

A Major Event in Auburn Prison: Behind the Scenes with a Phoenix Player

By Adam Roberts

On Thursday, May 12, 2016, the Phoenix Players Theatre Group performed “This Incarcerated Life: The Foundation of a Pipe Dream” for an audience of seventy in Auburn Prison’s chapel. It was like a performance anywhere else, except that it was staged in prison with inmate actors. That is to say, it was unlike any theater experience in the world.

The warm weather of the previous month had brought with it the reliable escalation of fights in the yard that accompanies every late spring in prison. Each time something jumped off, I hoped that it wouldn’t be the big one, the fight that triggers retaliatory fights, which lead to a facility-wide lockdown.

Bruce Levitt, PPTG’s fearless leader, finagled 6:30 PM call-outs (permission to leave one’s cellblock) for all his Players to rehearse in the chapel on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, just as he had done for the previous years’ performances. 6:30 is a half hour earlier than other call-outs. In prison, anything out of the norm is viewed with suspicion, and the only reason we got there roughly on time was because we were blessed from on high – the well-dressed administrator, Dave Roth, Supervisor of Volunteer Services, made a point of showing up.

For reasons of security (guards had to process in our volunteers, the audience, and recording equipment), our call-out for the night of the performance was for 7 o’ clock. Accounting for warm-ups, an eighty-five-minute running time, closing, and Q & A, there would be no time to spare before getting pulled out by guards at a non-negotiable 9:15. Bricks and mortar and razor wire hold the joint together, but rules, routine, and time a prison make. Bells and count times punctuate our days, and even those who have less OCD-like brains than mine have routines that they have engaged in for years.

For the Phoenix Players, routine went out the window Thursday. Before making time for a shower, we tapped our respective networks and called in favors to have clothes ironed or get a haircut. I did a run-through of my lines for friends, and one piece – detailing my descent into heroin addiction and the family tragedy that ensued – made someone cry. I wasn’t able to process his raw emotion, so I joked: “They laughed, they cried.” And my throat was sore.

I emptied the dregs of my honey into hot tea, then poured hot water into the honey bear, and drank that, too. Then a nap. Shower. Medium-sized roast beef sandwich, courtesy of my friend Mike, a light meal for yours truly. A difficult decision awaited: green shirt or red? The light green polo that I borrowed from Benji or my deep red polo that fit more snugly. Seeing as how I’d already ironed the

green, which was only the second time I'd ironed anything in my thirty-nine years, green it was. I was squared away. The thought occurred to go through my lines one last time, but I figured it would just make me nervous. I was excited, anxious, and ready – one hour to curtain.

From his cell on the floor above me, Sheldon could see the chapel entrance, and announced to Leroy and me that a group of twenty was just escorted in, camera crew included. The gears of the big machine were clicking into place. Leroy was making me nervous with his pacing and clockwatchery. I wanted to be out as much as anyone, but knew that with all the guests there would be a Department official, who'd make a call to get us where we needed to be. As Leroy walked to the guards at the desk, he said, "I'm gonna see what they say."

"Waiting for the call," the guard at the desk said. "There's a major issue." Was he talking about PPTG? Life is a matter of perspective: our happiness was their headache, our major event their major issue. I was in earshot of the guards arrayed around the desk when one said, "...and what if there's a riot?"

Each time the desk phone rang, Leroy and I perked up and moved to the exit. There's a payphone on our tier, and I wanted to call a loved one, receive a last-minute good-luck hug over the phone. I got my brother, who was commuting home: "Break a leg."

A few minutes after 7, the desk phone rang, and the guards grudgingly told us we could go. On the way out, we gave them the cell numbers of the other Players in the block: Nate, Sheldon, JR.

Leroy Taylor and I were the first to enter the chapel foyer, where we dropped our ID cards in the block-appropriate slot, as a guard checked our names against the call-out list. I laughed inwardly at the blind obeisance to routine, the hilarity of an Off-Off-Off Broadway performer being carded at the playhouse door. The Deputy Superintendent of Programs was there (if the Superintendent is the CEO, Dep. Tanea is the VP of Human Resources). A Lieutenant held court in front of a klatch of guards. We walked past them, through the heavy wooden doors, and into the chapel. Too many people in the pews to take in distinct faces. Two cameras on tripods were set up towards the back. Our volunteer facilitators were arranged along the back of the house, like a receiving line: Norm Johnson, Mary Rolland, Judy Levitt, Allison Van Dyke. On the side of the pews, Chris Seeds came up to greet me, more ebullient than I'd ever seen him. Bruce, in a handsome blue blazer, smiled and embraced me. His baby was about to be born. There was Nick Fessette and Mariana Amorim. The fellows arrived: Sheldon Johnson, Jim "JR" Ryant, Demetrius Molina, Nathan Powell, Ray VanClief, David Bendezu.

The entire family present and accounted for, Bruce called us into a huddle, where he imparted words of encouragement. Time was compressing for me, my senses becoming acute and heightened,

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tunneling in on focal points. Hey, next to me was Mark DiStefano, our sound technician, Cornell undergrad, Bruce's student. Allison led us in annunciation exercises. *Puh, puh, puh, buh, buh, buh...* For once, I remembered them the whole way through, and realized just how thoroughly we had trained for this moment. We held hands and said our motto: *We are a community of transformation. Through the power of self-discovery, we create the opportunity to know and grow into ourselves.* And then we went to places.

David was on stage, opening up, before I realized that we had started. On cue, we went up one at a time, and gave him a pat or a dap. Standing on stage, registering the bright floor-lights, I felt the flutter of adrenaline. My nerves kicked in: *Oh, God, I'm about to make a real ass out of myself.* No sooner did David thank us for giving him the space to play than I was center stage, singing my love of pockets, dancing with my backup. I noted some serious faces in the audience. *They hate it, you suck...quick, find expressions of approval.* Sheldon and I performed our interspersed pieces, then I rotated off stage.

Watching Leroy, Nate, then Ray perform was like seeing them, truly seeing them, for the first time. They were so damn good, and the audience was engrossed. We were the illest show on Earth. I was witnessing the climax of three nights of rehearsal, weeks of fine tuning, months of workshopping our pieces, over a year of skills training, five years of PPTG's craft memory and learning curve, the lifetimes of our volunteers' collective teaching experience. This was the culmination.

The pieces flew by. Demetrius, Nick, and Judy reenacted a call with Demetrius's young son. Sheldon used sign language to narrate growing up with a deaf mother. JR brought it home with a tale of never knowing his father, by which point anyone who wasn't moved by the previous two pieces got misty eyed. And then I did my part.

Leroy did the second half of his piece. Nate led us in song. David made a serious bid for an R & B career. Off stage, I snapped out of the trance of the present moment, and, realizing we were three pieces from the end, felt sadness arising. In the weeks leading up to the performance, I hoped to make it through without screwing things up, but now I wanted it to last forever, to go on a road trip whose destination was forever the next exit. Having jettisoned petty concerns, I was in a flow state, processing at full capacity – like a mountaineer concerned only with the immediate handhold, I was focused on the narrative terrain, waiting to leap into my cue.

I was also absorbing flashes of sensory information, like how the guards on the foyer side of the chapel's glass windows regarded us differently than the audience. The audience watched us act on stage, the guards scrutinized the few inmates sitting off stage. That was their routine, and where training dictated that they focus their attention. It felt like the embodiment of college towns across the country,

the tension between town and gown. The audience was comprised mainly of students and academics from Cornell University and Ithaca College who drove a not insignificant distance and were subject to rigorous screening, just to see us, and they were enthralled; the guards were bored, but at least the duty assignment kept them out of the yard. They were not amused by the hip-hop antics of Leroy and his Lunchbox Crew's "Mess Hall Delights," but everyone else loved it.

Then I was closing, the audience was laughing, and we were taking deep bows to a thunderous standing ovation. Standing O: everyone should be on the receiving end once in his life.

We set up chairs on stage, and David and Demetrius – performing a role previously held by Michael Rhynes, the group's cofounder, who'd been unexpectedly transferred to Attica in August – emceed a Q & A. As people stood up and introduced themselves, I recognized the names of Cornell Prison Education Program professors I'd heard over my two-plus years in Auburn. Paul Sawyer and Alex Chertok (younger than I'd imagined).

The questions and comments highlighted how magical the evening was. We had turned the chapel into a lush oasis within a carceral desert, a transformative space full of positivity and warmth – outside, the yard was cold and dark and bereft of hope. The way our audience was escorted in, and would be escorted out, called to mind a so-called Green Zone, the fortified compound in a war-torn country.

Sitting on stage, in between JR and Leroy, I felt so proud of what we accomplished. We answered the questions for ourselves, but spoke as a group. I'd finally grown into someone who could resist hogging attention.

When Dave Roth appeared off stage to give us the five-minute warning, I realized how absent our Director, Bruce, was. Aside from motioning me to speak louder during one piece, he was invisible, trusting us to do what he and the other facilitators had prepared us to do. We answered one last question, then led the audience in closing with our motto, which was printed on the cover of the playbill. More applause, then the audience moved into the wings, and we mingled.

For extrovert me, meeting two to three people at a time was a smorgasbord of peak experience. There was the irrepressible Kyri Murdough, CPEP Coordinator, and her mom; Doc Wetherbee, Cornell professor, he of the legends; Paula Cole, our founding volunteer's daughter, who accepted my condolences on the passing of her father Stephen, and agreed that his presence will always be felt in PPTG. I met Mary Katzenstein, one of the founders of CPEP, and thanked her for her commitment to the program. Lots of hands materialized out of the crowd to shake mine. Mariana's husband, Dylan. Then a pleasant young woman, a drama student from Cornell. An English professor from Syracuse University, who, noticing in my bio that I attended SU, wondered if I'd studied under any of his colleagues. There

was a semicircle of folks in front of me when I commented on a salmon-colored tie as I shook the hand of a gent (unfortunately, it was only later that I learned, courtesy of Leroy, the power tie belonged to none other than Rob Scott, executive director of CPEP, who I'd wanted to congratulate on recently winning the Presidential Champions of Change award).

At 9:15, a guard opened the door and called for the inmates to leave. I broke off from a nice woman, a high school teacher who'd driven from Baltimore to see us that evening (God bless special-ed teachers). As I walked to collect my jacket, I shook more hands, not wanting to return to "inmate" just yet, savoring a few more precious seconds as Adam, the performer who thanked people for coming and accepted praise. In those moments before some guests would inevitably Google me, I was a person, they saw me for who I am, not what I did. Bruce embraced me. Good Ol' Bruce, the maker of theater. I was looking forward to seeing him and Co. the next night, our weekly Friday night gathering, for a debriefing.

In the chapel foyer with my mates, we were counted by guards, then escorted upstairs to the gym's locker room to be strip-searched. We all vibrated with energy, and I felt so bonded to my brothers, such a part of something. The Magnificent Eight. In the dim stairwell, JR began singing David's song "Sins." We took turns adding snippets, exuberant and oblivious to the guards walking behind us. Two of us were taken in between the rows lockers, to be stripped while the remaining five stood waiting, joking. We were watched by a guard, who I half expected to make a friendly comment about our performance (obviously, I was still high from the kindness of strangers).

His walkie crackled to life: a fight in the small yard. I thought: local color for our guests. Two more of us went to get stripped. After bemoaning to a coworker how hot it was up there near the shower room, the guard offhanded: "They're taking a long time to clear that fight." Usually, the fighters are made to break it up, returned to their cells or solitary confinement, and a scene commander calls the all clear within five minutes. We'd soon learn why things were different that night.

The rest of us were stripped, and though the guard gave me the full treatment, rooter to tooter, he didn't confiscate any of the candy I had in my pockets, as would be done normally. Downstairs, the Lieutenant was not pleased to see us. "Bring 'em back upstairs. Keep an eye on 'em." And this from the chill Lieutenant. What was happening? Was it because we hadn't signed our waiver to appear on camera, per procedure?

Back in the locker room, I stood by a large fan as the boys availed themselves of the sinks. I planned to join them, but they returned, red faced, saying it was only hot water. We stood fast by the fan, raucously laughing, naming great moments from each other's pieces, reprising "Sins." Demetrius tossed Starbursts around like a true player, and we enjoyed our impromptu cast party. Now, *this* was

camaraderie. I told myself I'd remember this moment for the rest of my life. The guards, to their credit, didn't tell us to shut up, as certainly would have been the case in Attica, where I spent my twenties.

David withdrew a partially-sucked, lint-laden Lifesaver from his pocket, and asked if it was mine. No, I laughed, it wasn't. Apparently, someone had left it on top of his water bottle, and for reasons unique to David, he was playing detective (turns out the culprit was Sheldon, who had spit it out before going on stage). Sheldon remarked that his cheeks were sore from all the smiling. Mine were, too. He said he'd never experienced it, and asked if I had – I lied, not wanting to sully the moment with talk about my youthful experiences with mushrooms, and besides, we didn't need any performance-enhancing drugs to make our cheeks hurt that night. I found myself wishing for a recording device. But a DVD, like amber, is bound to deprive the object it preserves of the life that gave it its vitality in the moment.

At roughly 9:45, a phone rang, and we were escorted downstairs. David pointed out Bruce standing in the chapel, amidst the rest of the audience, who must have been going stir crazy from their taste of imprisonment. Shit got a little too real. The night air was beautiful and cool, and felt great on sweaty skin. The main yard was uncharacteristically quiet and still as all the prisoners stood with their noses pressed to perimeter walls, something I'd never seen done in Auburn. Was this because our audience was about to be escorted out? No, men were being taken into their block in groups of five, hands in pockets. Maybe we weren't the most dramatic thing happening that night in Auburn Prison. Demetrius, David, and Ray were escorted to their cellblocks by a guard. "See y'all tomorrow night," Demetrius said (wishful thinking is just one of his strong suits).

Leroy led the way – JR, Sheldon, Nate, and I followed. A Sergeant, thinking Leroy meant to follow Demetrius, David, and Ray said, "Not yet. You're coming with me." Leroy experienced an understandable wave of panic as he flashed back, I imagined, to CPEP's graduation ceremony, December, 2014, after which he was taken to solitary confinement for being out of place (long story). I knew the Sergeant was a decent guy, and saw the scene for what it was. "Leroy," I said, "it's OK. He was talking to all of us."

We passed Dep. Tanea, who had enjoyed the show, but now had the look of a senior administrator who'd be spending time filling out paperwork for the fight rather than going home as planned. Inside the cellblock, one of our party noted seeing guys lying face down on the small yard's blacktop. The guard at the desk said a shot was fired. In a hard-to-place tone that struck me later as perverse jubilation, he said: "This is prison!" It was the same line Leroy jokingly deployed in his piece, an hour earlier.

The cellblock was quiet and buttoned up on account of the scene in the yard. We said goodnight, and parted company for our cells. I'm sure we weren't the first acting troupe to be going to bed early on

account of the cops raiding an after-hours party. When I passed Benji's cell, he called out: "Congrats, Adam. I noticed you and Leroy walking with a limp, so you must've each broken a leg." Fantastic line.

When a handful of guys returned from school call-outs several minutes later, they recounted getting detained on their way back, that a multi-man fight in the small yard caused a tower guard to fire a warning shot. Perfect timing: any sooner, and our performance might have been interrupted; later, and the visitors would've been scared while they were leaving.

The prison would end up being locked down Friday, while C Block, nexus of the drama, was searched. Saturday night in the small yard, I reconnected with some of my fellow Players, and we euphorically relived the performance. Over the phone, my wife lavished me with affection and shared in my experience. Then came the unmistakable POP of an assault rifle. Guards ran to the main yard, responding to the fight, while my friends and I milled about, saying our goodbyes, wishing each other good thoughts for the lockdown we knew would be coming.

But on that Thursday night in my cell after our performance, there was no thinking about the future. As the lights went down, I washed up, still incandescent with positive energy, remembering the faces of seventy-plus audience members, seven mates, eight volunteers, camera crew, sound man. Everyone was there to see us. My life had been characterized by solitary pursuits, and the wins were shared with a mentor or loved one. That night, however, I was a part of the championship team. Our hard work had paid off and brought joy and mirth to many. And we straight up crushed it!

The performance had transformed me, just as the veteran Players said it would. Experiencing the joy, and feeling part of a community gave me strength to deal with my own challenges, reminding me that I'm not alone. Prison changed for me: I was still locked up, but felt freer. Despite my situation – or maybe because of it – this was the best night of my life. I stayed up past midnight replaying scenes, cherishing the feeling, not wanting it to end.

