Sing Sing, dance, dance

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OSSINING, N.Y. - Sing Sing Correctional Facility could be the last place where one would expect to go for a night at the theater.

But for the past seven years, inmates at this maximum security prison - where phrases like "the Big House" and "up the river" were coined because of the facility's ominous presence on the banks of the Hudson River in quiet Ossining - have been performing theater and seeking redemption through song, dance and drama.

Helping them develop these skills is Peter Barbieri, director of Sing Sing's production of Leonard Bernstein's musical "West Side Story," featuring about 30 inmates in performances at the prison this week for invited audiences.

Barbieri is associate artistic director of Curtain Call Theater Inc. in Stamford and is a volunteer for the Westchester County-based Rehabilitation Through the Arts, a nonprofit program that teaches prisoners about theater, music and visual arts.

"There's an amazing sense of community here," Barbieri, an Ossining resident, said during a recent rehearsal break. "We really learn about human nature working with these guys."

While Barbieri has plenty of experience directing theater in more traditional venues - he's the founder of Curtain Call's "Shakespeare on the Green," and is working on a new off-Broadway musical called "Sessions" - he finds there's very little that differentiates Sing Sing's performers from those he directs in Stamford and New York.

"When these guys are on the stage, they're not in prison anymore," Barbieri said.

That's not to say working with prisoners doesn't have its challenges. There's red tape galore. Even getting into the prison for rehearsals is a process that routinely takes more than a half-hour.

Visitors can make it only about 5 feet from the front door when the first set of prison bars greets them. After being identified by security guards, visitors must then pass through metal detectors and other checkpoints.

From there, they wait until a van that can be opened only from the outside picks them up and drives them to the chapel, where rehearsal takes place under the watch of prison guards.

Cell phones are not allowed inside Sing Sing. Rehearsals and performances can be canceled on a whim if the prison goes into lockdown. All actors' costumes are double- and triple-checked, as they could be viewed as disguises for inmates.

Props are also problematic, especially for a show like "West Side Story," where scenes of gang violence and brawls calls for switchblades and guns.

"It's a huge challenge because of the bureaucracy," said Katherine Vockins, RTA's founder and executive director. "You can't just pick up a phone to call the actors."

Vockins started the group in 1996 as a way to help prisoners rehabilitate. This was after many

publicly funded programs were withdrawn from the New York state prisons.

The program started with some workshops. There, "we had eight men who started writing about what they knew. The streets. Crime. Denial. And redemption," Vockins said.

In these workshops, RTA volunteers teach prisoners, many who have been convicted of very serious crimes, about teamwork, patience, friendship and compassion, Vockins said.

Past RTA productions at Sing Sing include the jury-room drama "12 Angry Men," which was also directed by Barbieri, and "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

Longtime RTA participants inside Sing Sing said the program has had a positive impact on their lives.

"You see, some good can come out of Sing Sing," said Tariq Beaudouin, an inmate who has been involved with RTA since close to its inception and is now on a steering committee that helps recruit and work with new inmates. "We're all family here. I saw I could benefit from that.

"I was scared because I never acted before but I decided it would be fun and I could be a good role model."