

# METRO NEWS

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# A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE

Inmates from Green Haven Correctional Facility see the play "The Castle" by performers (inset, l. to r.) Angel Ramos, Vilma Ortiz Donovan, Kenneth Harrigan and Casimiro Torres.



## 'The Castle,' off-B'way play about life after prison, comes to inmates at Green Haven

BY KATHRYN LURIE  
DAILY NEWS WRITER

SEVERAL HUNDRED prisoners watched intently as four of their own sat on stage and told them that there is a future for them when their sentences are up.

The cast of the off-Broadway hit "The Castle" performed the play — describing obstacles criminal offenders face upon their release — recently for inmates at the maximum security Green Haven Correctional Facility in Dutchess County.

"The Castle" has been in production at New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St., since April, with performances each Saturday at 5 p.m.

The play is based on the real-life experiences of four ex-prisoners — Angel Ramos, Vilma Ortiz Donovan, Kenneth Harrigan and Casimiro Torres — who lived at Fortune Academy, a stately halfway housing facility in West Harlem, nicknamed the Castle because of its Gothic exterior.

Fortune Academy is under the umbrella of The Fortune Society, a prisoner-reentry nonprofit group founded more than 40 years ago by former theater press agent

David Rothenberg. He conceived the idea for the play while listening to ex-prisoners relate stories at meetings at Fortune Academy.

The cast of "The Castle" did not start out as actors. They are ex-prisoners telling their own stories of doing time, readjusting to the outside world, and, ultimately, the long road to healing.

"We're letting people know that there's hope for people who have been written off by society," said Rothenberg. "They want a second chance, and this is giving them a glimpse of that second chance."

During the Green Haven performance, the audience laughed heartily at the funny parts and cheered as the actors related their many post-prison successes. Some even cried when tears rolled down the face of actress Ortiz Donovan as she told of her struggle to overcome a life of drugs.

Performing the play at prisons is one that the cast and crew of "The Castle" consider important to show inmates that all is not lost because they are serving time.

"I think this is about a sense of possibility," said JoAnne Page, chief executive of-



ficer of The Fortune Society. "This is a play speaking to the life experience of the people who were sitting there."

Tyrone James, 30, an inmate who watched the play, said he writes often to pass the time — something actor Harrigan encouraged the inmates to do.

"They definitely motivated and inspired me to keep writing," said James.

"I think the prison population is the area where we make the most impact," said actor Torres. "These are the people who need the help. The biggest issue these people face is the transition back into society."

Bob Cunningham, deputy superintendent of programs for Green Haven, brought "The Castle" to the prison after an inmate suggested the idea. He thought the performance was inspiring.

"Certainly a focus of our department is reentry," he said. "Like the actors said, if someone is committed to change, they can make the change."

"I think this play has different messages for people who are incarcerated and people who aren't," said Page. "For both, it's about hope and it's about potential, but for the folks in Green Haven, it was about their own lives, and their own possibilities."

Actor Torres agreed, saying that the inmate audience could relate to the actors much more than the average audience.

"And if you can make a direct connection with them," he said, "at every opportunity, you should take advantage of that."

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