Behind Walls of Sing Sing, Inmates Find Freedom Onstage

By KATE STONE LOMBARDI

OSSINING

JUST before the curtain opened, there was an announcement from the stage.

The audience was to remain seated, that the guards could conduct a count. Such is theater at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility: a series of parodies, in which freedom of expression takes place within the quixotic 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, with jealousy over the queen's favorite, Lord Stratford, leading to a trial and murder. While the language was mostly appropriate to the era - "You hast summoned me?" - "I shall go forthwith," and the like - it was also spiked 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 dazzling Lord Stratford, played by David James, 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 square all this time and now they give me a damn cansestence!"

When young Lord Todley, played by David James, draws out his death scene, he pops up from the stage and asks, "What's my motivation here?"

It was a chance to watch murders onstage within a comedic setting and to ask whether, in the world, "Stratford's Decision" is truly rehabilitative, giving the inmates 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 professional theater.

"Theater is like life," said Katherine Vockings, the director of the Rehabilitation Theater Program and one of the three volunteers who played the female parts in the play, "You've got to show up; you've got to be on cue; you have to work with people you don't always like. It's all about working as a team.

Lora, a former inmate, said she discovered a great deal of talent within the walls of Sing Sing. She admitted that the theater program had led her to realize her potential in the arts and to help build social and leadership skills. She said it had also helped her 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. Vocking 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 - costumes, props - is closely scrutinized.

The first three nights of play were performed solely for prison audiences; the last was open to some families of the prisoners and other audience members from the outside, who then entered the theater, watched the play, and then left.

Visitors, who needed to be cleared through the Department of Correctional programs, were allowed to attend. They were given passes good for the entire run of the play and were seated in the front row.

After the performance, the audience members were invited to the stage to meet the inmates and discuss the play.

David Aul酋, as Bishop Holway, above, Brian Fischer and Katherine Vockings, backstage, right.

Right: Kelly Ward, left, and David Wayne Britton.

A chance to get away 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 beards. 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 Pembroke.

Mr. Fischer said that in the past he had trouble expressing his emotions. "I was always in this box," he said. "Being part of this program allows 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.'"

Mr. Vockings said, "We played a scene with a hard role. This is the best for me, living in that time, working with that dialogue."

David Wayne Britton, who with Winston Bishop, 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. So far this really seems like she really can be now. I'm in prison. But some day I want her to look at me as an artist in film and say 'I'm proud.'"