist on Thursday for the first time in my life, and the short version is that I'll be going in to Sloan Kettering for a bit of surgery next Tuesday.

ATTY BB

Oh, Maria! Cancer . . .

SR. MARIA

That's what they tell me. And then there will be radiation treatments . . .

ATTY BB

Maria, I'm so sorry! Forget about this Drug Law stuff - your health is what's important!

SR. MARIA

My health doesn't make our fight any less important. If anything, my reaction is that it's more important than ever! When is the interview supposed to be? I want to straighten up my office *and* do the interview. You know what, Barb? Now, I can't wait to do the interview - pretend I've accomplished something before . . .

ATTY BB

How can you even think that! Your letters to judges on behalf of inmates, and the last fifty letters you sent out to legislators. And the interview's already set up for Friday . . . Oh! But listen, are you sure you'll feel up to it?

SR. MARIA

Absolutely – I wish I could do it right now. I guess at least I can clean up my desk right now . . .

ATTY BB

I just can't believe this is happening to you - you of all people!

SR. MARIA

Come on, Barbara. I'm going to think of this as just another challenge. I'll be fine, and back on Rikers in no time! *(pause)* It'll just have to be part time for a while . . .

(ATTY BB crosses to MARIA, and hugs her)

SCENE SEVENTEEN – *Six Weeks Later*

(BOB GREGORIO and ATTY BARBARA BENNET are in her office)

ATTY BB

She'll be happy to see this bloody Reform Act in print. Finally, some progress!

BG

Yeah, but I won't breathe easy until it's passed. I'm just not sure it has the votes. By the way, thanks for letting me know she was coming. When did you see her last?

ATTY BB

A couple of weeks ago. I went to see her at the Convent.

BG

You're a better friend than I. All I've done is call. But every time, she's sounded totally herself.

(A knock on the door. SR. MARIA enters.)

ATTY BB

Maria, you made it! *(hugs all around)* Bob flew over here when he heard you were going to pay a visit.

SR. MARIA

Hi Barb! Bob, how are you?

BG

Never better, now that I'm looking at you looking great!

SR. MARIA

Thanks, I'm feeling great. Thanks for staying in touch this past month or so, you two – it's meant a lot.

ATTY BB

Please sit, Maria. Oh, before I forget – you've heard from Janet, right?

SR. MARIA

Yes, would you believe? She wrote to me from Albrion Prison where she's begun to serve her sentence, and she asked about getting transferred to Providence House in the future.

ATTY BB

Well, that's about as good news as possible at this point.

SR. MARIA

Yes, hopefully she'll join a successful bunch of transfers some time soon. But Barbara, is there any news about Sonia?

ATTY BB

Nothing good, I'm afraid. She's had a total breakdown and been admitted to the Psychiatric Ward at Elmhurst Hospital.

SR. MARIA

Oh dear - poor Sonia! It's sad how the ones you can't help are the ones who stay in your mind. I've thought of her so often these days. I'll have to visit her.

BG

But there is good news we hope from the RDL front . . .

ATTY BB

We were just going over the proposed legislation for the REFORM DRUG LAW ACT of 2005. And Maria, we've been calling people like mad, asking them to vote for it.

SR. MARIA

You know, you people are actually moving mountains!

BG

Well, the mountain only gets moved if we have the votes. Maria, please pray for this one.

SR. MARIA

I've been doing a lot of that with my time off, Bob.

ATTY BB

Listen, Maria, there are a bunch of people waiting to welcome you back. And one person has bugged me regularly to ask how you were doing.

SR. MARIA

Really?

ATTY BB

Really. He's been promoted – He's a captain now.

SR. MARIA

Not Tom!

ATTY BB

Tom indeed. Has his own office.

SR. MARIA

Well, I'll just have to go congratulate him.

BG

But Maria, will you take it easy now?

SR. MARIA

Well, the spirit is still impelling me, Bob.

BG

Oh oh . . . what now?

SR. MARIA

(laughing) Oh, just more of the same. You know the Providence House story – we've been caring for homeless women and their children for 30 years. And sometimes we've been able to divert them from prison because of health problems. We just have to keep our residence program going, you know, to take in women like Janet - parolees who need a new lease on life when they complete their sentences.

ATTY BB

Providence House - your community . . .

SR. MARIA

Founded by my community, the Sisters of St. Joseph

BG

So, you've been getting better, maintaining permanent housing by Providence?

SR. MARIA

Stop teasing me, Bob!

BG

Listen, I've kidded you about the spirit often enough. But would you send some spirit in my direction now and then?

SR. MARIA

Always. You and Barb are always in my prayers.

ATTY BB

OK, let's not get carried away, guys. Maria, it all sounds terrific. But right now, our lunch is booked. I've made reservations.

SR. MARIA

Oh, but . . .

ATTY BB

No buts - they're a lot of people waiting for us - for you.

BG

On to lunch! After you, Sister!

SCENE EIGHTEEN

(TOM'S Office)

SR. MARIA

(OS) Knock knock. May I come in?

TOM

Come. (*sees MARIA*) Oh my God - Sister Maria!

SR. MARIA
How are you, Tom?

TOM
Speechless!

(TOM runs around desk to hug
MARIA)

What are you doing here?!

SR. MARIA
Coming to congratulate you on your promotion.

TOM
It's so good to see you, Sister Maria! I heard they were organizing a welcome
back lunch for you, but I was on duty . . .

SR. MARIA
Good to see *you*, Tom. And in your own office!

TOM
Isn't that something? I was surprised they chose me . . .

SR. MARIA
They made a good decision! Tell me, how is your baby? Growing fast, I imagine.

TOM
He's fine, Sister. Please, sit.

SR. MARIA
(*sits*) Thank you. And your sister-in-law?

TOM
She's pretty fine, for her. Almost completed a drug rehab program.

SR. MARIA
Wonderful!

TOM
And I've heard about your news – that you're coming back part time. But maybe
you should take it easy for a while?

SR. MARIA

Oh I am. I promise I won't be working full time. In fact, may I share a secret with you?

TOM

Shoot, Sister.

SR. MARIA

Do you remember what you asked me when we first met?

TOM

God, that must have been, what? About three years ago?

SR. MARIA

Four, to be exact.

TOM

I'm trying to remember . . .

(Phone rings.)

Excuse me, Sister. Yes, this is Tom. Hello! Yes, she's here. *(pause)* Really! Right away. Sister, a call for you . . .

(TOM hands phone to MARIA)

SR. MARIA

Really? Who could that be . . . Hello . . . Barbara? Hello again! What? So soon? Oh my . . . Yes, I'm afraid to believe it . . . No, congratulations to YOU! All right, tomorrow. Thank you so much for tracking me down. *(pause)* Well!

TOM

She told me. That Reform Act you've been working on just passed . . . congratulations!

SR. MARIA

The Reform Drug Law of 2005 Thank you, Lord! And Tom, this law is going to help put people like us out of work – isn't that wonderful! (*MARIA sits*) Which reminds me of what I was going to tell you! When we first met, you asked why a nun like me was at Rikers and wasn't working in a hospital or something . . .

TOM

Oh right, I did! That was nervy of me . . . I didn't have a clue!

SR. MARIA

But you gave me a good idea that day. And guess what? I've been going up to Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx every Wednesday.

TOM

But Sister, they told me you were cured!

SR. MARIA

Oh, I am! I don't go there for treatment. I'm there to read to the children, and I love it! And I've begun meeting with parents who've asked for counseling. So, just as you said, I'm working in a hospital!

TOM

But is that OK for you? Your health, I mean.

SR. MARIA

Truthfully, Tom? Can I tell you a secret about my health?

TOM

Anything, sister.

SR. MARIA

All right. Whatever health I have left needs to be useful. So part time at Rikers is good for my health, and reading to sick children is great for my health.

TOM

Go, Sister!

SR. MARIA

But that's not all. I have a list. Working with the Committee against Torture helps my health, and working for my sister nuns to be heard.

TOM

So . . . For you, it's like that poem people are always quoting.

SR. MARIA

Which poem, Tom?

TOM

I think it's by Robert Frost.

SR. MARIA

Robert Frost? Does it end with

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
And miles to go before I sleep.”

TOM

That’s it, Sister. That’s the one.

(END OF PLAY)

Mimi Gisolfi D'Aponte is Professor emerita of Theatre at the CUNY Graduate Center and Baruch College where she received the 1998 Baruch College Excellence Award for Distinguished Teaching. A published author and translator, D'Aponte's favorite work is *Theater Neapolitan Style: Five One-Act Plays by Eduardo De Filippo* (FDU Press 2004) that received the Italian Government's Translation Prize in 2006. During 2002-03 she produced four of these one-acts as professional staged readings at Manhattan sites while a favorite, *Philosophically Speaking*, ran as a showcase production in 2004. Her play, *Staying Connected*, was presented as a staged reading at NYU in 2007, while another, *8th Grade Reunion*, was read in 2008 at Valley Players Theater in Waitsfield, Vermont, and given a 2010 staged reading at The Players Club in New York City. During 2011 her *Letter Dialog* between Luigi Pirandello and Marta Abba, adapted from Pietro Frassica's *Her Maestro's Echo* and presented together with his lecture, played NYU, Seton Hall University, Dorothea's House in Princeton and The Players. In March 2012 D'Aponte directed The Players' staged reading of *Sicilian Limes* for the Pirandello One Act Festival. Her ten-minute play, *Homeland Security*, ran for four nights as part of the Vermont Playwrights Circle Tenfest in August 2013.

Sister Marion Defeis is a core member in one of seven Providence Houses whose mission is to transition women who are homeless and recently released from prison back to society. To date over 8,500 women and 4,500 children have lived in Providence. In May 2001 she received the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, in recognition of her work for the women on Rikers Island and for her zeal in working to repeal the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Sister Marion, who served as Chaplain for 23 years on Rikers Island, is presently working to abolish solitary confinement in all prisons and jails.