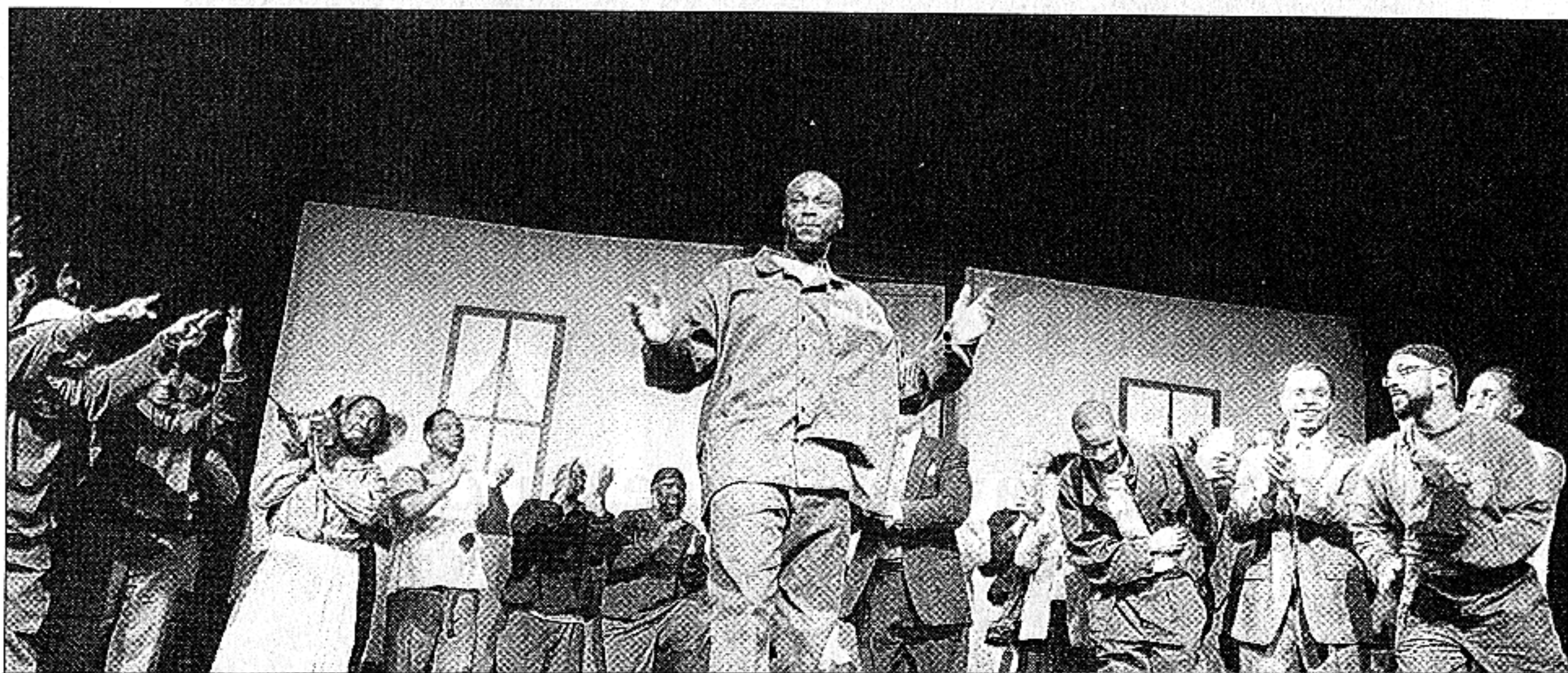


SING SING'S DIRECTION REHABILITATING WITH CULTURE

Program sets the stage for change



Photos by Dave Kennedy/The Journal News

Playwright Philip Hall takes a bow Friday after the Rehabilitation Through the Arts production of "The 'N' Trial" at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining. The play, written by Hall, a former Sing Sing inmate, was performed in an auditorium on the grounds of the prison.

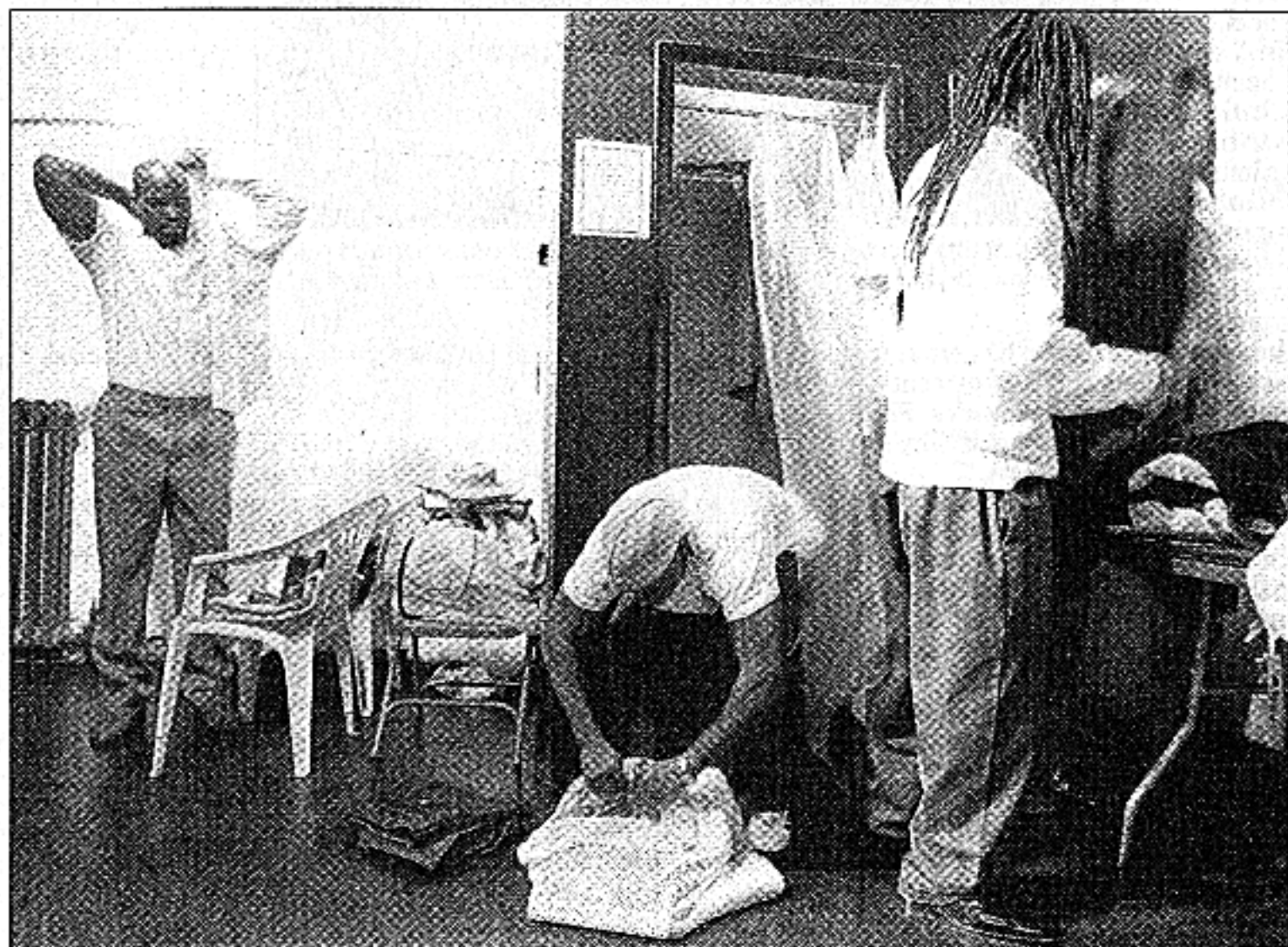
Inmates act in play as part of effort toward new focus

Susan Elan
The Journal News

Sing Sing Correctional Facility held a most unusual homecoming last week as the prison program Rehabilitation Through the Arts staged its 15th production since 1996.

The presentation of the play "The 'N' Trial" marked a series of firsts for Sing Sing. Prison officials permitted the performance of a prisoner-written play banned several years ago. They agreed to bring playwright Philip Hall back to the maximum-security prison from another facility. And they invited five former inmate participants in the program to return as members of the audience.

"It's very emotional because there was a lot of pain and years spent in this facility," said Sean Dino Johnson of South Jamaica, Queens, 41, a founding member of the theater program who was paroled 16 months ago after serving 15 years of a 15-years-to-life sentence for cocaine possession.



Inmate actors dress backstage before the play, which deals with the historical origins of the "N" word.

Johnson was one of about 250 guests from New York, Connecticut and as far away as Maine who filed through a thorough security

check to attend Friday's performance. Bags and jackets were searched, cell phones and beepers surrendered before guests passed

through metal detectors. They were then driven by correction officers in gray prison buses with barred windows up a winding road

on Sing Sing's grounds to a cavernous auditorium that is flanked by two chapels. Inside, prisoners in dark olive-green prison uniforms served their guests crumb cake and coffee, cheese and raw vegetables as guests arrived in successive small contingents.

Hall, 39, of Brooklyn, a tall, slender man with a shaved head, said the idea for his play began with an internal debate over the impact of the "N" word on those who use it and those at whom it is directed.

"I thought of doing it as an argument in a courtroom for and against censorship and free speech," Hall said as he sat in a blue plastic auditorium chair before the performance. "I didn't want to come down on one side of the argument. I wanted people to question their choice."

The audience is the jury. The performers, with the exception of a few volunteers, are prisoners. Through courtroom scenes, plantation scenes and a scene in the home of the young man who stands trial for using the "N" word within hearing range of an elderly neighbor, the origin of the word is traced and its history examined through slavery and the Civil War to the present day.

Hall, who is serving the re-

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Photos by Dave Kennedy/The Journal News

An appreciative crowd claps Friday for the cast after the Rehabilitation Through the Arts production of "The 'N' Trial" at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining. The play was written by former Sing Sing inmate Philip Hall.

Sing Sing play sets stage for change

SING SING, from 1B

mainder of his 20-year sentence at the Federal Correctional Institution in Otisville, N.Y., said seeing his play staged live had exceeded his expectations.

Watching three performances last week with his friends on stage and many of Sing Sing's 1,750 prisoners in the audience allowed him to marvel at the transformation of what he had created, Hall said.

"Because of the actors, the script took on a life of its own," he said. "The guys (audience) reacted to the humorous parts and were really subdued during the serious ones. Some came a few nights. I feel really good about that."

Sing Sing Superintendent Brian Fischer said while it isn't easy to put on a play in a maximum-security prison, the rehabilitative benefits make the effort worthwhile.

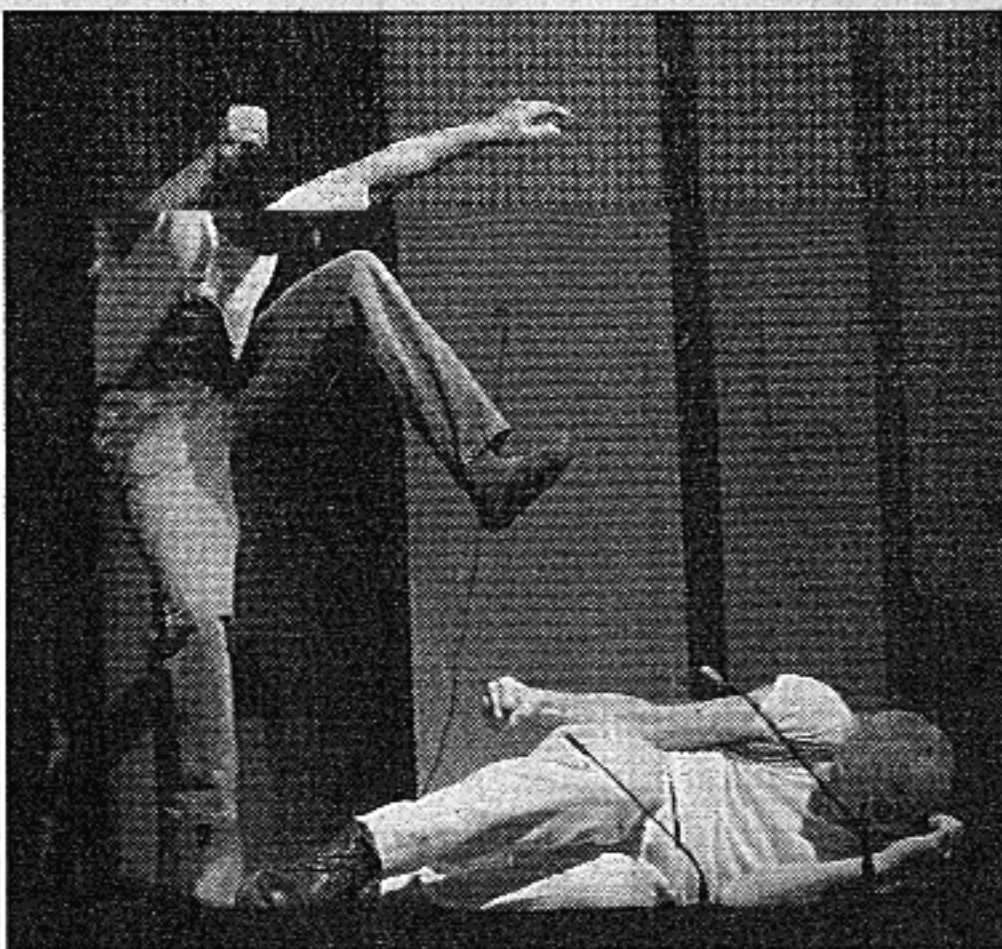
"The program allows inmates to grow and challenge themselves," Fischer said during a pre-performance interview in his spacious office, which offers a sweeping view of the Hudson River through thickly barred windows. "They're learning skills and changing attitudes."

Johnson, who now works with a New York City-based program that teaches young people to steer clear of gangs and has a role in the movie "The Producers," is an example of the program's success.

"RTA is one of the main reasons for my transition," Johnson, a towering man with long dreadlocks and two gold front teeth, said as he looked at the stage where he had once performed. "It taught me compassion, to put myself in another's shoes. It changed my perspective on life. I know how it feels to function beyond my own self and feelings. My life is proof that rehabilitation can take place through the arts."

Because of the sensitive subject matter, a request to perform "The 'N' Trial" at Sing Sing several years ago was rejected. It was produced at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in March 2001.

Fischer said since then, he has seen how the theater program significantly reduces recidivism among participants.



Inmate actors Lamont Bryant, left, and Brian LaBrosse perform during the show. Bryant portrays a slave attacking LaBrosse, a slave owner.

play to be performed at Sing Sing, where 95 percent of the prisoners are minorities, Fischer consulted with the facility's minority staff members.

"They felt it was a good way to teach about racism," Fischer said. "This play gives a good picture of the history of a very negative reality."

Joseph Thomas, 39, of Brooklyn, who plays the self-important professor and author Dr. Emil Gregg, an expert witness during the trial, said he took pride in performing a comic role that brought laughter and relief after a harrowing scene that recounts the beating of a pregnant slave woman before the eyes of her powerless slave husband.

"I'm proud that people are enjoying themselves and taking their minds off their other problems," said Thomas, who is serving a 12-years-to-life sentence for robbery. "RTA has taught me not to give up, to do something for myself and to stay on track."

Kelly Watts, 41, of the Bronx, who made his directing debut last week, said he discovered the dramatic impact of the program on

his life when playing the role of a troubled boy's father in a play by August Wilson.

"It enabled me to step into the skin of my own father and understand and empathize with what he had to go through," Watts said.

Lamont Bryant, 31, of the Bronx, who played Everett, a slave in Hall's play, said his first appearance on stage in 2002 "felt like a revelation."

"RTA helped me discover my humanity that was lost," said Bryant, who is serving 15 years to life for second-degree assault. "Prison generates such hopelessness but rehabilitation helps you look into yourself. For the moment you are on the stage, you are not being judged for what you have done. I threw away my life but now I have regained my life."

Stage manager David James is one of many of the 40 participants in the theater program to describe its founder, Katherine Vockins of Katonah, a former international marketing consultant, as "a fairy godmother" for her role in allowing the men to discover the best within themselves while staying out of trouble.

How you can help

Rehabilitation Through The Arts is supported solely by charitable, tax deductible contributions. Donors pay for materials for set design, props, costume rentals, and video copies of the performance mailed to the family of the participating inmate.

Checks should be made out to Prison Communities International, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, and mailed to Prison Communities International, Inc., 12 Huntville Road, Katonah, NY 10536-2002. For more information call 914.232.7566 or e-mail: pci19@optonline.net

"RTA gives me experience and helps me focus on what I'm going to do when I get out," said James, who expects to be released in 13 months after serving 10 years on drug charges.

After the show, the guests were permitted to approach the stage to congratulate the performers. Johnson called out to a friend in the stage crew, "Great job." The man beamed at him and then yelled back, "How does it feel to be in the seats down there? Pretty good, huh?"

Hall plans to continue work on a new play about the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks when he returns to the medium-security prison in Otisville.

"I was touched by the messages people left on answering machines as they called from the towers," he said. "There was so much people wanted to say and never had a chance to say. 'I love you. I ask to be forgiven.'"

Those things left unsaid in his own life drive this new work, Hall acknowledged. "There are a lot of people I hurt, a lot of people I let down. I wish I had the opportunity to tell people I could have done better."

Hall comes up for parole in September 2006.

Reach Susan Elan at selan@thejournalnews.com or 845-228-2277