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LIVING THEIR ROLES FEMALE INMATES TELL THEIR STORIES ON STAGE

Montgomery Advertiser - Montgomery, Ala.

Subjects: Self esteem; Criminal sentences; Prisons; Manslaughter

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Date: Apr 18, 1999

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LIVING THEIR ROLES

FEMALE INMATES TELL THEIR STORIES ON STAGE

Today's Topic: Inmate Actors

Portraits: The play illustrates the women's experiences before and after being convicted

"Freeze!" screamed one of the actors. "You have the right to remain silent ...," yelled another as she and the others spread out across the room and stood straight with their hands behind their backs.

Wearing white shirts, white pants, white shoes and navy blue belts, the eight actors performed a preview of a new play, "Transformations: Reality By Degrees." The play was new. The roles were not.

The actors, Julia Tutwiler Prison inmates whose crimes range from robbery to manslaughter, must wear these "costumes" daily. They know their lines by heart because they've lived them.

Performed in the prison chapel, the play flows from one vignette to another. It is the culmination of the Create-a-Play program, which has had positive effects on the participants' self-esteem and self-worth. But reliving some of their experiences to use in the play was very painful at times.

"You wouldn't believe the emotions when we first started (about six months ago). I used this (program time) as stress management," said inmate Laurie Vacca, who has served almost four years of her two- to 10-year sentence for failing to remove her children from an abusive environment. But, in a post-performance discussion, Vacca and the others talked about how the choices one makes often have dire consequences.

These consequences and choices are represented in the vignettes, which cover the women's experiences before, during and after being convicted.

Even Alabama Prison Commissioner Michael Haley was moved by the performance.

"It was excellent. I sensed how much it meant to them (the actors) and the ladies (inmates) in the audience," he said. "I thought it was very powerful."

And because the powerful material covers areas that still are sensitive for some inmates, some of the women but three dropped out because of health or scheduling problems. One woman left the group when she was moved into a halfway house.

Everyone in the group praised the program for its positive effects on their self-esteem and self-worth, but reliving some of their experiences to use in the play was very painful at times.

There are aspects of the past that the actors would rather not remember.

Teresa Knox, two years away from parole, is in prison on an 18-year sentence for manslaughter; Tammy Birdwell has served three years of a 20-year sentence for manslaughter; Gwendolyn Jackson has served 21/2 years of a 15-year sentence for attempted murder; Barbara Pelzer, who is appealing her conviction, has served 22 months of a 25-year sentence for robbery; Kathryn Jones has served more than seven years of a 20-year sentence for manslaughter; Ruth Chambers has served almost eight years of her life sentence under the Habitual Offender Act for manslaughter; Janine Walker has served more than three years of a 20-year sentence for manslaughter, and Laurie Vacca has served almost four years of a two- to 10-year sentence for child abuse.

"You wouldn't believe the emotions when we first started," Vacca said during a post-performance discussion. "I used this (program time) as stress management."

Vacca's fellow program participants nodded in agreement.

ASF's literary associate Jennifer Hebblethwaite, who assisted Lebow, also was pleased with the results.

"This is the best thing I've ever done," she said. "I've been at ASF for three years, and nothing has been as powerful as this."

Over the past six months, Hebblethwaite, Lebow and Aid to Inmate Mothers executive director Carol Potok used creative exercises that included storytelling, improvisation, visual expression, movement and music. Through these exercises, the women developed the play from their own experiences. ASF actors, such as Monica Bell, who currently is performing the title role in Lebow's play "Lurleen," also have shared their time with the inmates in the program.

"This is work -- and they had a lot of homework," Lebow said. "One of the exercises was to write a letter to their younger selves. And then they wrote letters to themselves in the future."

Create-a-Play, which is held for two to three hours twice a week, is very different from everything else in the inmates' daily routine, Potok said.

"A lot of them are in trade school or have boring jobs," she said. "It's a very stimulating atmosphere to be in. I believe it is the best self-esteem class we've ever had."

Potok became involved when ASF approached Aid to Inmate Mothers about adding the prison program to the theater's outreach work. AIM provides a transitional program for incarcerated women. The organization provides classes on a variety of subjects, such as GED, literacy, parenting and life skills.

"Other outreach services are for the families of the inmates, who sometimes struggle while the mothers are in prison," she said.

The pain of being separated from their children had the performers as well as several audience members in tears. Several times, Pelzer echoed the words of her daughter, who was just 6 when Pelzer was convicted.

"She told me she was going to get a gun and shoot the policeman who did this to me," said Pelzer, who almost quit the program because it was so painful to talk about her life and to recite the lines. It was fellow inmate Vacca who coaxed her into sticking with it.

In the play, other mothers talked about how confused their children were because they couldn't see their mothers.

"While being here (at Tutwiler), I have come to know that being away from family is a prison larger than the one I am serving time in," Walker said.

In later scenes, the women fantasized about being with their children and having an opportunity to do everyday things, such as watching their children sleep or waking them up in the morning. The mothers wrapped their arms around each other and squeezed the children they imagined holding.

The play also had plenty of humor, which had everyone in the prison chapel laughing.

In one scene, the women chatted about all the material things they were acquiring -- such as a mink coat, a Bahamian island and a castle in Ireland complete with a staff of 60 -- as they sipped their imaginary cups of tea.

But then they talked about the things they really treasure; things as simple as soaking in a hot bath or sitting on the front porch.

And they talked about how the choices they made still haunt them.

"I want people to know I will always see my victim's face," Jackson said. "We didn't forget about what we did. It's something that we will have to live with for the rest of our lives."

Watching from the audience were ASF artistic director Kent Thompson and associate artistic director Kent Gash.

"It was wonderful," Thompson said. "This kind of experience is another reason one goes into theater."

He is pleased that ASF has had an opportunity to work with the women of Tutwiler because community outreach is a priority for the theater.

"They (the inmates) are another overlooked Southern voice to be heard," Thompson said.

Assistant warden Gladys Deese agreed. Though she did not see the preview, she said she had heard positive things and looked forward to seeing the play.

"The program allows the inmates to look internally," she said. "And it does so much for their self-worth."

Seeing something to completion -- which is a new experience for a number of inmates -- also is beneficial for the women, Deese said.

"Most of the time, they come here feeling bad about themselves," she said. "I'm all for anything that can help them learn to love themselves."

Jackson said she is a prime example.

"I felt like I was nothing when I got here (to Tutwiler)," said Jackson, who has been ordained into the ministry since being at Tutwiler. "But this program has given me so much. We did it. It feels wonderful."

And the excitement was still strong the following day, when the group discussed the previous night's performance, Lebow said. Lebow hopes to continue her work with Tutwiler inmates.

One of the inmates said something Lebow felt she had to write down. "She said, 'I never realized that I could get so high off of something other than alcohol. It feels better than any drug I have ever done. I'm still high!'"

In "Transformations: Reality By Degrees," mothers talked about how confused their children were because they couldn't see their mothers.

"While being here (at Tutwiler), I have come to know that being away from family is a prison larger than the one I am serving time in."

--Janine Walker, who has served almost 3 years of her 20-year sentence for manslaughter

Notes 1: Photos by Mark Miller Staff 'Transformations: Reality By Degrees' is a play that the participants of the Create-a-Play program at Julia Tutwiler Prison developed from their own experiences. The eight members of the group, including, from left, Kathryn Jones, Tammy Birdwell and Janine Walker, describe their experiences through vignettes.

Notes 2: Julia Tutwiler Prison inmate Ruth Chambers talks with playwright Barbara Lebow after the preview performance April 7 of the Create-a-Play group's play, 'Transformations: Reality By Degrees.'

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Teresa Knox, two years away from parole, is in prison on an 18-year sentence for manslaughter; Tammy Birdwell has served three years of a 20-year sentence for manslaughter; Gwendolyn Jackson has served 21/2 years of a