

Rehabilitation Through the Arts presents 'Of Mice and Men,' behind bars at Sing Sing

When he was cast as George in a Sing Sing prison production of Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men," Jermaine Archer had his doubts. "I was like, 'Do these people doing the casting know what they're doing?'" the 34-year-old Brooklynite says with a laugh.

He also scratched his head when he learned that Mosi Eagle, a tall, soft-spoken fellow prisoner, was to play Lenny, the gentle giant.

Archer says he knew they could act. They'd been in previous prison productions - under the auspices of Rehabilitation Through the Arts, an 11-year-old program designed to turn hardened criminals into thinking actors and teach them how to communicate.

And people who break the law are born actors, he says.

Still, his doubts persisted for months - time he spent rehearsing wherever and whenever he could.

Archer and Eagle worked each day in their RTA sessions - and when they were in their cells, which are diagonally across from each other.

"We'd look at each other through the bars, trying to see each other while we're rehearsing," he says. "I kept on asking him if he was looking at his script."

Soon enough, neither man needed a script. But the confidence still wasn't there until the day before their first performance.

Eagle had the part down when he began to take on Lenny's physical traits, acting with his body, Archer says. "When I saw him do

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Jermaine Archer, 34, left, of Brooklyn and Mosi Eagle, 37, of Long Island, inmates at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, rehearse their roles in the prison's production of John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men."

See a show at Sing Sing

Volunteer Katherine Vockins says interested members of the public may attend productions of Rehabilitation Through the Arts after a rigorous screening procedure. If you are interested, go to www.p-c-i.org/rt_a_register.php.



Ricky Flores/The Journal News

Brent Buell of Manhattan, director of Sing Sing Correctional Facility's production of John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men," talks about the impact that the acting experience has on the inmates.

it, he convinced me he was Lenny and I said, 'You know what? We're gonna be all right.'" But George was a tough nut to crack.

"George is frustrated, loving and strong," Archer says. "It's hard to balance all those emotions at the same time."

Director Brent Buell and a couple of RTA veterans helped.

"They told me 'Everyone's been in a situation like this, so draw on that experience,'" he says. But that was easier said than done.

"I've been in prison so many years that I've learned to mask my feelings, and I've become great at it," he says with a chuckle. "They said 'Don't be afraid. Let go. You have to let go.' "

Archer - whose nickname is "Panama," owing to his Panamanian roots - wasn't able to do that until he got some advice from Katherine Vockins, the Katonah volunteer who runs Rehabilitation Through the Arts.

"Katherine said 'Panama, don't be afraid.' " Archer recalls. ' "You're not going to cross over a ledge where you can't come back. Don't worry about that. Let it go and you'll reach that limit and you'll be able to come back.' "

The first audience was B block, Sing Sing's youngest prisoners.

"They're notorious," Archer says. "... They curse. They talk. But last night, they were like a Broadway crowd. There was a hush. They were respectful."

Eagle says he could sense the audience changing, from thinking the show was a comedy - because Lenny is simple and slow - to worrying for his safety and warning him that he was in danger.

John Steinbeck's story of two drifters - George Milton and Lenny Small - traces a

love story of sorts, as the strong and domineering George looks after the hulking but dim Lenny, through several brushes with the law.

In the final scene, after Lenny has accidentally killed the boss's wife, George shoots Lenny rather than have the mob get to him. It is an act of love, a sacrifice.

The scene profoundly affected Archer, who is in Sing Sing for second-degree murder.

"Last night, I got so into it, that I cried my first tear in 10 years, maybe more than 10 years," he says. "When I was looking over Lenny, and he was dead on the floor, I was George. I wasn't Panama. I wasn't Jermaine Archer. I was really George."

Archer says he drew on his life, on a relationship he had with his girlfriend's brother, a "problematic" man who needed Archer's protection. "I can identify with taking someone else's welfare as your own responsibility."

"I've tried to cry for years. I think about my children, about the victim's family," says Archer.

"I used to think to myself, maybe if I cry, God would let me go home. Maybe if he knows I'm really sorry.

"It sounds crazy, but I would sit in my cell and try to cry, try to get one tear out. Last night brought a tear out - and it felt good. I felt like a whole new person after that. Maybe I do have those emotions that I've suppressed for so many years. Maybe I just have to dig them back out - and it's OK to show them."

After that first performance, Archer took some heat from the audience for what George had done.

"A lot of people cursed at me last night and said 'You're foul. How could you kill your best friend?' "

"Ghetto loyalty isn't the same as Hollywood loyalty," he explains. "They look at it as 'That's your best friend. You took the gun. You and him should have taken on the world together.' "

Even between scenes, when he stood in the wings, Archer says he felt entirely in the moment, using an actor's phrase. He even spoke with a drawl, something he hadn't done in rehearsal.

"It just came outta me," he says with an air of disbelief.

Director Buell is sold on the program's worth.

"This is why I love RTA," he says. "I think actors are the most courageous people in the world because they go places inside themselves that other people don't go. Here, it's even more so."

Buell had wanted to do a play about a strike in an English tin-plate factory in the 1800s, but the RTA steering committee - the prisoners - chose "Of Mice and Men."

"They said, 'You told us you wanted us to do an actor's piece. This is an actor's piece,' " Buell recalls.

"As they talked, it completely reshaped my thinking about the play," he says. "It was amazing to think what they brought to it."

"Nobody could toss money at me to get me away from here. Hands-down, it's the most rewarding work I've ever done."

Buell says he is in awe of the transformation the men go through as they learn their lines and become the characters.

"It happens before your eyes - and it's really something we get to see that no one else

sees," he says. "Men who are buried in themselves become leaders in the program.

"That," he adds, "bodes well for society, because most are going to be back home one day. I'd rather have someone (next door) who has vastly improved himself than someone who has spent 20 years reading the only comic books they provide and plotting how to have revenge when he comes home."

There are challenges, too: When Buell staged the attack that drives George and Lenny to that final scene. Sing Sing is a maximum-security prison for men, so the director had to find an actress to play Curley's wife.

He found Rosie DeSanctis.

Staging the death "had to be choreographed down to the slightest move," Buell says.

When Lenny puts his hands in her hair, petting her in the same way he had earlier petted a puppy, DeSanctis puts her hands on top of Eagle's and takes control of the scene.

"It looks violent and terrifying," Buell says, "but it puts her in complete control so she doesn't get hurt."

Buell gives credit to the prison administration for allowing this type of scene to be shown.

"In prison, to enact a scene of violence against a woman on stage is extraordinary," he says. "It's instructive to the audience to see something horrible look horrible. Murder is never pretty."

That scene was difficult for Eagle, who says he has many women in his family.

"The violence of it was hard to play and I had to get into Lenny." Eagle says. "The shock of it - that she's dead - I can play."

There were times when Buell saw Eagle thinking too much.

"Very often he'd give a very intelligent facial expression and I'd tell him 'You have to wipe that out. You look too smart,' " Buell says with a laugh.

"He's not smart, but he's not dumb all the time," Eagle says. "I'm like 'OK, when do I look smart and when do I look dumb?' There's so much to him."

There's no guile to Lenny. He is all genuine, says Eagle.

"What I discovered about Lenny - in one of those aha moments - is that he has all the same emotions we all have. It's just that we learn to hide them when we get older. Lenny never reached that point."