

Behind Walls of Sing Sing, Inmates Find Freedom Onstage

By KATE STONE LOMBARDI

JUST before the curtain opened, there was an announcement from the stage. The audience was to remain seated after the play, so that the guards could conduct a count. Such is theater at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility: a series of paradoxes, in which freedom of creative expression takes place within the quite literal confines of prison walls.

The drama that followed was the fourth and final performance of "Stratford's Decision," written, performed and directed by inmates at Sing Sing. It was produced through Rehabilitation Through the Arts, a program run by volunteers from outside the prison, which has helped stage 10 plays at Sing Sing over the last six years.

The play, which ran for two and a half hours, was set in Elizabethan times and involved palace intrigue, where jealousy over the Queen's favorite, Lord Stratford, leads to conflict and murder. But while the language was mostly appropriate to the era — "Why hast thou summoned me?" "I shall go forthwith," and the like — it was also spliced with contemporary street talk for comedic effect.

Lines like "What hast thou been smokin'?" had the audience roaring with laughter, as did many others that contained language unprintable here. At various points, the actors would break out of character with asides to the audience. The dashing Lord Stratford, played by Dino S. Johnson, an imposing man with long dreadlocks, is about to seduce Lady Pembroke when he stops suddenly to say, "What are these writers doing to me? I've been a rogue all this time and now they give me a damn conscience!" When young Lord Tooley, played by David James, draws out his death scene, he pops up from the grave and asks, "Walt! What's my motivation here?"

It was odd to watch murders on stage within a comedic setting and listen to lines like "if it would make you happy, my homicidal friend," and then to remember that the performers themselves may be serving time for these very acts. At times the play was so engrossing that the drama could have been unfolding on any professional stage. At other moments, the audience was reminded of exactly where they were, with phones ringing, guards' walkie-talkies squawking, and trains rumbling by just outside the prison walls.

Those involved with the theater program — both inmates and volunteers — say that it is truly rehabilitative, giving the men a sense of responsibility and community, and valuable communication skills, which may help them when they are released. The program is financed solely through private donations and foundation grants and is run by volunteers, many with backgrounds in



Photographs by Chris Maynard for The New York Times

professional theater.

"Theater is like life," said Katherine Vockins, the director of the Rehabilitative Theater Program and one of three volunteers who played the female parts in the play. "You've got to show up; you have to be on cue; you have to work with people you don't always like; you've got short and long term goals and most of all, to pull off a production, you've got to work as a team."

Ms. Vockins said she had discovered a great deal of talent within the walls of Sing Sing. She noted that the theater program allowed the men not only to explore their creativity, but also to help them build social and leadership skills. She said it also helped them give freedom to emotions that are often difficult to express in the harsh environment of prison.

"Drama allows you to try on emotions and see what happens," Ms. Vockins said. "You can't do that in prison. You have to wear a mask to protect yourself."

Brian Fischer, the superintendent of Sing Sing, said he had seen positive results from the program. He noted that the inmates involved with the theater projects had fewer disciplinary problems. Still, Sing Sing is a maximum security prison, and everything related to the program — guests, costumes, props — is closely scrutinized.

The first three nights of the play were

performed solely for prison audiences; the final night was open to some visitors from the outside, including those who volunteer in other capacities at the prison, as well as some inmates. Security was tight. The audience members from the outside, after driving along the high, thick, granite walls and razor wire that surround the prison, were searched thoroughly, as were their belongings.

VISITORS, who needed to be cleared through the Department of Correction well in advance of the performance, passed through metal detectors, signed log books and wore badges throughout their time inside the prison. Once inside the grounds, they were driven in a caged van down to the chapel auditorium where the performance took place.

The inmates said they were thrilled to have an audience "from the outside" and were eager to talk about the program. Sean Smith, 31, played Captain Quinn, one of the Queen's guards in the play. "Stratford's Decision" was his fourth play, and he credits the program with teaching him discipline and instilling a sense of pride.

"I like the freedom of expression," Mr. Smith said. "It gives me a chance to explore new things and also to work with issues pertaining to my being in prison. It's a

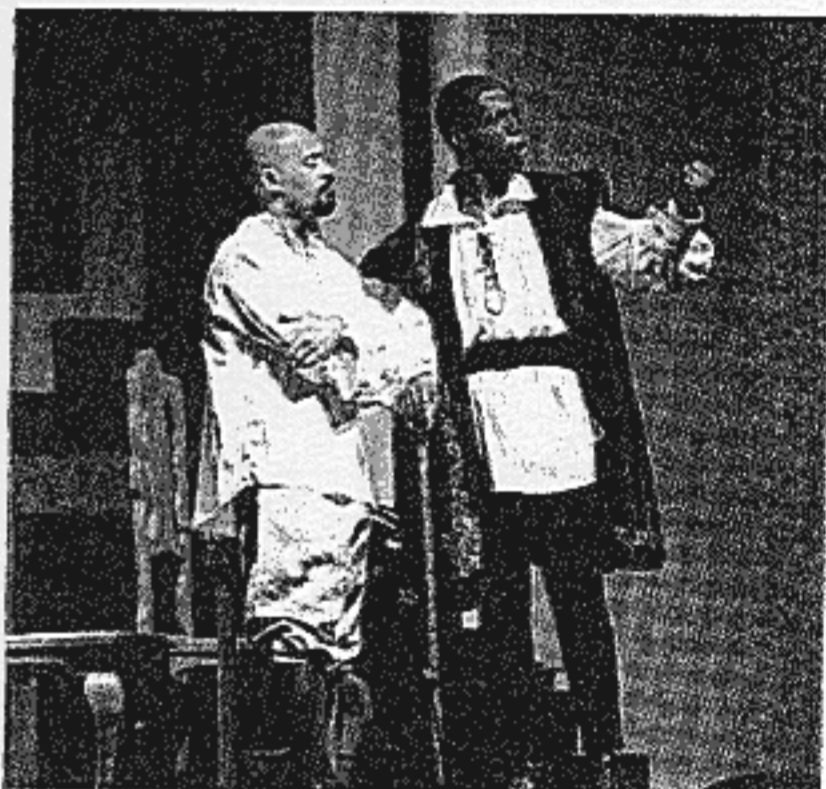
chance to get way from everyday prison life. It also gave me something to feel good about. You feel like you accomplished something."

Many of the prisoners are physically imposing, with bulging muscles and copious tattoos. So it was somewhat surprising to hear from several performers that they suffered stage fright at each performance.

"My heart is beating so fast and I have butterflies in my stomach," said Jeffrey Hogan, who played Lord Hemmings.

Mr. Hogan said that in the past he had trouble expressing his emotions. "I was always in this box," he said. "Being part of this program allowed me to communicate, to express how I feel. At first I thought no way could I do this. I started by saying 'I'll move furniture around.' But they said, 'We need you, come on, man, we need you.'"

Another guy said, 'I'll work with you.' Then I realized, wow, this is powerful. I got bit. This is my eighth production. I've played sensitive roles, hard roles. This is the best for me,



living in that time, working with that dialogue."

David Wayne Britton, who with Winston Ishon Williams, wrote "Stratford's Decision," had been trying to persuade the theater group to put on a Shakespeare play for some time. He particularly wanted to try "Julius Caesar."

But Mr. Britton's fellow inmates argued that the prison audience would find Shakespeare too boring.

"Stratford's Decision" was written in 19 days. Mr. Britton said he wanted to write a play that addressed the destructiveness of hatred. Mr. Britton starred as the villain, Lord Cross. He was beaming after the audience gave him a standing ovation.

"This feels really, really good," Mr. Britton said. "I've been in prison 10 years. When I get out, I intend to pursue this. I want my mother to be proud. How proud could she really be now? I'm in prison. But some day I want her to look at me on stage or in film and say 'I'm proud.'"