

Ithaca Voice: Ithaca theater company gives new roles to former prison inmates

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Ithaca, N.Y. — Teheran Forest leans back on the couch as he thumbs through the script in his hands. The others in the room do the same, heads bowed to their papers. Sitting in a circle, they are each assigned their roles for the evening's read through.

Forest is one of eight participants of Civic Ensemble's first Theatre ReEntry Program, an eight-week program that brings people who were formerly incarcerated together with local civic artists to produce theater. Each participant writes a play over the course of the program, which will be performed in a staged reading on April 22 at 6:30 p.m. at the Hangar Theatre.

For people like Forest, who spent time in prison for selling drugs, the program serves to strengthen the reentry process.

"This program definitely makes me want to stay positive," he said. "It definitely makes me want to do right in my life. So, I think having this program really definitely helped me in a lot of ways."

One in three working-age adults in the United States has a criminal record, according to the National Employment Law Project. Of these adults, about 1.6 million were in state and federal prisons in 2013, according to the United States Department of Justice.

The ReEntry Theatre Program began as an effort to educate employers about hiring someone who has been in prison, Sarah K. Chalmers, Director of Civic Engagement at Civic Ensemble said.

"[The program started] specifically to help people, not necessarily get jobs, but to take steps towards both being employable and then on the employers side, employers being willing to hire someone who has been incarcerated" she said. "So, increasing understanding about what it means to hire someone who has been incarcerated. That some of the fears we have about the risks of that aren't necessarily based on fact."

Lisa Ellin brought the idea for the program to Civic Ensemble, wanting to join her activism for incarceration and reentry issues with her passion for theatre.

"It really helps people with their ability to write and helps them in their confidence to get up and shows them they have something important to share," Ellin said. "It also helps with their ability to trust in the people they work with and other things like showing up on time and making a commitment to something."

This environment of understanding and collaboration encouraged Forest to continue with the program, he said.

“They are not only people who gave me a chance,” he said. “They are actually my friends too. I think meeting them was the best thing that could have happened to me.”

Theater as a medium fosters this understanding in the community as well, Chalmers said.

“Theater allows us to address some big topics,” she said. “Some real human things we all go through...It’s a place for the community to come together about a larger issue.”

The New York State prison population was 53,565 in 2014, according to the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. The growth of incarceration will increase the amount of former inmates re-entering society, Chalmers said.

Employers who attend the performance will have the opportunity to understand this ever-growing population of society and the detrimental stigma attached to being incarcerated.

”I hope that the program can help to humanize this situation,” said Josh Friedman, Managing Director at the Hangar Theatre. “To give the community an opportunity to see formerly incarcerated people in this light.”