

Community Connections: Bruce Levitt – Outside, Coming In

By Marjorie Olds | Posted: Wednesday, November 19, 2014 12:07 pm

[Editor's note: the web version of this article indicates that Bruce Levitt was the chair of the Theatre Panel for the New York State Council on the Arts rather than chair of the entire council.]

In 2010 Bruce Levitt, former chair of the Theatre, Film, and Dance Department [now Department of Performing and Media Arts] at Cornell, drove with colleague Steve Cole to Auburn Correctional Facility, a 45-minute ride on a good day. A year earlier, two incarcerated men – Michael Rhynes and Clifton Williamson – met with Steve to discuss the creation of a theater project inside Auburn, a maximum-security prison built in 1817 with immense stone walls topped with rolls of razor wire. The men inside were determined to develop a program that was created by and for the inmates. The Phoenix Players Theater Group is now five years old.

Bruce Levitt came to Ithaca already having had a distinguished career as a director and former chair of the New York State Council on the Arts Theatre Panel, among many other achievements. He and his wife, Judy Levitt, (respected theater teacher, who has long been a popular professor in theatre at Ithaca College) both maintain a busy schedule with Cornell and Ithaca College students.

Every Friday night, Bruce, Judy, Alison Van Dyke, Nick Fessette, and occasionally others arrive at Auburn around 6:30 p.m., sign in and pick up their identification badges. Around 6:40 p.m. they are accompanied by two correctional officers to the classroom area. Passing through a series of locked passageways, eventually the theater facilitators arrive at the outdoors area called The Yard. When they arrive on their way to class, The Yard is often empty. When they are heading back home, The Yard is often filled with incarcerated men, who are directed to move aside before the visitors pass through.

The Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) administrators at Auburn have supported Phoenix Players Theater Group from its inception. Bruce recalls Superintendent Harold Graham once commenting that programs like Phoenix Players enhance thoughtful



Bruce Levitt

Bruce Levitt directing at Auburn Correctional Facility.

behavior “inside”, and the chance to attend a theater class is great motivation to have a good week in between sessions. While many of the men at Auburn are serving long sentences, 95 percent of inmates statewide will eventually be released.

Michael Rhynes originally conceived of Phoenix Players when he began participating in the renowned Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP), which has been providing classes staffed by Cornell faculty and assistants at ACF since 2009. Michael felt that most rehabilitative programming is constructed by someone on the outside who has a concept of what men on the inside need. He saw that the men in prison who struggle with their own past, their own current transformation, are planning for their own future. They are the experts; and within Phoenix Players they control its direction, within ACF guidelines.

David Roth, Supervisor of Volunteer Services at Auburn and six additional correctional facilities in the Elmira Hub, is the liaison to community programs and volunteers throughout this region. He and his staff manage to bring top-notch community programming into the prisons. In order to bring outsiders into ACF Roth has to be like a U.N. negotiator working with very different countries with little common language.

The weekly Phoenix Players workshop is currently composed of 12 men from inside working with four to six facilitators from the outside. Much of daily life inside is regimented. Fifteen hundred men are supervised by a large number of staff. When they eat, what they eat, when they can leave their cell to do what, is determined for them year after year. Two hours a week the men are permitted, within the facility regulations, to determine how they wish to proceed within Phoenix Players.

“I’ve heard the men in the group discuss how Phoenix Players’ main objective is to reawaken the humanity in them,” Bruce said. “As one member put it: ‘Theatre is a conduit we use to reach the still waters of the soul.’”

Each week, when the incarcerated men greet the men and women who have come inside from the outside, Bruce is moved by the graciousness of the welcome.

“For us—we have never have a bad night in prison,” said Levitt. “The Phoenix Players are ideal collaborators, bright and eager to delve into the subject matter, which are often their own lives. They are so hungry for those two hours when they can ‘take off their prison masks’ and explore themselves, their persona.

“The weekly theater workshop provides a safe and welcoming space for the men to explore the pain they have suffered and the pain they have caused others—their victims, their families—as well as celebrate their support of each other in this process.”

After the two groups have trekked across The Yard, they greet each other, and their two-hour workshop begins. The members enter the room with a heightened sense of readiness—to relish every moment of the workshop. Their time together may be spent on storytelling, writing, or rehearsing monologues, or doing improvisational exercises individually or as a group.

“During our short time together, everyone relaxes, shares stories during the course of our work together,” Levitt said. “The men from inside empathize with each other—they support, encourage, and advise each other. It is a remarkably generous and collaborative space to inhabit with them.”

The time passes quickly and soon all those inside the classroom make their way back. Going back for each member means lining up and returning to his cellblock, and then to his cell. For the facilitators it means proceeding back as they have come—through the eight locked enclosures, pausing for permission from South Control to proceed.

As Bruce and passengers head home each Friday night he describes what he feels on the journey home: “These gentlemen are endlessly inventive, extremely insightful and bright. They bring such energy into the room every Friday night. When I head home I am exhausted, yet recharged. I feel more serious, yet joyous to be more in touch on some deeper level with what humans can be.

“My only regret is that I cannot bring the PPTG members to speak to my students at Cornell,” he said. “Their perspective on their own lives and the wisdom shared within Phoenix Players is both unique and profound.”

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In 2012 Levitt also received permission from AFC and DOCCS to make a documentary about the Phoenix Players Theater Group. Filming and basic editing are now complete. Once additional funding is raised, the film will go through the final editing process, excerpts from which will be posted on the Phoenix Players Theatre Group’s upcoming website. The final video will also be screened for the members of PPTG at Auburn