

From Sing Sing to Broadway – Powerful Entertainment and Education

by Donna Lamb

It was a truly historic evening. For the first time ever, a show was presented on Broadway that was *based on the writings of men currently incarcerated* and performed by a cast of former prisoners.

From Sing Sing to Broadway – An Evening Without Walls at Playwright’s Horizons was the first performance outside prison walls for Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) – the breakthrough theater program at Sing Sing and five other New York State prisons. Playwright, director, and actor Brent Buell, who has been a volunteer with RTA for five years, told what motivated him to do the script. "It was the repeated call from the guys inside prison to give them an ‘outside voice,’" he stated. "So I wove together the writing of four incarcerated authors and interviews with about 25 other prisoners including all their different voices and life experiences."

The result takes us on a journey *that is at once dramatic and humorous* through the thoughts and attitudes of men coming into prison when they’re angry and confused; through the process of their learning to survive in prison; then learning to take responsibility for their actions; and finally, through art, beginning to change and find their humanity. "The work I do with RTA is the most rewarding thing I’ve ever been part of," Buell concluded.

The RTA cast members were extremely proud to represent the men still incarcerated. Rory Anderson, who had been released 88 days before the show after serving a 25-year sentence, said he was especially pleased to be a means of his friend Philip Hall being heard. "He is an exceptional writer, and his voice is important," Anderson said. "He's a very quiet person, and we wouldn't have known what was inside him if he hadn't had an opportunity to express himself through RTA."

When asked what it felt like to perform with RTA on the outside after having participated with it on the inside, RTA founding member Robert Sanchez responded, "There's a camaraderie that we all share, a feeling that no matter what is going on in our personal lives, we have each other. It's a tight network, and I feel taken care of, almost as if I have a set of hands surrounding me making sure that my life is OK out here."

Alonzo Gregory joined RTA in its first year, 1996, and then became resident set designer. For him, working with RTA both then and now has been an amazing experience. He explained that while prison life is extremely tough for everyone, it’s even worse when you’re gay. "Being in RTA got me through my prison experience," he declared. "It was a bright spot in my day because, whatever was happening to me, I knew that in a couple of hours I was going to be away from it. RTA saved me by getting me to focus on being creative. And instead of being ostracized, it made me feel like a part of a group because they didn't care that I was gay. They just wanted to know what I was going to bring to the table."

Another founding member of RTA was Sean Dino Johnson, who appeared in multiple productions at Sing Sing. When asked about what he was performing in this production that meant the most to him, he spoke of Philip Hall’s very powerful piece "Down Dimly Lit Corridors," about seeing a man lose his life in a prison stairwell and doing nothing to save him for fear of retribution from whoever did it. "Performing it brings back a lot of emotions that I felt for many years in prison," Johnson said. "Phil describes both a situation and the emotions that people struggle with because in that environment it's considered a weakness to care. We’re quick to say, ‘Just mind your business.’ ‘Corridors’ provides insight into why people do what they do under certain circumstances because it's a form of survival."

George Villanueva, who has an 8-year-old son, revealed that the thing that meant the most to him was a

scene where he says that he's a father now, and that he'd like to be a decent one for a change. "Along with my parents, my son is going to be in the audience, and I want to make him feel proud," Villanueva stated.

Robert Sanchez noted that in one of his favorite scenes he plays a character who doesn't feel incarcerated while he's with RTA. For those moments, all he cares about is the play. "That's the way I felt," Sanchez commented, "like I was actually free when I was in the acting classes, participating in rehearsals, and when I was onstage."

As to the message they all hoped the audience would take away from the performance, Christopher "Zubair" Bradford said, "We want to show whoever sees this that people in prison are human beings too, and that we deserve a second chance. We're not asking people to forget what we did that landed us behind bars," he continued, "but to leave the door open for forgiveness."

"I'm hoping that there will be people out there in the audience who are willing to say, 'I want to be involved in some way – how can I help?'" added Sanchez. "I think that in order for us to produce law-abiding people, we need to do it as a team. We can't expect the men and women on the inside to come home and be successful on their own. They need help."

Joining the eight RTA company members was the critically acclaimed actor Charles S. Dutton, who himself served eleven years behind bars before establishing his noted career in theater and film. Dutton cites his own experience with prison theater as the turning point in his life. "I would have been back and forth to the penitentiary the rest of my life if it hadn't been for it," he declared. "That's why I agreed to come and perform with RTA."

RTA's founder and producer, Katherine Vockins, said that while the production was a fundraiser, their number one goal was to raise awareness about the use of rehabilitation behind bars. She pointed out that 95% of the people who go to prison come home, so while in prison they need to be given tools with which to come back and enter into society. "If they aren't, we're doing ourselves a big disservice," she said.

Vockins also mentioned that RTA couldn't exist without the extraordinary cooperation of Brian Fisher, Superintendent of Sing Sing, and the volunteer efforts of many theatre professionals. In addition to Sing Sing, RTA is now collaborating with projects in Fishkill and Woodbourne Correctional Facilities and has initiated supporting programs at Otisville, Eastern and Arthurkill. It is their plan to open programs in twelve New York State prisons before moving RTA to a regional and national level.

Rehabilitation Through the Arts is a not-for-profit foundation. Contributions are tax deductible. For further information, contact Katherine Vockins at (914) 232-7566 or pci19@optonline.net, or visit www.p-c-i.org.

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