Starting Over on Stage

One man’s story on how practicing theater during his prison sentence changed his life.

By: Keydra Manns

Albert Fermín was born and raised in the northern section of Manhattan, in Washington Heights. He was 31 years old when he saw his first play. But the production wasn’t a Broadway or off-Broadway production, or any other type of commercial theater in New York City. It was in a prison, and Fermín was one of the inmates.

It was eleven years ago. He and about 200 other male inmates had gathered in the cafeteria of Woodbourne Correctional Facility, a medium security prison in New York’s Sullivan County, about 100 miles from Fermín’s old stomping grounds in uptown Manhattan. He was there to see The Bull Pin, an original production that focused on what goes through a person’s mind as they are being arrested.

“I forgot the actors were prisoners,” says Fermín, who’s now 42 and was released from prison in April of 2016. “I gravitated toward their skill and I was captivated by their performance and dialogue, they were one step ahead of what you were thinking when remembering what it was like to be arrested.”

Fermín was first incarcerated in 1994 at the age of 18. Prior to being arrested, had learned he would soon become a father. Fermín said he felt stressed and with little money or education he tuned to drugs to cope. He said the drugs corrupted his way of thinking and he became violent. One day Fermín got into an altercation which turned fatal and left the other person involved dead.

Growing into manhood behind bars, Fermín tried to use the time to gain new skills. When he heard the prison had an arts program he was immediately intrigued.

The play he saw, The Bull Pin was produced by the prison’s theater program, Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA). RTA is a non-profit out of Katonah, NY, a small town within Westchester county. First established in 1996, in tandem with the Sing Sing correctional facility, the organization now works within five prisons to assist in rehabilitating inmates. Arts professionals in theater, dance and visual art volunteer their time to teach the inmates. The full length productions performed are typically original plays but RTA has also been known to produce the greats like Shakespeare’s Macbeth.

“We have to get the play approved,” says program director Craig Cullinane. “We typically cannot show murders or death happening on stage...but we often get a pass with Shakespeare.” But Cullinane says they aren’t even allowed to use fake swords, so in situations like these they improvise. For their last performance he hired a choreographer to teach the inmates how to use their arms as swords.
While he was in Woodbourne, Fermin participated in many productions such as *Of Mice and Men* and a few original productions. And he is only one of hundreds of individuals who have taken advantage of arts programs while incarcerated. Arts programs in prisons have been proven to be impactful in building confidence in inmates, building interpersonal skills and even contribute to reducing recidivism rates in some prisons. But despite the positive effects, many states still do not fund arts programs like RTA. RTA, like many similar arts programs are non-profit organizations, are run by volunteers and are privately funded.

“Additional state funding would be helpful,” says Cullinane. Cullinane says there are states that fund arts programs in prisons, but New York is not one of them. “The California model has millions written into the state budget for their prison art program and that really helps them.”

In 2014, the state of California granted $2 million dollars to Arts-in-Corrections, a state run prison arts program after groups lobbied together in support of arts in prisons. There were also research studies done that support the significance of these programs.

Around 1983, one of the first quantitative evaluations was done by prison reform advocate and University of San Francisco professor Larry Brewster, about arts in corrections programs in California. He found that the program was cost effective for tax payers, and has had life changing effects on inmates. In a recent phone interview, he said, “Inmates who participate in arts programs received significantly less infractions than inmates in general population, during a time of mass incarceration rehabilitation is very important.”

Mass incarceration plagues America more than any other country in the world. The U.S. is home to just 5 percent of the world’s total population, yet it incarcerates 25 percent of the world’s prison population. And incarceration rates continue to rise despite crime rates declining.

A 2016 study by The United States Sentencing Commission, a bipartisan independent agency that collects, analyzes, and distributes information on federal sentencing practices, reports that roughly 50 percent of federal inmates were re-incarcerated within three years of being released. But inmates who participate in arts programs receive less infractions while in prison and are less likely to return upon release.

In 2016, Acting Commissioner of Correction and Community Supervision Anthony Annucci wrote a letter supporting RTA. “As Acting Commissioner I have been in an ideal position to observe what programs are effective in changing a prisoner’s outcome,” he stated. “Arts programming has had a significant effect on an individual’s behavior while in prison and once released.”

Case in point: Albert Fermin.

Fermin says that having access to a variety of programs in prison has made all the difference in his sentence and that he feels very confident about life after prison.
Fermin had been in multiple facilities throughout his incarceration but came to Woodbourne in 2007. He served the remainder of his time at Woodbourne and said it was one of the most progressive prisons he had ever been to. Woodbourne is home to almost 850 inmates.

“Woodbourne was very forward thinking in their programming,” says Fermin. “They offered a lot of programs so it reduced the violence in the prison, because there were so many options to keep you busy.” Fermin was sentenced to 14 to 42 years in prison, and one day in April of 2016 despite being incarcerated for manslaughter he was given surprising news.

“It was a big shocker when they said they would release me,” he recounts. “I was in for murder, and there were other inmates up with less charges...so when they said I could leave after 22-years, that feeling was indescribable.” He says that RTA helped him learn how to express himself better and he thinks that may be the reason why he was granted parole.

Fermin put in a lot of work in order to be released early. During his time at Woodbourne he earned his associates degree and in conjunction with performing with RTA he took computer classes which helped him land his current position.

Fermin admits he had never been to a play before RTA but now as a free man he is interested in theater. He has been back home in Washington Heights for almost a year now and has been to a few off-Broadway productions such as Gloria Estefan’s Get on Your Feet. He says Hamilton is next on his list.

Fermin is now an IT Associate and works for the Ford Foundation, a non-profit, that works to reduce poverty and injustice. He was hired for a 12-month fellowship with them because of the work he did while incarcerated. “RTA helped me feel comfortable and present during the interview and I felt I could answer their questions truthfully,” said Fermin. “I didn’t become the monster people think I would have become. My way of thinking has changed.”

Perhaps if more people hear his story, the thinking of people who budget prison funding may change too.