

THE  
PHOENIX  
PLAYERS  
THEATRE  
GROUP

Presents:

**THE STRENGTH OF OUR CONVICTIONS:  
THE AUBURN REDEMPTION**

**A Theatre Performance piece created from the  
original writings of the members of  
PPTG**

PERFORMED AT AUBURN CORRECTIONAL FACILITY  
MAY 24<sup>TH</sup>, 2018

WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF TRANSFORMATION.  
THROUGH THE POWER OF SELF-DISCOVERY,  
WE CREATE THE OPPORTUNITY  
TO KNOW AND GROW  
INTO OURSELVES.

*PPTG has its roots in the same fertile ground that the Harlem Renaissance sprung from. PPTG at its finest is the notion that incarcerated people can redeem and rehabilitate themselves if given the chance. The Phoenix Players Theatre Group by definition is an acting troupe. Our aim is not to create actors, but to engage in the activity of acting to reconnect us to our humanity.*

*Michael Rhynes  
Co-Founder, Phoenix Players*

### **Members' Biographies:**

**Sheldon P. Johnson** is a student in the Cornell Prison Education Program at Auburn, and will earn his Associates Degree this month.. In addition to the time he dedicates to PPTG, he is President of the LIFER's organization, has instituted a book club and parole preparation class, an HIV/AIDS Basic Awareness program, and facilitates the Urban Monks Poetry Corner at Auburn Correctional Facility. In 2012, Sheldon was applauded by the Albany Times Union newspaper for his performance in the lead role of ***Macbeth*** at another facility. In February of 2015, Sheldon was awarded second place out of one thousand entries in the National Prison Writing Contest. He is currently serving a disparaging fifty-year determinate sentence for non-homicidal offenses.

**Robert Lawrence** is a warm, gentle soul who aspires to help make the world a better place. In the twenty-eighth year of his thirty year sentence, he currently

pursues his Associate's Degree as a student in the Cornell Prison Education Program. In addition to the rigorous work associated with being a thespian in PPGTG, the radiant transformative and therapeutic process is beautiful, making every tear shed, hug endured, or triumph of memorized lines all worth it. Robert patiently awaits the opportunity to join his family and friends on the other side of the wall to explore the next chapter in his life.

**Demetrius Molina** is in his ninth year of incarceration, and is thrilled to return to PPTG for a fifth year. He rounds out his time in prison by working as a peer counselor for a re-entry program and spending time with his wife and son. Demetrius is unendingly grateful for the support he receives from his family as he serves seventeen years in prison. He completed his Associate's Degree through the Cornell Prison Education Program.

**Adam Roberts** is a near graduate of Syracuse University and completed his bachelor's from a cell in Attica. Now in his eighteenth year in the ongoing production of *Prison: The Musical*, he plays the empathetic peer counselor, starring as the lead in a reentry preparation group for men with mental health issues. Adam's role in this performance is a slight departure from his signature pocket-themed, jazz-handed dance number. He has been a member of the PPTG family since 2014, and for him that has made all the difference.

**Mark Thompson**, who is entering his 39<sup>th</sup> year of incarceration, earned his Bachelor of Science from Canisius College in 1992. He's passionate about his work as a peer counselor teaching aggression replacement training. Mark is a fourth generation PPTG member and enjoys performing small feats of magic when the opportunity arises. Currently, Mark is preparing himself for enrollment in the NYS Theological Seminary Program at Sing Sing. His first parole board is in 2046.

**Raymond Van Clief** was born and raised in Mt. Vernon, New York. Ray joined the Army and was deployed to Iraq and later to Afghanistan. Still believing in being a good father and remaining a kind hearted individual Ray seeks to help himself and others in avoiding the pitfalls of life while reaching their potential. Currently in Auburn Correctional, he is the President of Veterans of Auburn, a Cornell Prison Education Program graduate, a facilitator for the Alternatives to Violence Program, and a grateful member of the Phoenix Players Theatre Group.

**Jerome Walker** is currently pursuing an Associate's Degree through the Cornell Prison Education Program. He also volunteers in the Youth Assistance Program helping teenagers understand the consequences of anti-social behavior and wrong thinking. YAP assists these teenagers to realize their sense of self-worth. Jerome is grateful to be a member of the Phoenix Players Theatre Group and blessed for all those

involved who help make him a more interesting and active person than he would be without them.

**AND:**

**Michael Rhynes\***, now residing at Attica, is the co-creator and one of the founders of The Phoenix Players Theatre Group. One of his beliefs is that deep space exploration and exploring the depths of our oceans are not the final frontiers. The inner depth of humanity is. Michael obtained his Associate's Degree in arts, humanities and social sciences, and at this very moment he is striving to obtain a bachelor's degree. He did not learn how to write poetry at the finer universities, but he has published a chapbook of poems entitled ***Guerillas In the Mist***. He did not learn acting on the grounds of any campus, but in the bowels of Auburn prison. He considers himself a homegrown poet, actor, and urban philosopher.

**Additional PPTG members** no longer in residence at Auburn: David Bendezu\*, Kenneth Brown\*, Jason Calkins\*, Efraim "De" Diaz\*, Larry Green, Michael "Shane" Hale\*, Jim Ryant, Leroy Lebron Taylor, Tyreek Williams, Clifton "Skye" Williamson,\* and Jake Winter.

Phil Miller--released, 2016 and Nathan Powell-- released May, 2018.

\*Founding Members

**Special Thanks to Superintendent Harold Graham (Ret.)  
First Deputy/Acting Superintendent: Timothy McCarthy  
Deputy Superintendent Programs: Galyn Schenk  
Deputy Superintendent Administration: William Fennessy  
Deputy Superintendent Security: Joseph Corey  
Director of Volunteer Services: Lynn Odrzywolski  
Recreation Leader: Dave Porter  
Secretary I: Maria McCann  
And the Staff and Corrections Officers of Auburn  
Correctional Facility for making this presentation  
possible.**

PPTG's gratitude to Kyri Murdough and the board and staff of the Cornell Prison Education Program for their support and encouragement of PPTG and its members.

Film Crew for recording this performance:  
*Well Said Media* and *Peter Carroll Productions*  
Sound Crew for recording this performance:  
*Mark DiStefano* and *Amy Evans*  
Special thanks to Warren Cross and Randy Hendrickson

This performance is dedicated to Michael Rhynes

And

Stephen Cole (1935 – 2015)

**PLEASE HOLD YOUR APPLAUSE UNTIL  
THE END OF THE PRESENTATION.**

**IN ORDER OF PERFORMANCE:**

DO REMEMBER: written and performed by  
Sheldon Johnson

CHORIC PIECE ONE: performed by PPTG  
members

TELL-TALE TYPEWRITER: written and  
performed by Adam Roberts

WORDS MAKE YOUR WORLD: written and  
performed by Jerome Walker

MIRROR REFLECTIONS: written and  
performed by Robert Lawrence

NOT ANSWERED: written and performed by  
Mark Thompson

A TIME TO FIGHT: written and performed by  
Ray Van Clief

CHORIC PIECE TWO: performed by PPTG members

YAP IN THE YARD: written and performed by Jerome Walker

SOUNDSCAPE IN THE JOINT: written and performed by Robert Lawrence

DOC JELLY: written and performed by Adam Roberts

THIS IS MY LINE: written and performed by Mark Thompson

NOSTALGIA: written and performed by Sheldon Johnson

ROOFTOPS: written and performed by Ray Van Clief

HEROES AND VILLIANS: written and performed by Jack Press

ON THE ROOF TOP: written and performed by Jerome Walker



I'LL TELL YOU WHEN YOU'RE OLDER: written and performed by Elise Czuchna

PATRICIDE: written and performed by Sheldon Johnson

BLAME/CONSPIRACY THEORY: written by Demetrius Molina and Tyreek Williams/  
performed by Demetrius Molina and Sheldon Johnson with Robert Lawrence

GROWING OLD: written and performed by Mark Thompson

CLOSING CHORIC PIECE: performed by PPTG members

*There will be a Question and Answer session following the presentation.*

### **The History of PPTG:**

PPTG is *a grassroots program* developed *by* and *for* incarcerated persons and communities in a *maximum-security prison*. It is *a transformative theatre community*, which utilizes theater to reconnect incarcerated people to their *full humanity*. Experiences gained through PPTG significantly

increase incarcerated peoples' chances of transcending the negative labels and histories of criminality that define them within the greater society.

The Phoenix Players was started in 2009 by a small group of incarcerated men dedicated to the idea that theatre work, combined with group inner healing work, is a true opportunity for all of us to connect and to become more fully human.

**Invited Facilitators and Performance History:**

**Stephen Cole**, a retired theatre professor from Cornell who taught at the IM School of Healing Arts, began working with PPTG in October of 2009. Cole's emphasis was on transformative characterology as an experienced act. The work is rooted in bioenergetic categories of psychological defenses. After some months Cole invited **Paula Murray Cole**, a theatre professor at Ithaca College, to join as a facilitator. Ms. Cole led workshops in Laban training, as well as psychological emotions through training in rasaboxes- a psychophysical technique that trains actors and others to work with the body-mind imagination, emotional sensation and its physical expression.

In an effort to bring all the work forward into a performance mode, Cole discussed the PPTG group with **Bruce Levitt**, theatre professor, professional director, and former chair of the Theater Department at Cornell University who specializes in Shakespeare,

Devised Performance and Solo Performance. Levitt joined the workshop in October of 2010 and led the members of PPTG in the creation of autobiographical performance pieces that called upon their own experiences as well as the techniques practiced from October 2009.

The solo performance work resulted in the creation of a script entitled ***Inside/Out***, which was performed at Auburn Correctional Facility in April of 2011. Participants included **Juliana Kleist-Mendez** and **Jeremy Flynn**, two students from Cornell, who collaborated in the creation of the piece and joined the men of PPTG in performance. Excerpts from ***Inside/Out*** were published in the Fall 2011 and Winter/Spring 2012 editions of Aaduna Press ([www.aaduna.org](http://www.aaduna.org)).

This performance was followed in June of 2012 with the presentation of **Maximum Will**, which combined soliloquys from Shakespeare with original reflective writings by the men of PPTG. **Danielle Frimer** joined **David, Shane, Michael**, along with **Efraim Diaz** and **Kenneth Brown** in that performance.

**Judy Levitt**, actor, acting teacher and theatre faculty member at Ithaca College, joined as a facilitator in the fall of 2011. She has also performed in two of the PPTG presentations. **Alison Van Dyke**, retired Senior Lecturer and acting, speech and dialects teacher at Cornell, joined the group as a facilitator at the beginning of 2012. Both, along with **Stephen Cole**,

collaborated with **Levitt** in the preparation of **Maximum Will**.

PPTG's third performance, **An Indeterminate Life**, was presented in April of 2014. "Second Generation" members **Leroy Lebron Taylor**, **Demetrius Molina**, and **Nathan Powell** joined the group in creating and performing that piece. Two additional facilitators joined the group in preparation for this production.

**Chris Seeds**, a composer, performer, and theater enthusiast joined "the playwrights and poets of PPTG" as a facilitator in the fall of 2013 along with **Nick Fesette**, a theatre-maker who completed his Ph.D. this semester at Cornell University. Nick's interests are critical prison studies and embodied performance. Nick also performed in **An Indeterminate Life** (2014) and **This Incarcerated Life** (2016).

After **An Indeterminate Life**, two additional facilitators joined the ensemble. **Norm Johnson** just retired from teaching movement and scene study at Ithaca College. He has worked as a puppeteer and puppet-maker, mask-maker, theatre director and performer. He is currently the President of the board of directors for the Civic Ensemble.

**Mary Rolland** has had a life-long commitment to her spiritual journey. She has lived in Zen Buddhist monasteries where she was a postulant nun she attended the IM School of Healing arts, where she was one of Steven Cole's teachers.

During the summer of 2014, PPTG admitted its “third generation” of members, **Raymond Van Clief**, **Adam Roberts**, and **Sheldon Johnson**. They performed with PPTG for the first time in 2016. **Phil Miller**, another “third generation” member was released before the May 2016 performance of **THIS INCARCERATED LIFE**.

A second Cornell PH.D. student joined the PPTG facilitators in 2017. **Jayne Kilburn** is the Founding Artistic Director of the Strand Theater Company in Baltimore City. She is a graduate of the University of California Santa Barbara and NYU. Jayne recently finished a collaborative feminist devised project with Civic Ensemble entitled **She Persists**. Her most recent production, **Mr. Burns**, was staged at the Schwartz Center in April.

Fourth generation members **Robert Lawrence**, **Mark Thompson** and **Jerome Walker** join second and third generation members in tonight’s performance.

Donations can be made via Pay Pal at PPTG'S website: [www.PhoenixPlayersAtAuburn.com](http://www.PhoenixPlayersAtAuburn.com)

Or by check made out to: *Mirth, A Theatre Company* and mailed to: Mirth C/O: The Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts, 430 College Avenue, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14850.

***"MIRTH" IS A 501 (c) 3 ORGANIZATION AND IS THE FISCAL SPONSOR FOR THE PHOENIX PLAYERS. DONATIONS ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE.***

***Contributions to defray the cost of video recording tonight's performance would be greatly appreciated.***