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ARTS BEHIND BARS

For Inmates, a Stage Paved With Hope

By SUSAN HODARA

Ossining

THE play was “West Side Story,” but in this production, the actors who sang and danced the roles of the Sharks and the Jets were prisoners inside Sing Sing, and the audience members who cheered them were primarily their peers. Four nights of performances earlier this month marked the 10th anniversary of theatrical productions at Sing Sing, thanks to the privately financed, all-volunteer Rehabilitation Through The Arts, established by Katherine Vockins of Katonah.

The program’s mission, explained Ms. Vockins, a former marketing specialist, is to change the behavior and better the lives of prisoners through the teaching approach of theater. To that end, Ms. Vockins, 63, in collaboration with theater professionals, has created a curriculum of year-round, twice-a-week theater-related workshops, culminating in the production of two plays a year. “West Side Story” was the group’s 18th show and its first musical.

Operating under the nonprofit Prison Communities International, the arts program was seeded in 1996 when Ms. Vockins, then a volunteer at the prison, was approached by a group of inmates who wanted to write a play. The result was “Reality in Motion,” staged a year later. About two-thirds of the program’s productions have been from original works, said Ms. Vockins, who now works full time for Prison Communities. “If you told me 12 years ago that this is what I’d be doing now,” she said, “I would have laughed.”

The arts program is facilitated by a steering committee of five inmates, one of whom is John Whitfield, 43, who is serving 25 years to life for

murder. Mr. Whitfield, who was assistant director of “West Side Story” and elicited copious chortles as Officer Krupke, has been involved with the program since its inception.

“Theater has a magical way of bringing out the humanity in people,” he said. “This program creates a more harmonious prison setting.”

That philosophy was confirmed by a 2003 study by [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#), indicating that prisoners in the arts program committed fewer and less serious infractions during their incarceration, and had better coping skills than a control group.

Ms. Vockins said the recidivism rate of the program’s alumni was lower than the national average, which, according to Justice Department statistics, is 67.5 percent in the first three years. Based on the 16 members who have been paroled in the past six years, she said, “the recidivism rate of our inmates is under 10 percent.” which corroborates the program’s intentions. “This is not about putting on a play,” Ms. Vockins said. “It’s about learning life skills.”

(In December, an alumni of the program who had appeared on “Law & Order” after his release was arrested in a series of robberies in the county.)

In 2005, Rehabilitation Through The Arts programs were established at prisons in Fishkill and Woodbourne, both in conjunction with [New York University](#). Last October, the Green Haven prison began an arts program, anchored by John Bedford Lloyd and Patrick Collins, actors and residents of Katonah.

“West Side Story” was directed by Peter Barbieri Jr., of Ossining, who has worked with the program for seven years. Its musical director was Kim Breden, a Yonkers-based educator and performer who played Anita in the show. Ms. Vockins played Consuelo, and other female roles were taken by outside volunteers.

The bustle and camaraderie that pervaded a recent rehearsal seemed more suited to a high school auditorium than a penitentiary. “We don’t picture them as bad men,” Ms. Vockins said. “But they were. In one critical, awful moment, they made a mistake. But they are not their mistakes. And we do not treat them as their mistakes.”

The group of inmates involved is diverse. Mr. Whitfield called it “one of the only groups inside that breaks ethnic boundaries.”

As for age, Ms. Vockins said: “The average is closer to 30 than 20, with some in their 50s and 60s. The younger men are less likely to stay the course.”

That is because membership requires more than a desire to act. “You cannot do a complex play without some level of self-control,” Mr. Whitfield said. “You have to be respectful and courteous. You have to be on time, and there’s no chasing the women.”

Another requirement is participation in a higher-education program; inmates can earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

The rewards for those who make these commitments are meaningful. Being involved in Rehabilitation Through the Arts “gives a person something of significance to look forward to,” Mr. Whitfield said. “This is a dreary place, and hope means a lot here.”