

## The Power of a Theater Performance in Prison

**How an acting program in Sing Sing Correctional Facility is helping inmates confront their darkest emotions and prepare for life on the outside.**

By LISA ARMSTRONG, July 29, 2018

As Charles Moore surveyed the room, the small black stage lit by late afternoon light streaming through the wall of windows overlooking the Hudson, he felt a mess of emotions. About 240 people, including staff from Senator Cory Booker's office, choreographer Bill T. Jones, and Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., had come to see the play "Of Mice and Men," and Moore, 52, wanted everything to be perfect. He checked in with the sound crew, the production manager, and members of the cast. But, despite his diligence, there was one vital element beyond his control — with just a few minutes until showtime, one of the lead actors, 41-year-old Chaymarl Cormier, was not yet there. He was still in his cell, waiting for a corrections officer to escort him to the visiting room at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility, where the performance was being held.

One thing that's needed in producing a play in prison, Moore says, is patience. He knows that not just from his work as a producer, but from the 12 years he himself spent in Sing Sing serving a 17-to-life sentence.

This May 2018 production of "Of Mice and Men" was part of the non-profit Rehabilitation Through the Arts' (RTA) theatre program, which Moore first joined in 2003, in part as a coping strategy and as a brief respite from prison life. "I was still trying to figure out how I was going to do 17 years in prison," says Moore. "I was still scared to death, because that whole prison environment scared the heck out of me. When you're involved in

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the play, you're not in prison anymore. We loved it when the production was on because for three months, it's like you're out of prison."

Moore's first visit back to Sing Sing was in May 2017. As a former inmate, he was technically not allowed to go into any correctional facilities until he'd been free a full year, he was granted permission to see the play "On the Waterfront" a week short of his one-year anniversary. "I didn't even see the play. I was there, but my mind was just so..." Moore says, unable to quite find the words.

It was odd yet rewarding for Moore to have corrections officers warmly shake his hand, but awkward to also have to greet friends with a handshake, as he could not hug them. And then came the bittersweet moment at the end: "Having the ability to

make that left instead of the right," he says, referring to the left he made to exit the prison through a bright orange, metal door, as opposed to the right he'd always had to make in the past to go back to his cell.

As the name suggests, RTA's theatre program is designed not just as a recreational exercise, but to encourage introspection, and to teach men life skills they might not have learned before they were incarcerated. Putting on each play is a complicated process. It takes about three months for each of the 40 RTA volunteers who teach theatre and other arts classes in New York prisons to get clearance from the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS). Even then, volunteers might go to the prison for months without a problem and then show up one night to discover that the corrections officers on duty don't have their gate clearances, so that they can't get in. Anything that is brought in to the prison must be counted and catalogued, down to the buttons on costumes. And the men who make up the cast and crew must abide by rules they themselves create, which is sometimes difficult in a maximum-security prison. "It's not easy to behave as an angel while residing in hell," wrote Jermaine Archer, one of Moore's closest friends,

who is currently incarcerated at Sing Sing. "Conducting ourselves as civilized humans in an uncivilized environment doesn't generally lead to idyllic results."



Charles Moore, an ex-inmate at Sing Sing who now works as a producer for RTA

But something happens in the collaborative process of learning lines, building sets and engaging in exercises that encourage the men to share parts of themselves they would ordinarily keep hidden.

"Artistic expression in general, and Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) in particular, help to fulfill our mission in a profound way," says DOCCS Acting Commissioner Anthony J. Annucci, in an email. "RTA participants develop life-changing skills that lead to personal growth and well-deserved praise for their hard work and accomplishments. The program's popularity, coupled with its strict acceptance criteria, influences positive behavior within our facilities, making them safer for everyone."

Despite the program's success, RTA Deputy Director Ricki Gold says they often get comments from people who say inmates shouldn't be afforded theatre programs and should instead, "sit in their cells and stare at the walls for the rest of their lives." "People don't understand that over 98 percent of prisoners come out and will be your neighbor," says Gold. The goal, then, is to ensure that once RTA alumni like Moore are released — there are over 800 alumni living in the New York metropolitan area—they have the skills to thrive in the outside world.

Moore was raised by his grandmother and uncle in Buffalo, NY, having been essentially orphaned at a young age. One of his greatest shames, he says, is the word written on his birth certificate in the space for his father's name: "unknown." Moore's mother, Minnie, was murdered when he was 3, stabbed 17 times by a boyfriend.

Though Moore's grandmother and uncle provided basic

necessities — food and shelter — he says he didn't feel much affection from them: "I felt unloved and I felt like I was in the world by myself," says Moore. "When I graduated 8th grade, there was no one at my graduation. I got a couple of awards, but no one was there."

Moore started drinking when he was 12, first by draining the dregs from his grandmother's beer cans, then buying his own beer, and eventually transitioning to hard liquor. He was an alcoholic by the time he was 18, and kept adding substances to numb his pain — the drinking led to marijuana use, and then, in his late 20s, crack cocaine.

In November 1999, when Moore was 34, he got into an altercation with an acquaintance who, he says, had made sexual advances, and accidentally killed him. Moore pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to 17 years to life. At the time of his incarceration, Moore was still addicted to drugs and alcohol. About a year into his incarceration, he saw his first RTA play — "A Few Good Men" — and was inspired to join. The program is so popular that Moore had to wait two years before he was accepted. He had small, often behind the scenes roles, first in August Wilson's "Jitney," then in "West Side Story."

Through acting, he went through a process of self-reflection. "It wasn't until I got involved with RTA that I finally began to get comfortable with myself again," says Moore. "It helped me to get my humanity back, to let me know that I wasn't as bad as the decision that I had made."

In 2007, Moore was the production manager for a performance of "Of Mice and Men." He was especially moved by the way George — played by Jermaine Archer — held his best friend Lennie after he was forced to kill him. It unearthed emotions Moore had been suppressing most of his life. "I didn't have my first cry until I was in prison," says Moore. "RTA actually helped me to tap back into my emotions."

Aside from learning acting and production skills, Moore says RTA inspired him to get an education. At the time of his incarceration, he only had a GED; he left prison on May 31st, 2016 with a master's in professional studies from New York Theological Seminary.

RTA founder Katherine Vockins says that in the 22 years she's been working in prisons, she has never met anyone with Moore's business acumen and ability to "think around corners." He is also a natural leader: "You have to be able to lead with silent and gentle authority to motivate people behind these walls," she says. Vockins was so impressed that when Moore was released, she offered him a job as program and alumni coordinator, making him the first RTA alumnus to become a full-time RTA employee. She then suggested he help produce "Of Mice and Men."

A 2011 John Jay College of Criminal Justice study found that those in RTA's theatre program had fewer and less severe infractions and demonstrated better behavior and anger management than a control group: "Theatre may be unique in facilitating institutional adjustment and well-being through the expression of emotions, the rehearsal of life roles and the gratification of public performance."

Archer, 44, worked with Moore as a production assistant on the 2018 performance of "Of Mice and Men." He's been incarcerated for 20 years, for a murder he says he didn't commit, and spent the first 10 years behind bars resentful about his wrongful imprisonment.

Then, a series of events, including being transferred to a prison close to the Canadian border, which made it difficult for his family to

visit, forced an epiphany. "I was like, 'You know, you're not a victim, Jermaine. You did a lot of things,'" Archer says, referring to the fact that he had been a drug dealer and self-proclaimed "bad guy." "Just because they didn't catch you right then, it doesn't mean you don't belong here."

Like Moore, Archer says that RTA allowed him to explore emotions he'd been hiding for years. "In prison, you got a mask on all day," says Archer. "In [RTA], you need to actually be vulnerable — take the mask off. Be silly. Laugh. Roll around on the floor. Sing."



Timmy Walker and Chaymarl Cormier performing in a recent production of "Of Mice and Men", photo: Peggy McDonnell

One thing Archer couldn't do was cry. When he was first incarcerated, he believed that if he could just cry, God would take pity on him and he would somehow be released. He conjured up every sad memory he could think of. "I'm trying hard to squeeze the tears out and they're not coming out," he says. Then, during one performance, Archer remembers the director telling him to actually feel what it would mean to have to kill his best friend. "He got me so into that character that on opening night," says Archer, "when I shot my best friend in the back of the head, without trying, tears just started coming down my face."

Like many in the audience, Moore was teary eyed again after the May 2018 performance. The men had remembered their lines. The final scene, in which George, played by Cormier, told Lennie, played by Timmy Walker, to look off across the water — in this case, the river just beyond the prison visiting room windows — before killing him, took on an additional level of complexity and poignancy. The play often raises questions for the men, as they see parts of themselves in the story of two outcasts, hustling to survive, and the choice one has to make in killing the other, out of love, to save him from a form of punishment that would have been far more cruel.

As audience members filed out, officers called the cast and crew to the right side of the room to be counted. Moore joked that perhaps he should line up with them. Archer told him he'd better not mess up their count.

It's hard, Moore says, to go from the euphoria of a performance back to prison life, especially since the men face heightened scrutiny after having been in close contact with so many visitors. "The thing about that other door is not so much that you're going back into the prison," says Moore. "When you go through that door, that's probably the most degrading part of being incarcerated, because that's where you're strip searched. That kind of breaks the whole joyous moment, just brings you back down to the reality of where you are."

Leaving the prison, Moore tries to focus on what they had accomplished, beyond the simple act of performing a play. "We were deemed the bottom of the barrel, if you will," he says. "But all of us working together, producing such magical shows such as the production that we put on, helps us to know that we are more than just our crime. We are more than what society says we are."

**For more info: 914.232.7566 or [rta-arts.org](http://rta-arts.org)**