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# A Day in the Life of a Prison Theatre Program

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*Lorraine Moller*

The sounds are like nothing else: The drone of the prisoners echoing down long, winding tunnels. The crackling of two-way radios, electronic voices. Keys rattle, gates slam shut.

Each time I enter the prison, I remove my watch, glasses, belt, place them in a wooden box. Tonight, the buzzer sounds and I retrieve a lipstick from my back pocket; it is confiscated until later. I leave behind a two-inch bottle of Binaca with its minute quantity of alcohol. My bags are checked, I have signed in, my IDs are prominently displayed. I am one of a small group of volunteers huddled together waiting to enter the next set of gates. Then we're out in the courtyard, where the remains of last summer's zinnias somehow survive in a patch of dusty, gray soil.

What stark contrasts. At sunset, silvery rolls of concertina shimmer against the magenta sky while the Hudson River wraps around the base of the Westchester County facility like a snake. The toddler playground with 36 small square tables in tidy rows waits for tomorrow's visit. In the distance, out in the yard, a cluster of two dozen inmates stand in their hooded sweats, their faces illuminated by the flickering blue light of the outdoor TV, their breath forming little puffs of fog in the night air.

This is Sing Sing and I am the artistic director for Rehabilitation through the Arts, a prison theatre program run by volunteer theatre professionals. Tonight, we travel by van to the schoolhouse, a three-floor, red brick building with large mesh iron windows where our group meets to rehearse. A corrections officer unlocks the door, releasing a blast of oppressive, hot, stale air. We enter a stairwell that brings us up into the blaring fluorescent light of a hallway bordered by classrooms. Two Corrections Officers (C.O.s) log us in. We proceed down the hallway, searching the classrooms for a familiar face. All empty. Until we get to ours.

Sing Sing Correctional Facility is located on 50 acres of rocky slope overlooking the Hudson River. The 175-year-old prison was named after the Sint Sinck Indians, whose tribal name translates as "stone upon stone." The feature dominating the landscape is the 24-foot-high wall with its 20 watchtowers surrounding the upper complex. The maximum-security portion of the facility houses 1,800 men and two of the largest freestanding cell blocks in the world. The most imposing building is A-Block, a four-tiered brick and concrete structure, one dozen feet

shy of the length of two football fields. Like most American cellblocks, A-Block, which houses over 600 inmates in cells that run 88 to a tier, is based on a prototype designed for Auburn Prison in the 1820s. B-Block, the other massive structure, is a five-tier building consisting of 68 cells per tier.

When on route to rehearsal one day, I was permitted a glimpse into the block through an innocuous, iron double door at the entrance. I was stupefied by the massive metal and concrete interior and assaulted by the din of human sounds, a cacophony of shouting voices amid iron gates slamming, electronic static, and blaring radios. But from that vantage point, not a human being in sight. The C.O.s explain that the cellblocks are loud because there is nothing soft to absorb the sound except for the thin mattresses and the inmates' bodies. The blocks in Sing Sing are vividly characterized by Ted Conover in his book, *Neujack: Guarding Sing Sing*, as having two structural components:

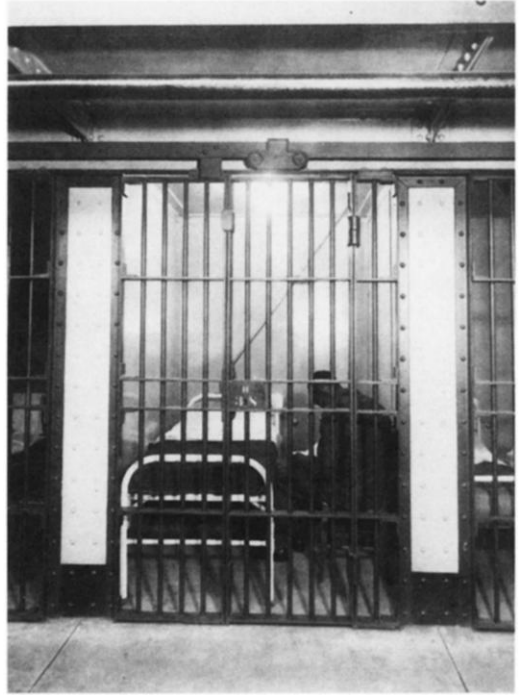
[One is] the all-metal interior, containing the inmates which is painted gray and looks as though it could have been welded in a shipyard. The other is comprised of the exterior walls and roof, a brick-and-concrete shell that fits over the cells like a dish over a stick of butter. [...] There is a flat, leaky roof, which does not touch the top of the metal cellblock but leaves a gap of maybe ten feet. If the whole structure were radically shrunk, the uninitiated might perceive a vaguely agricultural purpose; the cages might be thought to contain chickens, or mink. (2000:9)<sup>1</sup>

At the base of the hill is Tappan, the medium-security complex which includes 500 men in three-story, cinderblock, dormitory-style housing, a fenced-in yard that can hold up to 1600 men at a time, as well as a gym built by Warner Brothers in return for shooting a film on location at Sing Sing. Slightly to the south, with a majestic view of the Hudson, is the Old Death House where 614 people were executed, including Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.<sup>2</sup> Both the maximum and medium security prison complexes contain tunnels and passageways that connect them and numerous other structures that have sprung up, helter-skelter, over time.



1. Lower tier of B-Block in Sing Sing Correctional Facility. (Photo courtesy of the Ossining Historical Society)

In the introduction to his book on prison theatre, James Thompson (1998) quotes Dostoyevsky who says that a nation's prisons are a measure of its humanity.<sup>3</sup> The startling reality is that the United States imprisons more people for crime control than any other country in the world; today, two million Americans live behind bars, over one-half million more than China with its vast population.<sup>4</sup> Critics of the criminal justice system blame the staggering statistics on massive incarceration on policies based on attitudes advocated by a large segment of the public and encouraged by over-zealous media coverage of violence and crime. Along with the record number of incarcerated Americans and societal demands for longer prison sentences, pressures from overcrowding and budget cuts cause attitudes to swing from prison reform and rehabilitative treatment to a punitive view of incarceration. According to Amnesty International's report "Rights for All", the rise in prison population has coincided with a decrease in rehabilitation, increased incapacitation and punishment, harsher regimes, and fewer amenities, including educational and treatment programs (1998:58). Ignoring evidence that education can reduce re-offending rates,<sup>5</sup> Congress, in 1994, put an end to federal funding for prisoners earning college degrees behind bars. Few programs exist to rehabilitate offenders who end up back in society unskilled and angry, resorting to crime as the only way to survive. More than half will return to prison at a cost to the taxpayer of up to \$25,000 per year per prisoner, and at an inestimable cost to their families and their communities (Fine et al. 2001). Despite the forecast for the year 2005 of an unprecedented re-entry rate of approximately 30,000 yearly,<sup>6</sup> the view of incarceration as strictly punitive has persevered.



2. Single cell in B-Block.  
(Photo courtesy of the Ossining Historical Society)

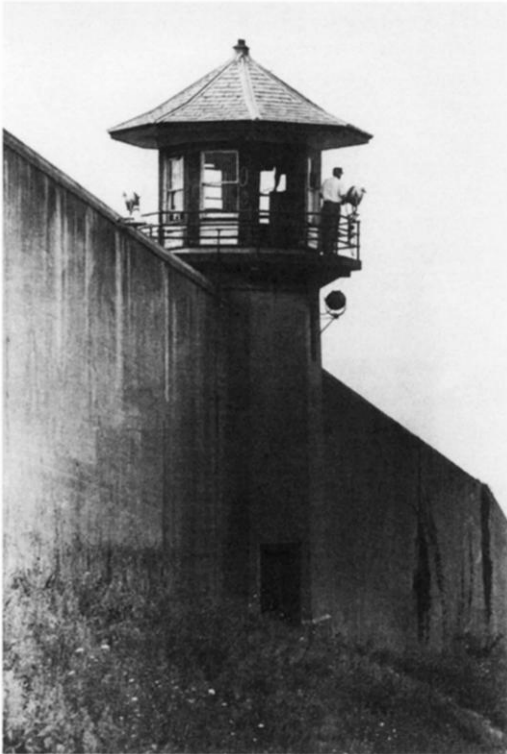
The roar of the Hudson Line commuter train that cuts through the heart of the complex jolts our equilibrium and obliterates all human sound. As the train fades into the distance, we travel down the hallway to where the hum of productivity grows stronger. Inside the School House classroom, 25 men scramble to create a set for a play. The divider that separates the double rooms is pulled back and the desks are cleared away to create a performance area. Three desks, the writing surfaces folded down, are placed side by side to form a couch. A desk along the wall doubles as a dining room table. An inmate's notebook becomes a macaroni dish; a blackboard eraser becomes a cell phone. Imaginary objects make up the rest of the living room—wall art, pillows, flowers.

Actors and stagehands alike move with the precision of a union crew on a Hollywood set. We prepare to rehearse several segments (playlets) from the original play, *Voices from Within*, collaboratively developed in a playwriting workshop during the summer.<sup>7</sup> The play, a compilation of several scripts, portrays the strategies prisoners consciously or unconsciously use to survive the experience of incarceration. At Sing Sing there is no budget. Except for the set built by Vocational Programming, everything is made out of nothing. The couch will be fashioned from an old torn mattress and some string. A brick wall with graffiti is suggested by old sheets stretched across a frame and painted with available colors. A gurney is made by padding a discarded mess hall table. Junk re-envisioned, born from the kind of ingenuity that comes from being denied access to real things.

3. An aerial view of the Sing Sing Correctional Facility taken in the 1970s; little has changed since. Toward the foreground is the long stretch of wall that surrounds the prison. The photo shows A-Block and B-Block, two of the largest freestanding cell blocks in the world, housing 1,800 men. Tappan, the medium-security compound, overlooks the Hudson River. (Photo courtesy of the Ossining Historical Society)



4. One of the 20 lookout towers perched on the 24-foot wall surrounding the facility. (Photo courtesy of the Ossining Historical Society)



We have little time to exchange pleasantries during rehearsal. If an actor is not present, another jumps into his place. Many of the inmates know more than one role, a few by heart. Prison is an oral culture where a man must be a keen observer in order to survive, where what he needs to know is stored in his memory. There are no date books or Palm Pilots. Even paper and pens are at a premium. Fortunately for us, the stage manager has a photographic memory; every word of the script is in his head, an invaluable asset for this production.

Rehabilitation through the Arts (RTA) produces theatre projects for and by the inmates at Sing Sing. Like the drama that unfolds in the classroom, RTA started with nothing but the passion, discipline, and talent of the inmates and a small team of volunteer theatre professionals. With the explosion of the prison population, the withdrawal of state and federal money to finance programs, and the public's punitive attitude toward incarceration, RTA struggles to survive on a few small private foundation grants.\* Founded in 1996 under the leadership of Katonah resident community activist Katherine Vockins and inmate Talib Amir Muhammad, RTA recognizes the enormous talent that languishes behind the walls and the limited opportunity for this talent to be expressed.

RTA has a three-pronged mission: the production of original and established plays to provide entertainment, cultural enrichment, and positive messages to the prison community; the application of drama as education and as a rehabilitative tool; and the development of theatre projects of artistic integrity and professionalism. Sending a positive message to the audience has been embedded in the mission of the program from its inception: positive in raising prisoners' consciousness about the problems of AIDS, drugs, racism, and disparities in

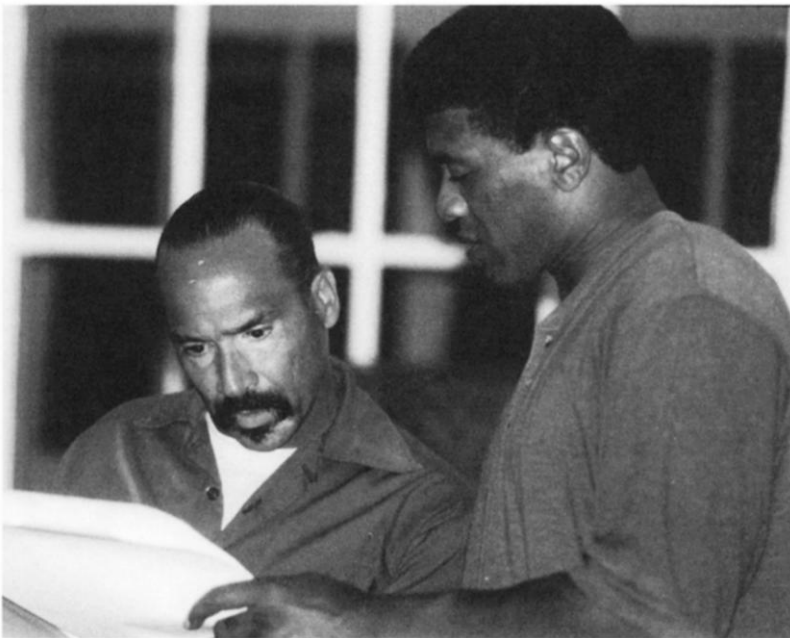
the criminal justice system; positive in sending the message that redirection through education saves lives; positive in promoting the arts as meaningful activity that increases self-awareness, stimulates emotional and intellectual development, and gives a voice to a forgotten population.

For those with less than a high school diploma or GED, the program provides opportunities to enhance literacy, as well as problem-solving and communication skills. For those with more formal education (some college, an undergraduate or masters degree), the program provides an oasis for a unique subculture of artists, writers, and actors who are hungry to channel their creativity into a collaborative project.

Drama educators have asked me whether the program is process- or product-oriented. Compared with other theatre programs that function in prisons, RTA is a hybrid.<sup>9</sup> Occasionally, attempts at establishing a democratic process in producing a play are met with resistance from a handful of inmates who claim democracies do not work in prisons. On the other hand, inmate graduates of the Certificate in Ministry Program (CMP) offered by the New York Theological Seminary, who are better acquainted with revolutionary thinkers like Paulo Freire, believe that oppressed people should be empowered to take responsibility for social change. Over the past six years, approximately 40 men representing both camps have surfaced at Sing Sing to keep RTA alive. At the core of this talented, community-spirited group is a steering committee of five to seven members who assume responsibility for choosing plays, directors, and the production crew, as well as for resolving the issues that evolve. They also set the standard for prospective members and screen them to protect the program from those who might abuse access to volunteers and equipment, or otherwise jeopardize the program. As the membership has become more experienced with mounting produc-



5. The cast of *Voices from Within* dresses the set, which features rotating platforms. (Photo by Richard Moller)



6. During the playwrights' workshop, taught by playwright Barbara Quintero during the summer of 2000, Rory offers Gregorio feedback on his script. (Photo by Richard Moller)

tions, they also stage manage, codirect, run lights and sound, prepare lists of the inmates cleared for rehearsals, locate “inside props” and equipment, do internal publicity, and expedite the construction of set pieces.<sup>10</sup>

There is a real partnership between civilians and prisoners during the production process. Vockins, the program coordinator, serves the program by making sure it stays on course, setting up classes, recruiting theatre professionals, and most importantly, navigating the bureaucracy. She communicates with the executive committee at Sing Sing to get approval for plays, negotiates the production schedule, and brings in props and costumes from the “outside” for performances. She functions as the producer and steps in as an actress when needed. As artistic director, I have suggested plays, guided the aesthetic vision of productions, served as an acting coach, and adapted, directed, and codirected plays. Together, the program coordinator and I are the putty that fills in the gaps, doing whatever needs to be done, from loaning furniture from our homes to sewing buttons on costumes. In addition, several other dedicated theatre professionals volunteer to share their expertise as acting coaches, directors, or technical advisors.

The audience is limited to inmates, volunteers, and a handful of civilians from the community involved with criminal justice issues and is one of the essential components in the process.<sup>11</sup> The sensory experience of the play—the light and sound effects, the three-dimensional world of the set, the reality of live actors as surrogates on the stage—all transport the audience beyond the walls of the prison. Audiences at Sing Sing are demanding and responsive, calling out actors by name, shouting advice or admonitions to the characters, voicing approval. For the actor, it is the power of the exchange that is so compelling. Actors and audiences engage in intimate dialogue; it is the actor in the guise of his role in front of the audience shrouded in semidarkness that permits the actor the vulnerability to express his humanity. The complicity that results between audience and actor gives expression to silenced issues of love, loyalty, manhood, morality, power, and freedom. It is a moving experience to hear this audience of so-called hard-core criminals respond to words of truth across the dark space, and, with thoughtful vocal utterances, acknowledge what they must do to survive.

When the actors return to their cells after opening night, they are greeted with standing ovations. (The inmate who played the first African American President of the United States in an original play called *The Sacrifice* was known as “The President” for months.) Even cast members playing small parts gain instantaneous celebrity status. The blocks are alive with excitement throughout the night; fans ask for autographs on crumpled-up programs; an endless stream of questions—about what it was like to be the character, to wear the costume, to hear the audience’s response—is directed at the actors. Some inmates return to see every performance in a three- or four-night run. Inmates talk about characters that remind them of people they knew on the street and issues that speak truth to them. They go over and over the lines that resonate in their memory, review their favorite scenes in vivid detail, and demand on the spot encore performances. Then come the questions about the next production: What is it? When will it be? It goes on all night, the cast tells me. Something to look forward to. Another journey.

Parrish,<sup>12</sup> the stage manager, is setting up a table and two chairs for the mess hall scene in *Front and Back*, one of the playlets woven into the tapestry of *Voices from Within*. *Front and Back* written by Phillip, is a dialogue between two inmates who try to maintain their marriages with the women who wait (or don’t). The characters, Hector and Vernon, depict conflicting ideologies of surviving marriage while incarcerated. At the center of the dialogue is a lengthy letter from Vernon’s wife and a set of divorce papers he received at an earlier date. While the inmates

banter over Vernon's dubious marital relationship, they clean the mess hall with an imaginary mop and rag. This is David's first major role. As an actor in a prison environment, he struggles to express the vulnerability he must expose playing Vernon, a young husband blinded by hope, so I give him a prop from home that I managed to get through the gate, something concrete: two pages of blank floral stationary sprinkled with perfume. He is delighted with this excuse to drop his guard. Pressing his nose to the paper, he closes his eyes, inhales, and allows the fragrance to take him to another place:

HECTOR: That from your wife?

VERNON: *(Suddenly cheerful; holds up a letter)* Yeah, kid. Fourteen pages. Front and back.

HECTOR: Good. Maybe now you'll stop all that whining and singing the blues. *(Begins wiping tables.)* So, what was she talking about?

VERNON: Who?

HECTOR: Your wife.

VERNON: Ol' same ol' same. She apologized for not making it up to visit me and said she'd try once her ankle healed.

HECTOR: What happened to her ankle?

VERNON: *(Shakes head and smiles, embarrassed)* She tripped over the rug and twisted it running to answer my call last week.

HECTOR: *(Stops wiping tables momentarily)* Damn... She could have wrote and told you that. *(With a lightness)* Had my man moping around here like it was the end of the world or something.

VERNON: *(Defensive in spite of himself)* It's kind of hard to do that with a sprained wrist.

HECTOR: *(Stops, watches Vernon)* I thought you said it was her ankle.

VERNON: *(After a moment)* Both. *(Silence)*

HECTOR: *(Resumes work)* Did she mention who the guy was that answered the phone the other day?

VERNON: That was her doctor. *(Stops and looks at Hector)* Didn't I tell you that?

HECTOR: You told me her job had a pretty decent health plan, but nothin' about house calls. *(Pause)* I guess it's better than the time she said that she couldn't make it because the train had a flat tire. *(Laughs)*

We jump to the end of the scene where the tables turn and Vernon criticizes the more cynical, street-savvy Hector, for terminating his marriage:

VERNON: Now you have *nothing!*

HECTOR: Now I have my *pride!*

VERNON: *(Almost laughing)* Pride? What the hell is that? That thing they let you keep on when they tell you to strip and spread your ass after a visit for a contraband inspection?

HECTOR: *(With forced pride)* I wouldn't know about that. I don't receive visits anymore.



VERNON: Maybe it's that cold water you wash your face with every morning.

HECTOR: Only Honor Block prisoners have hot water taps in their cells.

VERNON: And what about that garbage you eat every day in this mess hall? Is that your pride? Some tuna casserole that looks like warmed over vomit?

HECTOR: (*Grudgingly*) So, what do you expect me to do, starve?

VERNON: Eat it! Eat your pride! Sprinkle it on the thought of how you let yourself slave in this mess hall for pennies a day. Take it as a laxative and let it flush all that excess loneliness from your system. (*Comes over to table and slams fists down hard in front of Hector.*) I wipe my ass with pride and stick it in my back pocket when I'm done! I don't even bother looking back at it to make sure I got it all.

HECTOR: That's disgusting.

VERNON: You bet it is. But guess what...(*removes letter from back pocket and sniffs it*)...it keeps my back pocket smelling like roses and the visits flowing regularly. (*Smiles*) And that, my friend, until the day I leave this shit-house, is all that really matters.

HECTOR: (*Shaking head*) I hear you. But take my word, divorce papers have a funny way of unmasking that perfumy scent.

VERNON: (*Looking around, under tables*) What papers? (*Hector and Vernon laugh. The sound of a bell and voices heard.*)

HECTOR: Are you going to the yard tonight?

VERNON: Naw, I'll probably stay in my cell. I've got a 20-page letter to write.

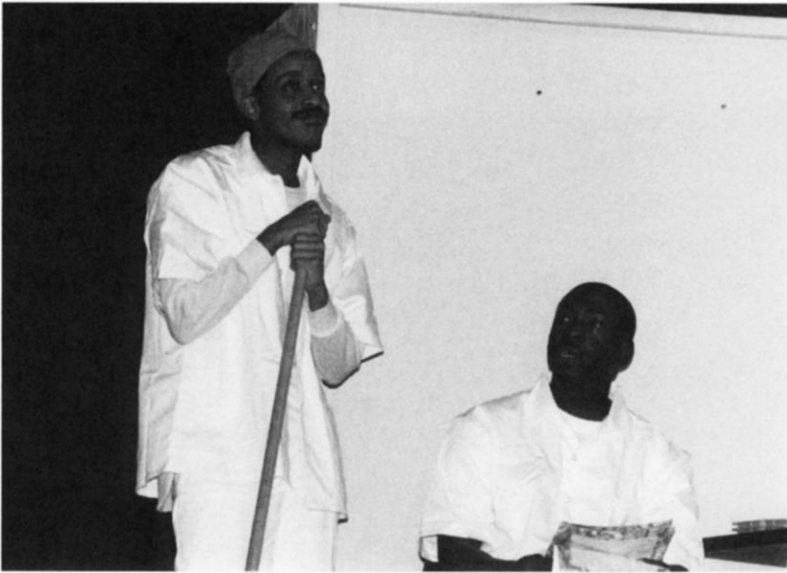
HECTOR: Front and back?

VERNON: Front and back.

(*Curtain*)

Phillip, author of *Front and Back*, is a quiet, pensive inmate who works in the library during the day; I have heard that before he joined RTA, the inmate who bunked next to him for nine years didn't even know his name. In the early days after each rehearsal, Phillip would thank me for coming, inquire if I would be back and leave me with the words, "God bless you." His gentle manner reflected a strict religious upbringing, a fact that would be confirmed by another inmate several productions later, along with the serious nature of the offense for which he is serving 25 years to life. When I asked him three years ago about his family, he shook his head and said that he had not received any visitors during the 13 years of his incarceration. Many of the men in prison suffer this type of estrangement from family, either to spare loved ones the heartbreak or embarrassment of having family behind bars, or because the family has rejected them for their crime. Not surprisingly, Phillip characterizes his participation in RTA as a playwright and an actor as an unexpected and miraculous turn in his life.

Like *Front and Back*, 50 percent of our productions are original plays written by the inmates on their own or in playwriting workshops. It is a well-kept secret among educators that prisoners are among the most motivated of students. Not the prisoners in the general population, as the inmates call the men who spend their evenings in the yard, but those who find freedom by clinging to the life of the mind by taking classes in the schoolhouse. Most RTA playwrights do not have a typewriter at their disposal. With the exception of one or two who are clerks,



7. In the prison mess hall scene from *Front and Back* (January 2001), the character Vernon (left) shares a 20-page letter from his estranged wife with Hector. (Photo by Richard Moller)

there is no access to computers. Some of the playwrights barter to get their work typed; others pay in cash from their meager salaries. One of our playwrights has the highest paid job at the prison, at \$7.50 per week.

Demographically, the men in Rehabilitation through the Arts are representative of the larger prison population. A majority of inmates in New York State facilities are from the same five economically depressed African American and Latino communities. Seventy-five percent of the inmates from Sing Sing are from New York City, almost all from poor communities with failing urban schools. Reflective of the state's total prison population consisting of 84 percent men of color, Sing Sing's population is roughly 50 percent African American and 30 percent Latino. Half of that population ranges between 25 and 35 years of age. About 75 percent are convicted violent felons, over 25 percent for manslaughter or murder. Other crimes include rape, robbery, assault, burglary, and arson (Camp and Camp 2000:13). An informal survey indicates that members of our program are serving 3 to 25 years for violent or nonviolent crimes, and range in age from 25 to 50. Some of our most loyal and productive members include a handful of prisoners serving sentences 25 years to life.

It is 7:30 P.M. when we take a break and the hallway outside the classroom fills with men in green from the GED and the New York Theological Seminary certificate programs. Some stop to chat with the actors in the production, others wave to us with broad grins through the divided glass windows as they pass. The newly transferred inmates, unaccustomed to seeing female civilians, slow down with curiosity when they see me and Katherine conversing informally with the men. During the break, several of us meet in the back of the classroom to discuss the set.

*Voices from Within* started as playlets on the experience of incarceration written by five different inmates, codirected by an inmate and three outside mentors: Laura Kramer, a local equity actress; Randy Mulder, an equity actor and drama therapy student; and myself. When we dialogue about the strengths and weaknesses of the pieces with the inmates, I suggest that the playwrights intertwine segments from the individual plays to create one large tapestry of voices. A kaleidoscopic approach to telling a story is a theatrical anomaly too difficult to grasp.



8. & 9. Small bronze masks installed on the proscenium wall under the speakers in the auditorium. The mask of Comedy is inscribed with the humorous pun "Pros & Cons."  
(Photo by Richard Moller)

Moreover, there is a resistance because of the playwrights' feelings of ownership and the concern that the individuality of a man's work will get lost when fused into the whole. Sensing the reluctance, I abandon the idea and endorse the more traditional approach of doing each play as a separate entity. But as I reverse my position, so do they, ultimately refusing to give up on something that sounds innovative. The following week, two or three men team up to literally cut up the script, determine the sequence of scenes, and splice the play back together. The final product gives the audience the experience of being omnipresent and the perception of a wide-angle lens on life behind the walls.

Everyone is charged. The production is moving in the direction of using simultaneous locations which we will achieve with sparse scenery and lighting, a reasonable solution considering the multiple sets and the brevity of the scenes. The inmates are learning about theatrical conventions. Since most of the inmates have little or no experience with theatre and are exposed to a steady diet of movies at the prison, the early plays reflect the influence of film with its short scenes, quick montages, and limitless locations.<sup>13</sup> With *Voices from Within*, I am determined to move us beyond this outmoded use of theatrical space and suggest designing two rotating eight-foot platforms with walls running down the center, each platform revealing two lightly furnished sets to suggest different locations. To represent the visiting area of the detention center, I suggest that the third platform be divided in half by a wall unit built of Plexiglas, with a small table and chair on both sides. The production crew likes the concept. John will make a cardboard model of the platforms for our next meeting and design a system using a central pin bolted to the stage floor, around which the platforms will revolve, like a lazy Susan.

In subsequent weeks, John engineered the rotational device out of plumbing supplies and Vocational Programming built the platforms to John's specifications. It worked like a charm. Having served almost 25 years of his sentence, John was one of the inmate leaders who helped bring a college program, which was run by Mercy College, to Sing Sing in the 1970s. He mentored hundreds of men as they went through college "behind the walls" and earned a master's degree himself through the New York Theological Seminary, one of the few programs of higher education still in prison today. As production manager for *Voices from Within*, he functions as a liaison between RTA and the prison staff, overseeing set construction, securing inside props, and expediting the design and printing of the playbill. He also hangs lights, no small accomplishment in a place where a hammer requires supervision, reams of paperwork, and official clearance from security.

In the RTA production of *A Few Good Men* mounted in the spring of 2000, John played the role of Captain Martinson, who speaks out against the inhumane hazing of a young marine and, finding no alternative to breaking the code of silence, resorts to suicide. I shuddered every time John, with quiet dignity, performed his final scene, putting on the last accessories of his Marine dress uniform: the gloves, the hat, and lastly the gun, which he slowly raised to his temple. Then, the blackout and the shot.

While we generally do not know the crime for which most of the men are incarcerated, John confided to me that, 25 years ago, when he was 18, he killed his girlfriend and her lover. Afterward, he attempted to take his own life but failed; the place where the bullet braised his chin is an indelible mark of his crime. When he told me his story, he shared this precept: "You must learn in life to be the master of your emotions, not the servant." I confess I never knew John, the murderer. I only know a modest, paternal man who is respected behind the walls for his conscientious work, for his ingenuity, and for his quiet wisdom.

The space where we perform is the prison auditorium, otherwise known as the "chapel" because religious services were held there at a time when the prison



10. This front view of the auditorium, also known as the chapel, reveals the stage and the program's limited lighting equipment. The stage is four feet high to discourage unruly audience members from interacting with dignitaries or performers. (Photo by Richard Moller)

population was more homogeneous. The auditorium has permanent seating for 500 men and a proscenium stage that is raised four feet above the floor to discourage unruly audience members from interacting with dignitaries or performers.<sup>14</sup> Today and most evenings, the auditorium is used for screening movies on a large pull-down screen positioned at the center of the stage. The majestic round stained-glass window built into the back stage wall, as well as the massive, dome-shaped, stained-glass windows on the side walls of the auditorium have all been painted black to block out the light. Two small bronze plaques representing the classical masks of tragedy and comedy are strategically bolted to the wall on either side of the proscenium. Facing the seats, they look down on the audience like a pair of obsolete pagan gods.

Backstage, the wing space is limited; overhead two small, dilapidated lofts original to the building hang precariously overhead, where we are permitted to store three platforms. There is evidence of an old pulley system for flies, although today its use would be prohibited as a security risk. Otherwise, the area is empty except for a dozen broken auditorium seats and metal chairs that line the walls.

Off the back of the auditorium are two adjoining rooms where inmates have religious services. The voices coming from these two areas of worship drown out the din of the guards, the static of their electronic transmitters, the echo of voices from the long winding corridor, and much of the dialogue coming from the stage during rehearsal. Large freestanding fans on either side of the auditorium provide the only relief from the summer heat, but pose an additional challenge to actors trying to concentrate on their roles and project their voices to the audience.

In spite of the obstacles, a series of minor miracles enabled us six years ago to resurrect theatre at Sing Sing. The administration agreed to buy a used set of legs and curtains for the back wall from a local company that installed them for a reasonable fee. The company repaired the curtains surrounding the proscenium, which are now functional. After our first production, a donation from the Inmate Fund paid for the purchase of 12 lights that were hung on two trees on either side of the stage. Last year, the administration paid for a technician to hang a single bar for mounting the lights over the audience and one for running cables to a power

source at the rear of the auditorium. Just in time for our last production, a lighting equipment company donated a no-frills dimmer box. This year, Superintendent Fischer authorized the installation of a new sound system to benefit all the programs that utilize the space. The original antiquated soundboard still needs to be replaced, another miracle waiting to happen.

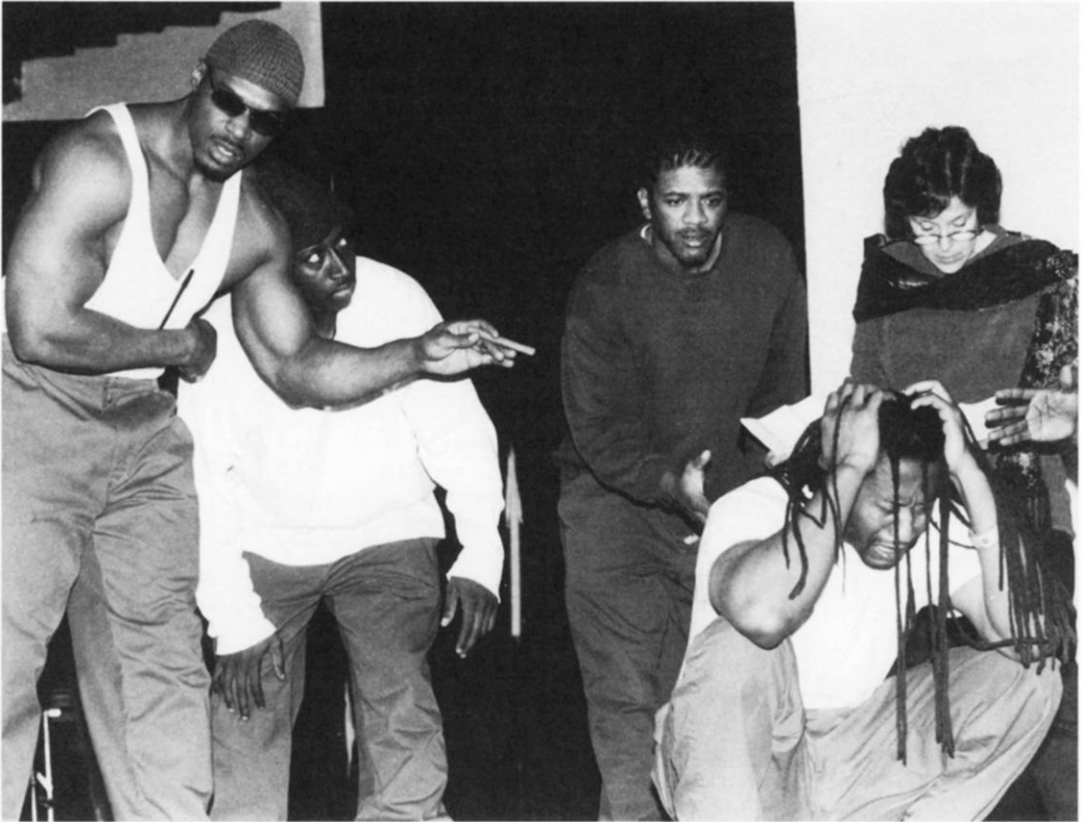
Gradually, theatre has become embedded in the artistic culture at Sing Sing. Men from our program are sought out to host prison events and to enact scenarios for the Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP) and events celebrating Black History Month. Following a long tradition of films that were shot on location at Sing Sing, including *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1932) and *Castle on the Hudson* (1940), the producers of *Analyze This* (1999) shot a scene at Sing Sing using actors from the theatre program as extras.

Original plays and adaptations have also found their way to audiences outside of the walls. Playwrights Theatre of New York City has produced RTA adaptations of Eugene O'Neill one-acts workshopped by men in our program. When *Voices from Within* was presented for the prison population on the "inside" at Sing Sing with an inmate cast in January 2001, an "outside" production of the play using professional actors ran simultaneously at the Newman Theatre in Pleasantville, New York, for the Westchester community. The State of New York Division of Criminal Justice Services helped to finance the twin production. A discussion period followed each performance, and although the project played to small audiences, it succeeded in breaking down stereotypes and raising awareness about issues of incarceration. The cycle was made complete when the actors from the Newman Theatre visited Sing Sing, performing scenes from the outside production for the writers and actors on the inside.<sup>15</sup>

RTA manages to walk the thin line between artistic integrity and endorsement from the Sing Sing administration. Plays are selected by the steering committee and then forwarded to the Executive Staff for their approval. The established plays produced by the group, including *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *A Few Good Men*, have each received support from the administration in spite of their anti-establishment themes. As director, I was relieved that the patient rebellion in *Cuckoo* did not discourage the prison executive staff; the film was well known and the popularity of Jack Nicholson who starred in the film helped us a great deal. The casting of our production, quite accidentally, shaped the vision of the play, which took on new resonance. Because of the demographics of the group, all of the patients were men of color, including the Nicholson character, McMurphy. Female civilian actors portrayed the nurses and McMurphy's girlfriend, and the only Caucasian inmate in the program at that time played the head psychiatrist.<sup>16</sup> The inmate audience got the connection between the emasculating state mental facility and the larger system of oppression of which they, as incarcerated men of color, are a part.

*A Few Good Men*, performed in the spring of 2001, caused initial anxiety because of a vocal minority of prison staff who felt it "sacrilegious" for inmates to portray Marines. The Vietnam vets in the inmate population were less than enthusiastic at the outset because they initially interpreted the narrative as patriotic. Angry and bitter, they felt betrayed by their country and victimized by the criminal justice system. In the end, we were permitted to do the play and Mulder directed it. The play was heralded by the population as one of our best, even among those who had become anti-American during the years of their incarceration, in part because of the abuse of power at the center of the story.

The play *Slam*, an adaptation I wrote based on the award-winning film by Mark Levin (1998), is overtly anti-establishment. It depicts the journey of a young black poet convicted on drug charges through the criminal justice system and is powerful in its condemnation of the racism, poverty, and lack of opportunity that per-



11. *Conflicting inner voices embodied as characters compete as Ray struggles to accept responsibility for his crime, in the RTA's production of Slam, based on Mark Levin's film. Program Director Katherine Vockins stands in for a missing actor. (Photo by Richard Moller)*



12. *Break-dance scene from Slam, choreographed by John W. The set was built by inmates under the supervision of the Vocational Programming Department. (Photo by Richard Moller)*

vades our urban society. The administration was not overjoyed by the choice of *Slam*, but since the play had merit in its strong message of nonviolence and personal responsibility, we got approval to mount the production in the fall of 2001, due in part to Superintendent Fischer who brings to the job an enlightened mind and a commitment to rehabilitation.

Our 7:30 rehearsal break is over and Sean is working on his monologue. An impressive looking man in his late 30s with a powerful build and long dreadlocks, Sean performs in *Corridors*, a playlet written by Phillip about the violent death of a fellow inmate. The three-page monologue expresses the inner voice of a prisoner faced with the moral dilemma of becoming involved. When I first met Sean six years ago, he was guarded; that I am white and a middle-class female gave Sean three reasons to distrust me. Over the years, he has performed in a range of roles including the Big Chief in our fourth production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Tonight, Sean is anxious because his monologue summons up the sorrow and frustration that is a carryover from his personal life. His father is ill and his mother recently had a critical operation for a brain tumor. He explains that he is feeling emotionally raw and worries that the scene is too close for comfort; each time he rehearses in his cell, he is overcome with emotion. I suggest we just run the lines:

INMATE: (*In the yard*) I watched as a man was dying today, and did nothing. I walked by, as did a hundred other people watching with the same mixture of curiosity and indifference one might display while seeing a mugging or a dead dog in the street. For a few moments I thought of going over to him. He was shaking and losing a lot of blood; and though I would not have known how to help him, the impulse drew me, seemed as natural as the next breath. I froze and my survival instincts took over; I sensed the crowd around me and began to grow agitated—annoyed at the guy laying there, at myself. [...] Of all the days, I thought, that I decided to go to the yard this shit has to happen. Of all the fuckin' days.

The air was cold and sharp. The gray sky bright in contrast to the tunnel's dimness. I pulled my collar up against the wind and walked outside. Why didn't I stop? If I had stopped it may have been interpreted as a sign of weakness. If I had said fuck it and carried him to the emergency room...wouldn't his enemies become mine? [...] Justice is blind and swift: an ice pick in the stomach or eye when stepping out of the showers; a knife in the head or neck on the way to the yard; gasoline and fire as you're locked in your cage sleeping. And for what? For caring? [...]

So yes, I walked by, as did everyone who was there. And yes, I listened once more with muted ears as my humanity was trampled underfoot.

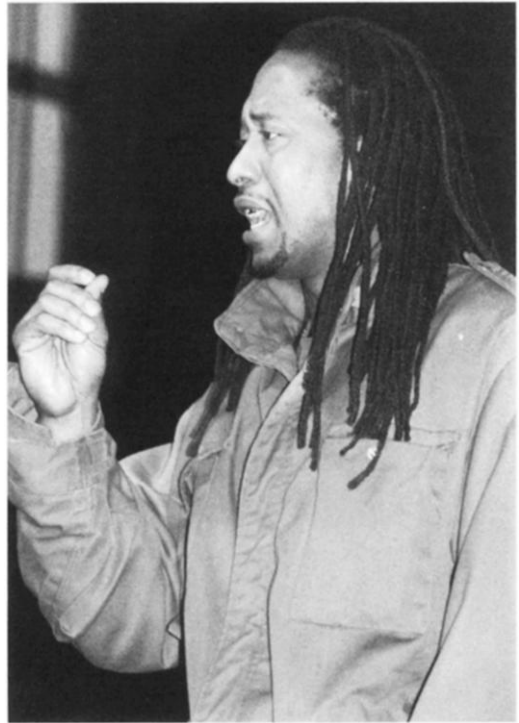
It strikes me as ironic that at this time of family crisis, Sean is paralyzed with feelings of helplessness, not unlike the character he plays in *Corridors*. Sean is one of the few nonviolent offenders in our program and I wonder what atrocities he has witnessed behind the walls. I also wonder how he will be able to compartmentalize his emotions. I am struck by the universality of this monologue, which speaks volumes about the hazard of caring, and am reminded of a recent incident. Last week, on the way to an afternoon rehearsal in the auditorium, a staff member told me some disturbing news. An inmate had reported to the health office complaining of a severe headache and chest pain. After examining the patient, the nurse had the wisdom to send him to the hospital where they x-rayed and examined him thoroughly. The man was diagnosed with a cracked skull and three broken ribs. When the examining physician interviewed him to find out the source of the injuries, he said without expression, "I fell." And so the story was recorded. During the investigation, no one from the prison surfaced as an eyewitness and,

fearing reprisal, the injured inmate refused to comment further on the incident. He was treated and returned to the prison where, as far as I know, he is still serving time.

Coordinating cast and crew, production supplies, staff, and civilians while meeting a performance deadline in a prison has its unique challenges. In a prison, you learn to expect the unexpected. One evening last summer, we arrived at the prison to find that the School House was shut down due to the heat, with the temperature in the blocks in the mid-90s. Imagine the tension in an overcrowded, humid environment in which there is no relief. Not surprisingly, we returned the next night and heard there had been an incident; B-Block, which houses the younger offenders, was on lockdown. We limped through rehearsals that night missing several actors and relying on the resilience of the inmates from the other blocks who stepped into their roles. In fact, it was not uncommon in the early days of a production to so infrequently see the actors who were cast in minor parts—due to lockdowns, visits, and commissary—that we would forget which inmate was cast in which role. Occasionally, one of our performers is put on disciplinary restriction or sent to the Special Housing Unit or to the Box, which is like an underground bunker. Men segregated there are locked down 23 hours a day: they cannot work, receive visits, attend class or go to the yard, and all personal privileges (reading or writing and recreation of any kind) are rescinded, with the exception of one court mandated hour of daily exercise in a large chain-link cage. The Box is a grim place where no personal possessions are permitted. However, the few RTA members who were sent to the Box during a production said at least it was quiet and they could work on their lines from memory.

Managing the physical aspects of production in a maximum-security prison is like building a chair out of matchsticks. Masking tape is contraband, a screwdriver is a weapon, and a blue shirt and chinos are get-away clothes. A supportive administration is crucial; they have to be willing to accept the additional burden of moving props, costumes, lighting, and sound equipment in and out of the prison, on top of the more immediate responsibilities of maintaining order in an often understaffed, overcrowded facility. Detailed paperwork is required to ensure that the production schedule runs smoothly from the first rehearsal to the performance date. Inmate actors and crew members must have clearance to leave their respective cellblocks to attend rehearsals. All costumes going in and out of the facility must be approved for gate clearance, itemized in detail on lists, and individually inspected at the gate for inconsistencies and contraband. Productions such as *A Few Good Men*, calling for one dozen marine and navy uniforms, and *The Sacrifice*, requiring an equal number of business suits, caused the greatest consternation for security where the movement of uniformed staff, volunteers, and visitors throughout the facility numbers in the hundreds; such garments could easily lead to mistaken identities.

There are additional challenges. Play scripts must be submitted 90 days prior to the scheduled performance for approval, along with a list of costumes, names of individuals wearing them, and the number of changes for each participant. All potentially dangerous props, from a metal fork to a ceramic vase, are prohibited,



13. In the January 2001 production of *Corridors*, Sean debates the merits of getting involved in a prison murder. (Photo by Richard Moller)



along with props (fabricated or otherwise) that resemble a weapon—props cannot represent a threat to security. Props and costumes are secured in a locked space until a few hours before curtain. Additional staff is needed backstage because inmates are required to change costumes in full view of the guards, and conduct in backstage areas must conform to the rules of the prison.

An event in the auditorium that commands an audience of 500 men poses a potential hazard to security. During the earlier productions, we were permitted to take the house lights out completely during the show, but because of several knifing incidents during nightly movies, we are now required to leave the house lights at 50 percent. After the curtain call for *Cuckoo*, a fight broke out in the back of the auditorium as the audience rose to return to their blocks. The staff hastily informed us that we could not leave until order was restored. The actors and crew could see the scuffle from the stage and instinctively closed the curtain to avoid involvement. Corrections officers swarmed into the auditorium, and in a short time the dispute was resolved and the men filed out to their blocks. Fortunately, RTA was not blamed for inciting the dispute, which the staff considered mild considering the number of inmates present.

RTA is not the only kind of theatre program to have survived in a correctional setting.<sup>17</sup> The literature on drama-based programs in prisons falls under one of two categories: theatre education or drama therapy. Since both utilize role-playing and improvisation, and both aim to achieve social, educational, or political goals, determining the boundaries between the two areas is often problematic. In theatre education, drama-based techniques are used primarily in preparation for the production of an original or established play, and secondarily, for individual and group growth. In drama therapy, there is an understanding at the outset that therapeutic goals are the central objective. Although most drama programs in prisons are run by theatre artists and therefore come under the rubric of theatre education, more often than not, therapeutic goals are achieved.<sup>18</sup>

To provide a few examples, researchers have evaluated Cell Block Theatre (CBT), Theatre for the Forgotten, Geese Theatre, and Theatre In Prison and Parole (TIPP) for their impact on participants.<sup>19</sup> Working with prisoners and ex-offenders, Cell Block Theatre utilizes improvisation to build original scripts that explore alternatives to violence. According to Ira Mintz, psychologist and superintendent of Bordentown Correctional Facility, “[Cell Block] Theatre, in general, can provide a success experience. And from that point alone, if it builds ego, if a man feels better about himself, consciously or unconsciously, it is a therapeutic experience” (in Ryan 1976:35). Roman Gordon, director of CBT, states that performance training is a resocialization process that contributes to the development of the values of mutual responsibility and delayed gratification:

Theatre training begins to remove the unrealistic attitude of instant everything and builds a concept of future. Rehearsal means repetition, practice over and over again [...and] the offender gradually learns that the work process is, in itself, both necessary and rewarding. (1981:35)<sup>20</sup>

Director Jean Troustine, who ran a writing/theatre program that produced adaptations of Shakespeare at a women’s prison in Massachusetts believes performance-based programs foster perseverance: “Theatre gave them [the inmates] both a chance to study a part and then to act it, to go through the many steps of fear and refusal along the way, and in the end, to overcome obstacles” (2001: 237).<sup>21</sup> Curt Tofteland reports that the Shakespeare Behind Bars program in Kentucky helps inmates “to heal” by working through their crimes and personal issues.<sup>22</sup> Both directors identify group support in a prison setting as rare and assert that play performance benefits participants by fostering a sense of community. For

Clean Break Theatre, which develops material utilizing psychodramatic techniques from Augusto Boal's *Rainbow of Desire* (1995), performance is validation—an emotional reenactment before an audience for whom applause is the formal recognition of communication: “There were tears of recollection and these tears touched the invisible and tenuous border between working within an arts process and stepping over into something that might feel closer to a psychodramatic/therapeutic process” (Gladstone and McLewin 1998:72–73).<sup>23</sup> Boal-based theatre in a prison in Brazil, goes even further, shifting the experience “from healing the individual to changing society,” demonstrating the extraordinary power of performance to facilitate a dialogue with the audience (Heritage 1998:39).<sup>24</sup>

Over the past 20 years, researchers have sought to measure the ways theatre education and drama therapy benefit inmates. While every art program creates challenges for prison staff and facilitators alike, measuring the program's impact supports the conviction that the arts teach quantifiable social skills, a goal that fits neatly into the ideological framework of a system designed to rehabilitate. All of the literature that I examined, without exception, cites improvements in cognitive, affective, and institutional behavior as benefits of drama-based programs.<sup>25</sup> Researchers using role-playing have cited improvements in reasoning, verbal communication, and problem-solving skills.<sup>26</sup> Others found positive results in risk-taking, sense of purpose, and self-development, including improvements in interpersonal trust, conflict management, and connectedness; and scholars found that using drama techniques with criminal offenders helps to break the cycle of hurting by instilling a sense of obligation and social responsibility.<sup>27</sup> While much of the work using drama in prison is explicitly therapeutic, workshops that develop scripts for performance have also identified prosocial effects. The development of empathy, for example, was positively linked to the use of performance-oriented drama in prisons (see Gendreau and Ross, 1983–1984).

Research that focuses on measurable signs of prison behavior and reentry into society demonstrates that drama-based programs reduce disciplinary incidents and recidivism, while early studies reported success with preparing offenders for release.<sup>28</sup> Reports on the use of improvisation and role-playing in the parole system in England describe success with teaching anger management and job training to parolees.<sup>29</sup>

An analysis of journal entries written by Sing Sing inmates in our program provides some insight into the benefits of the RTA program.<sup>30</sup> Inmates state that they “gain confidence,” learn the “meaning of discipline” and experience “commitment” because of the program. Not unlike many people on the outside, inmates resist anything overtly therapeutic; however, through theatre, under the guise of playing a character, they take off masks that shield them, express their sensitive sides, walk in other people's shoes, and expand their perspectives. They reenvision themselves from aspects of the characters they play, or at the very least, objectify themselves in a way that develops self-awareness. One introspective actor wrote about the self-knowledge he acquired through acting:

I have learned that an actor must be able to transform himself from one persona into another. However, in order to give these different personas life, individuals must explore themselves and find parts of their own personality to incorporate into the character they are portraying. Unknowingly, I have been transmuting personas for years. For example, whenever I was in the presence of my friends I would tap into parts of my being that allowed me to relate to and imitate their behavior. In the process, I was accepted and respected. At home, I was a family man who cooked and cleaned and handled the responsibilities of the man of the house. I changed personas with each environment so that my friends would not see my family sensitivity

14. On the set for *Senses*, representing a detention center visiting area, Jeffrey and Artistic Director Lorraine Moller communicate through a cloudy piece of plastic framed as a Plexiglas window. (Photo by Richard Moller)



and my family would not see my thuggishness. Both of these personalities are my own, and although I continue to change with my environment, I am learning how to incorporate all of myself into my actions.<sup>31</sup>

Several men expressed that drama offers a rare opportunity to vent their emotions: “It gives me the latitude to release my rage and frustration through acting,” an opportunity that is denied inmates in a repressive, punitive environment.

A self-described jailhouse lawyer who initially expressed reluctance about getting involved explains: “You see, I found a new kind of freedom. The kind of freedom that allowed me to relive a time in my life pregnant with possibility, potential, and the limitless imagination of youth.” One inmate did some break-dancing for an RTA production:

When I was about 14 years old, I was a break-dancing kid. I was hanging on the corner with my friends, surrounding a large piece of cardboard, waiting for my turn to “bust a move.” Those were good times in my life, and I am glad—at 31 years old—I let my shell crack and get involved because I relived those days of youthful freedom and possibility.

The same inmate concluded that the community that is built around a production provides a “safe haven.” He states, “I saw some men socializing in a peaceful and respectful manner with the civilian members. I was dancing and paused in mid-move because I almost forgot I am dead smack in the middle of a maximum security prison.” A prison activist states, “The opportunity for me to give a message through a character is something I couldn’t miss.” Another inmate talks about expanding his personal role repertoire by “challenging the image people have of me.”

The men who have a serious interest in theatre hone skills in acting, directing, or stage management, or at the very least, enhance leadership skills and self-esteem. Others develop proficiency in technical theatre, learning lighting or sound. When in production, the men learn how to work as a team, embrace mu-

tual responsibility, and sometimes find friendship and solace in their experience of community. Some heal. All of them learn to have an identity apart from their crime.<sup>32</sup>

Our stage manager Parrish (the inmate with the photographic memory) is coaching Jeffrey in the visiting room scene. The setting takes place in a detention center where Jeffrey's character in *Senses* has spent eight months waiting on an assault charge. Jeffrey is in his 30s, with a head full of shoulder-length dreadlocks. He strikes a powerful image with his wild hair, strong features, and his massive physique. I remember the acting class I taught several years ago when Jeffrey joined us as a new recruit. He worked on a scene during class looking full of trepidation. In spite of my emphasis on process, I noticed Jeffrey beginning to shrink emotionally. At the end of the class, I tried a different tactic, "If you don't come back next week, I'm not going to come back." Sadly, he didn't come back, but, of course, I did. I thought that was the last time I would see Jeffrey, but during the next production, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Jeffrey was an avid participant at every rehearsal, working as a stagehand or filling in for a missing actor. I was so impressed with his diligence that I decided to write in the role of Tabor, a contentious patient from the movie version and to cast Jeffrey in the role. One rehearsal, he began to explore ways of using his body in the role, so I suggested he chew on a meat stick and see how it affected the physicalization of the character. The next day, he showed up with the meat stick and a pair of boxing gloves. (I have no idea where he got them and didn't ask.) It clicked into place. He played the Tabor role like a punch-drunk boxer throwing jabs into the air whenever he got angry. He was outrageous and original, and his character got richer and richer.

Rory, the "inside" codirector, is running a scene between the characters Trent and Dale from his one-act, *Homecoming*. Trent is a recently released ex-offender and Dale is his teenage stepson:

DALE: What's with all the questions? Is this the time when you try to act like you're my father, or that you even care about me, huh? If you love me so much why wouldn't you let me visit you?

TRENT: Dale, I didn't want you to get used to the prison environment. Some kids become accustomed to coming inside prison and it no longer scares them. And when that happens, you're likely to take risks that could land you there, once you no longer fear the consequences. I didn't want you to assume that prison is a rite of passage for men of color, so I sacrificed seeing you to try to keep that from happening.

During the scene, Rory passes me photos of his biological son who just graduated from college; he is wearing a cap and gown. I wonder if he has visited Rory at Sing Sing during his incarceration.

Rory has emerged as a leader in the program and his ability to think rationally in a crisis situation has been crucial to the group's survival. When there is an internal conflict, he becomes the rudder, working to navigate storms so the program doesn't fall into the hands of an outspoken minority. Rory's social behavior is spiritually grounded in Quaker beliefs. Over the years, I have watched him patiently weather the irascible behavior of the difficult men in the program—a quiet act of heroism considering the dangerous environment. In prison, inmates and civilians alike must be extremely cautious about infringing upon a man's territory or "stepping on someone's toes." Rory's famous words "I have no toes" underscores his willingness to transcend obstacles for the good of the group. I have witnessed his tireless commitment even at a time when his immune system is compromised

due to his day job and the demands of putting on a production. Rory is HIV positive.

Last spring, Lou, a member of the recreation staff, revealed to me that he and Rory came from the same neighborhood, played sports and went to high school together. He told me that they both came from “good homes.” Like many youth in the neighborhood, during teenage years, Lou explains, Rory got involved with a gang and his life took a detour. Both men are in their 40s now. Both men have spent 20 years at Sing Sing. One goes home at night; the other does not.

Darkness slips in and tonight’s rehearsal flies by. We finish the evening with a scene from *Pro Se*, about a prisoner named Antonio who exhausts every legal strategy to overturn his case. All hope gone, he believes his last resort is to plan an escape. Two fellow inmates argue a different strategy:

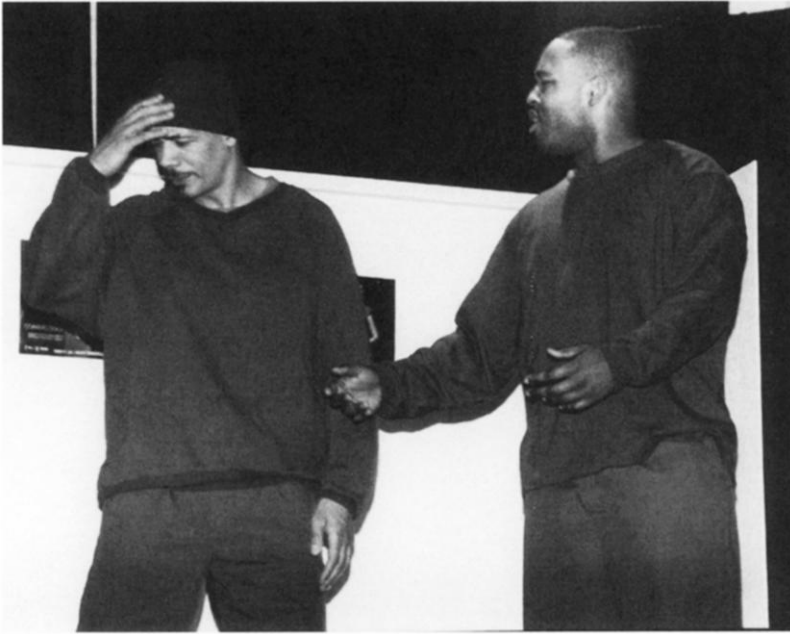
WILLIE: You need a healthy way to vent that built up anger and rage that’s boiling inside of you like a volcano about to explode. And you need a way to inflict some devastating punishment on the guilty party. [...] Make no mistake, you’re beef is with the system, my brother. [...] You have a craft and a skill that makes you the worst enemy of this corrupt system. You know the law. Imagine if you were to start getting other prisoners out on reversals. The damage you could do would be immeasurable. You could reach—

ANTONIO: That sounds good but that ain’t gonna get me out of prison. [...] There ain’t nothing in the world like freedom. Especially when you’re in my shoes. I don’t know man. (*Starts pacing.*) It sounds like a plan but I don’t know. I gotta think about this way of fighting as you call it and look at all my options.

When the time is up, we wrap it up quickly; all hands are on deck to erase the world created by the play and transform the physical space back into a schoolroom at the prison. The actors shed the skin of the characters; the men reassume their inmate identities and everyone packs up. Even the classroom seems to moan regretfully as we return the desks to their designated rows. Phillip helps me on with



15. The characters Trent (left) and Dale (right) rehearse a scene from *Homecoming*. In the background is an example of inmate art, January 2001. (Photo by Richard Moller)



16. Dee, an inmate scheduled for release, argues over divided loyalties in 30 Days, January 2001.  
(Photo by Richard Moller)

my coat. Someone else hands me my bag, slipping in the script I left on the windowsill.

The end is painfully abrupt. We hurriedly exchange farewells and essential information about tomorrow's dress rehearsal as we are rushed by the flow of traffic to the end of the hall where the men return to their blocks for the count. I feel protected by "our guys" as they escort us through a sea of green, flanking us on both sides as we pass. A few escort us back down the stairs where we wait in the dimly lit hallway near the door for the van to take us back into the night. It was a good rehearsal. The program is working and my values are affirmed; we are better than the worst thing we have done. I enjoy the liberating reminder that the inmates are not their mistakes, nor am I.

When the curtain goes up on the sixth RTA production, *Voices from Within*, the Sing Sing auditorium fills with 500 inmates. The house lights dim slightly, the modest set, the 12 stage lights, rented mikes, and, most importantly, the power of the actors transform the reality of prison life into the magic of theatre.

Toward the end of the play, in the final scene:

*(A bell rings and from offstage we hear someone shout.)*

OFFSTAGE VOICE: The gym is now closed. A-Block is on the go back. A-Block on the go back.

*(Willie and Greg go to Antonio while he's gathering his things.)*

GREG: Have you ever heard of the saying, "As long as your mind is free, your body can never be imprisoned"? There are more people suffering from imprisonment beyond these prison walls than you could possibly imagine. Freedom is in here *(gesturing to his head)*. Freedom is a state of mind. No one can take away your freedom.

As the curtain closes, another miracle occurs. Art pushes up through the barren soil of the harsh prison environment, breaking through regimentation, punish-

ment, and shame to reaffirm life. A troupe of prison actors take 500 inmates on a journey where they are lifted up, reminded of their humanity. For a few short hours, they are transported to a state of mind where they are free.

I go back into the night air grateful, board the van that travels back over the tracks to the Visitors Yard, walk up the path past the courtyard to the administration building, pass through three sets of iron gates to return my ID, wave my hand under a fluorescent light, and wait to be released at the main entrance, the final gate.

I have heard it said that, "A community without art is like a community without a soul." As I walk through the parking lot, I feel a bit giddy, as if I had stolen something priceless and had gotten away with it. Once again, I return with more than I came with—a feeling of fullness that has infused my spirit—and I know that can only come from a place like this, a community with a soul.

### Notes

1. Ted Conover, a journalist who worked undercover as a corrections officer at Sing Sing writes a compelling book, which takes the reader behind the walls to witness the danger and dehumanization of prison life.
2. Executions for male prisoners sentenced to death in the State of New York are now performed at Clinton State Prison.
3. In the introduction to *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices*, Thompson refers to Churchill and Dostoyevsky, who share the view that prisons provide "a window through which observers can judge and criticize their society" (1998:9).
4. See Marc Mauer's book *The Race to Incarcerate* (1999) for an explanation of the explosion of the American prison population.
5. For a comprehensive study on the impact of higher education on a prison population, see the collaborative research by university and inmate researchers at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility on the College Bound Program. The findings report that women who participated in college while in prison had a 7.7 percent re-offending rate, compared to all female offenders released between 1985 and 1995 who had a 29.9 percent re-offending rate (Fine et al. 2001).
6. This information comes from Jennifer Wynn's book *Inside Rikers: Stories from the World's Largest Penal Colony*, citing Eddie Ellis, director of the Community Justice Center (2001:170).
7. The workshop taught by playwright Barbara Quintero involved approximately 10 inmates and ran during the summer of 2000. RTA cast the play in September and began rehearsals that fall. Performances were held 24 and 25 January 2001.
8. Carol Bernstein Ferry, long-time social activist and prison advocate, was our first contributor. After *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, we were awarded small grants from the following private foundations: Robert E. and Judith O. Rubin Foundation, The Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust and The Kalliopeia Foundation.
9. Pauline Gladstone and Angus McLewin, who developed performance-oriented projects with inmates, dialogue about the boundaries between drama and drama therapy in "Treading on Tales: Telling All Stories" (1998:67–88).
10. Sets are now constructed by the Vocational Programs Department, a relatively recent development that has vastly improved the physical aspects of our productions.
11. The presence of outsiders who pay a fee to witness a performance by inmates raises the issue of exploitation. For a striking example, see Jessica Adams's description of the Angola Prison Rodeo at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (2001). Using inmates to generate money for any purpose in a state facility in New York is prohibited by the New York State Department of Corrections.
12. First names are used in this article to protect the privacy of the inmates.
13. In our first RTA play, *Reality in Motion* (1997), most of the staging occurred center stage and the play suffered from short scenes dominated by lengthy scene changes.
14. Celebrities such as Bob Hope and Colleen Duhurst once performed on the stage at Sing Sing.
15. In March 2001, New York University produced a play by an RTA member at the Shop Theatre. *The Nigger Trial* is about a black youth who stands trial for the malicious use of language

under a new hate speech statute. We are hoping to produce the play at Sing Sing in the near future.

16. Katherine Vockins, the program director, played Nurse Ratchet; Lisa Brinegar, a theatre student from Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, played Nurse Flinn; Laura Kramer played Candy Starr; and John, an inmate, played Dr. Spivey.
17. From our experience over the last decade, funding sources have shifted from rehabilitation programs for the incarcerated to community programs for high-risk youth and ex-offenders.
18. For a review of literature on cognitive development through drama and a summary of research findings on the impact of prison drama programs on the psychological, social, and institutional behavior of participants, see Cogan and Paulson (1998) and Landy (1994). For a description of the programs offered by Theatre in Prison and Parole (TIPP), James Thompson's book, *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices* (1998) provides information on the latest work in England using drama in corrections.
19. See Paul Ryan's article in *TDR* (1976) for a descriptive evaluation of techniques used by Cell Block Theatre and The Theatre for the Forgotten.
20. Cell Block Theater operated mainly in New Jersey prisons, although one of their best-known "therapy" programs was tailored to ex-offenders in New York City. The program's aim was to teach participants to listen, observe, and respond thoughtfully to situations as an alternative to violence.
21. In *Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women's Prison* (2001), Jean Troustine describes how play production evolved from her 10-year work as a writing instructor for a college program at Framingham Women's Prison. She highlights her experience with six inmates who discover drama as a catalyst for transformation while rehearsing and performing an adaptation of *Merchant of Venice*.
22. For an account of *Titus Andronicus* produced by Shakespeare Behind Bars at the Luther Luckett Corrections Complex, see Wiltenberg (2001).
23. Gladstone and McLewin (1998) discuss process and product, comparing drama and psycho-dramatic methods while focusing on Clean Break Theatre's work with domestic violence. The issue of "de-roling" is addressed here which enables the actor to step back out and assimilate the experience.
24. Paul Heritage's work with TIPP Center at Papuda, the federal penitential complex in Brasilia, is described in his article "Theatre, Prisons and Citizenship: A South American Way" (1998).
25. Some of the research I will briefly mention is descriptive and documented from the point of view of the facilitator, while other approaches are quantitative, conducted by an outside researcher or prison psychologist.
26. See the works of Ayers (1981), Cattanaach (1994), Gendreau and Ross (1983–1984), and Ramon Gordon (1981) on the use of role-playing in correctional settings.
27. Cogan and Paulson (1998) conducted a study of a family violence project that examines the perspectives of the participants through a thematic analysis of material collected during interviews with the participants. Based on the principle that the use of drama techniques with criminal offenders facilitates cognitive restructuring, Bergman and Hewish (1996) examined how removing social masks and exploring the roles of family life, work, and basic survival helps to break the cycle of hurting by instilling a sense of obligation and social responsibility.
28. In two separate studies, Stallone (1992) and Schramski and Harvey (1993) in fact argue that these programs are valuable to the institution because they improve attitudes and reduce unacceptable behavior; see also Snell (1990) who evaluates a program in the New Jersey prison system that resulted in lowering infraction rates; see Haskell (1957) for a look at parole offenders.
29. For an explanation of widespread recognition of the work of TIPP at Manchester Prison, and for a description of their most successful programs, "Blagg" and "Pump," see Anne Peaker's article "Drama and the Institution" (1998).
30. Under a special arrangement, men who are alumni members of New York Theological Seminary received course credit for participating in the fall production of *Slam*, which was performed in the fall of 2001. As part of the written requirements for the course, the men kept journals throughout the rehearsal and performance phases of this project. These quotes are from the inmates' journals.
31. This and subsequent quotes from inmates' journals are kept anonymous to protect the privacy of the writers.



32. I have recently developed an inventory using established psychological measures on several important dimensions of behavior including: self-esteem, coping responses, anger, interpersonal trust, empathy, and social responsibility. The study involves a pretest and a posttest of RTA members and matching nonmembers from the prison population. In addition, it will utilize institutional records made available through Sing Sing Correctional Facility and the Department of Corrections for data on misconduct and infraction rates in an effort to test for any differences between the two groups. My hypothesis is that the RTA members will score higher on self-esteem, trust, empathy, coping strategies, and social responsibility, as well as exhibit lower levels of anger and infraction rates.

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