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Incarcerated groups stage shows based on their own stories

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This past September, three Alabama Shakespeare Festival actors, its literary manager and three volunteers trained for an upcoming project -- but not just the typical ASF production.

They were being trained to use their talents to help women in Julia Tutwiler Women's Prison and teen-age boys in Mount Meigs Youth Detention Facility. They were being trained to use improvisation, visual expression, movement, music and storytelling to encourage creativity.

Training for the project, which falls under ASF's Theatre in Human Services, was led by playwright Barbara Lebow, who in 1999 started working with another group of Tutwiler inmates.

As with the first time, these groups worked on the various exercises and worked toward creating and performing pieces of theater, which were performed during the past two weeks for limited audiences inside the facilities.

And what powerful pieces they were, said ASF actor Brian Kurlander, who worked with the Tutwiler group and was joined on the project by actors Rodney Clark and Bonita Hamilton.

"Because it was such a 'real' experience, I found audiences -- even 'free world' people (outsiders) -- said it was one of the most awesome theatrical experiences ever," said Kurlander, who first came to ASF in the 1996 and '97 repertory seasons. He rejoined the company in 1999.

ASF literary manager Gwen Orel, who coordinated this fall's project, said there is a chance the groups may be able to perform outside the facilities.

"We would like to see it happen, but nothing has been finalized," she said.

The project was made possible by a \$20,000 grant from the Nathan Cummings Foundation, which allowed ASF to expand its original project to include Mount Meigs. It also provided for a week's training by Lebow, who worked with Orel and the actors as well as Carol Potok of Aid to Inmate Mothers and volunteers Sharon Demuth and Cindy Meador.

Orel, who joined ASF in December 1999, worked with the Mount Meigs group.

"Some of it was really difficult. We had people quitting every day and had to coax them back," she said. "That is the downside to childlike energy. But it is just a matter of channeling that extra creativity in a positive way."

Working with Orel at Mount Meigs was actor Tommie Gomez, who is married to Chris Traister, a master of fine arts student at ASF. Gomez had to leave before the final week to begin a holiday production in San Francisco.

Clark, who is in his sixth season at ASF, also had a chance to work at Tutwiler as well as serve as a substitute at Mount Meigs, a different type of group, he said. The group there consisted of teen-age boys, who have a shorter attention span, were not as emotionally developed as the women at Tutwiler and had a higher frustration level.

"At least at Tutwiler, we were dealing with a higher level

of maturity," he said. "It could be frustrating at times at Mount Meigs. We would spend 30 minutes in an hour getting them settled down. But you just had to find a way to deal with it."

The groups met three days a week for 2 1/2-hour sessions at Tutwiler and 2-hour sessions at Mount Meigs during September and October. But finding time to work on the project was not too difficult for Kurlander and Clark.

"My wife (ASF actor Greta Lambert) was on tour, and I was just renovating my house," said Clark, who is in "Guys and Dolls," which opens this week.

And Kurlander likes to stay busy.

"The busier I am, the better I manage my time," he said.

Orel said at times, it could be draining -- but draining like really good teaching.

"Some days were so inspiring," she said. "But near the end, I found myself directing them in my sleep and making notes. I definitely took it home with me because I became very close to the boys."

It also wasn't easy for Hamilton, an ASF guest artist whose latest production is "Guys and Dolls." Not only that, but she has a day job.

"I don't know how I do it -- go to prison from 9 to 11:30 (a.m.); Delta (Air Lines), sometimes by 1 (p.m.) and then get off at midnight," she said. "Then 'Guys and Dolls' started. It got rough for a minute, but I pulled through. I don't have children, so it's a little easier."

But she quickly added how rewarding the project was.

"So many of them were very creative. One lady could draw; another lady wrote letters like poetry," she said. "There were some you could just sit and watch doing improvisation all day long."

Letters became a powerful portion of the program for those involved. Those who wanted to could write letters about whatever they wanted. Some wrote to their victims, asking for forgiveness. Some wrote to the people who had hurt them, offering forgiveness. Others wrote letters to themselves or an imaginary friend.

The letters were written anonymously, placed in a center pile and read to the group.

Clark said, "All the letters were immensely powerful because they all could relate to what was being read."

One of the ironic things about the entire experience, Kurlander said, was in the beginning, there were these people who were terrified about doing the improvisation exercises.

"And then you get to the end of the process, and these are the people directing the scenes," he said. "Their input was great. We never stifled anything."

Clark agreed. "And the result was in their words -- the idea was to have them write this piece about their emotions, traps and failings."

By the end, the groups of inmates had a piece of theater they could be proud of. Kurlander recalled one lady who said she now had done something her grandchildren could be proud of.

"Seeing the difference it makes in someone's life is so amazing," he said. "These people had never been exposed to this kind of work."

And, Clark said, "They've never been inside a theater before."

Now, they have created a piece of theater that is all about themselves.

The hope is that this type of program will continue and that funding is in the project's future.

Kurlander would like to get others involved in the process.

"Now there are four more people (actors) who can go out and do this kind of work, which is not just for people who are incarcerated. It could be used for people in drug and alcohol rehabilitation, high schools and elder hostels," he said. "I'd like to see non-actors involved -- writers, visual artists and others interested in helping people find a voice for themselves."

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