



## Best seat in town: Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

By EVE MARX

Psst! Longing to see a wicked good play but don't want to drive all the way to Manhattan? Surprise: awesome theater is right here in Bedford Hills, but you need special permission to see it. Oh, and the show goes on at 9 a.m. and be prepared to pass through a metal detector and undergo a noninvasive body search before you can enter the theater.

One of the most audacious, innovative, thoroughly entertaining live theater experiences you can imagine takes place at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison for women. "What you will see tonight is entertainment, but what I see is rehabilitation," Commissioner of New York State Department of Correctional Services Brian Fischer said of a similar performance. And while rehabilitative, restorative and healing as

these shows may be, from an audience perspective what you get is as good as, if not better, than anything you'd buy a ticket for at Long Wharf or The Orpheum or Lucille Lortelle. When inmates take the stage, it's electric.

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On the morning of Dec. 18, 16 women performed in a show called "Art & the Individual," created and produced by Rehabilitation Through the Arts, a Katonah-based foundation. RTA's privately funded programs were founded in 1996 at Sing Sing after publicly funded



**Katherine Vockins, Anne Twomey Lloyd and Marybeth Metelski of Rehabilitation Through the Arts**

higher education and enrichment programs were withdrawn from the system. RTA facilitators Anne Twomey Lloyd, Marybeth Metelski and Katherine Vockins, all of Katonah, worked with inmates on this project.

"Art & the Individual" began as a workshop created by RTA facilitators Carie Donnelson and Dawn McDonald, who did it first with men at Woodbourne Correctional Facility. A little background: paintings from around the world and throughout time were introduced to a volunteer group of inmate participants. Every painting in some way featured a human being. The women were asked, what would you do if you were the person in the world of a great painting? Monologues were developed, essentially one-way conversations, based on a character each woman

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# Hot ticket at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

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conceived. The monologues made it to the stage to be performed before a selected audience of outsiders invited to come inside the prison. RTA looks at the work as a way to build literacy, improve self-expression and develop poise. The project also deepens insight and empathy as it broadens cultural awareness."

The early performance took place in the prison gymnasium, which just like the Katonah Elementary School gym, also includes a stage. A video screen was set up to project the visual image each woman had written her monologue to. Mandy Griffith worked off "Self Portrait" by Frida Kahlo to perform a piece where she became a highly amusing Frida Kahlo whining about her unibrow. Georgia Lopez turned into a young man shooting hoops in response to Ernie Barnes's

"High Aspirations." Sheron Thomas got deep into Rene Magritte's painting "Homesickness" to reveal an identification with a lion. Noquasia Pollard spoke about being the embodiment of feminine strength through Ernie Barnes's painting "My Miss America." Maijia Scott channeled powerful female energy through William Blake's "The Ancient of Days." Geraldine Motzer became a 16th-century male adolescent El Greco's "A Boy Blowing on an Ember to Light a Candle." Mercedes Smith explored existentialism through the Edgar Degas painting "Absinthe Drinker." Rosalie Cutting spoke of urban loneliness and broke into song during her performance of Edward Hopper's "Morning Sun." Tallulah Gillespie, Eugenia Pedroza, Bettina Harris and Tiffany McCann developed four singular personas based on the Eugene Delacroix's painting,

"Young Orphan Girl in the Cemetery." Taliyah Taylor rapped to Ernie Barnes's "Song of Myself." Kim Brown brought down the house with a powerful spoken-word performance she called "Feed the Sheep," in response to Julien Dupre's "The Harvester."

The remarkably talented and entertaining Pamela Smart portrayed none other than the siren Cleopatra against a backdrop of a circa 1256 B.C. painting of Queen Nefertari. "Damn the peasants, I am Queen of the Nile," Ms. Smart declaimed. Despite being garbed in prison-issue green, Ms. Smart managed to be a commanding presence.

Following the performance there was a Q&A. Prompted by a question from a reporter, Kim Brown said that by becoming "that person in the painting," she learned she can become "very creative. It opened up a whole

new world for us," Ms. Brown said. "Fifteen people can look at a painting and see 15 different things."

Noquasia Pollard said the experience made her feel "more open," and enjoyed the possibilities created by assuming a façade. Mandy Griffith spoke of the experience of performing before a live audience. The motherly Kim Brown quipped to much younger woman, "I love that this group encouraged you to stay out of trouble."

The group met weekly for about three months, first to be introduced to the artwork and then to develop the monologues. Tallulah Gillespie called the process "nourishment for the soul."

For more information about RTA and performances, contact Prison Communities International Inc. The phone number is 232-7566. E-mail them at [pci19@optonline.net](mailto:pci19@optonline.net).