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Fortune Society Creates Drama at Sing Sing Prison

By Philip Boroff on October 03, 2012

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On his 56th birthday last week, Rory Anderson climbed into a white van in Queens, New York, bound for Sing Sing Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison an hour north of the city where he had once been confined for 16 years.

“I never thought I’d spend another birthday at Sing Sing,” he said.

He and three other men and one woman, all former inmates, were to perform “The Castle,” an autobiographical recounting of horrific childhoods, drug abuse, crime, arrests, prison and eventually going straight, getting jobs and paying taxes.

David Rothenberg, a onetime Broadway press agent for the likes of Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton and Dudley Moore, conceived of the show in 2007. That was 40 years after he founded the nonprofit Fortune Society, which has helped Anderson and thousands of others released from prison secure jobs and housing and otherwise adapt to life on the outside.

Among Fortune’s backers are George Soros’s Open Society Foundations, which made a \$300,000 two-year grant in 2011.

As the van pulled away from Fortune’s Long Island City headquarters, Rothenberg, 79, was ambivalent about the trip. “It’s emotionally draining, especially when you run into people you know and they’re stuck there,” he said. “But I wouldn’t forgo it.”

Murder Conviction

“The Castle” is named for a 62-bed residence Fortune has on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, where Anderson stayed after a total of 25 years in prison. He explains in the show that he was convicted of murder in his early 20s, following a shootout over a soured drug deal.

Although sturdily built, he comes off as gentler than any number of Manhattan professionals.

“The public really doesn’t believe people can change their lives,” Rothenberg said, reserving special scorn for the media and entertainment industry. “I think crime sells and hope doesn’t. You’ll see more crime on television tonight than you’ll see on the streets of New York.”

Victor Rojas, another cast member and Castle alumnus, said he doesn’t like returning to prison. “But it’s important to tell the men there’s something else to what they’ve normally done.”

All of the cast work at the Fortune Society. Rothenberg said some worked elsewhere and returned. Other Fortune beneficiaries are in other fields, many thriving. But the nonprofit, which employs 180, is a key source of jobs.

“Nobody is going to hire you if you have 67 arrests and 16 years in prison, no matter how charming you seem to be,” Rothenberg said.

‘Same Thing’

In a new memoir, “Fortune in My Eyes,” Rothenberg recalled producing John Herbert’s prison play, “Fortune and Men’s Eyes,” in 1967. For research, Rothenberg and the actors visited the Rikers Island jail complex.

“It was a shocker,” he wrote. They saw “young men being herded about or sitting morosely in dayrooms or dormitories.”

“It’s the same thing, every day all day,” said Anderson.

JoAnne Page, Fortune’s chief executive and the van’s driver, calls it death by boredom. “With time on the inside you’re always trying to make it go away,” said Page, a Yale- educated lawyer. “But on the outside there’s never enough time. It’s an enormous change.”

Sing Sing occupies 55 acres, with an awe-inspiring view of the Hudson River. Passing below the manned watchtower, we entered a vestibule, emptied our pockets, passed through a metal detector, and had a number imprinted on our wrists in invisible ink. The guards were all business.

“They are not burdened with an abundance of charm, are they?” Rothenberg whispered.

‘Too Familiar’

Thomas Jones, a “Castle” cast member who, like Anderson, spent time in solitary confinement, was sweating. He sat in a chair and Page massaged his shoulders.

“It’s anxiety, returning to prison,” he said. “Too familiar, the memories.”

The group was led into an empty auditorium with hard, plastic seats. A sign on the wall read, “Inmates are to remain seated until directed by a security staff member. Rule: 109:12.” The performance wouldn’t start for an hour.

Robert Rose was preparing to operate the sound board. An articulate 40-year-old in his 18th year in prison, he said he works fulltime in the law library. He earns 13 cents an hour. Like all inmates, he lacks e-mail or Internet access.

Missing Friends

He praised programs such as the Fortune Society's. He has observed many released inmates soon return.

“After being taken care of all these years, it's not easy,” he said of the transition. “So much has changed over the years. When you walk out you need help. A lot of your friends are no longer there.”

The audience entered in regulation green pants and shirts of various colors. The performance began, with the cast on stools. The prisoners sat rapt.

In a Q&A they asked about Fortune Society's programs. When it was over they stood and applauded eagerly.

“It was cool,” Rose said. “The guys liked it.”

To order “Fortune in My Eyes” (Applause Books) in North America, click here. “The Castle” will be performed on Oct. 11 at the JCC in Manhattan, 334 Amsterdam Ave. Information: +1-646- 505-4444; <http://www.jccmanhattan.org/performances?page=programs>.

Muse highlights include Ryan Sutton on dining, Martin Gayford on art.

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