Inmate actors take shows on the road

BY LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON
Advocate staff writer

When the Angola Drama Club players left the state penitentiary for their first ever outside appearance at LSU last month, Warden John P. Whiteley boarded the bus and spoke to the group.

"I told them I wasn't expecting an Academy Award — yet," Whiteley said. "Maybe just a nomination."

When Drama Club president Gary Tyler and seven other inmates left the prison walls behind, it was the first time most of the group members had been outside the penitentiary since their incarceration.

"It's exciting," said Tyler, who had come out only once — for his father's funeral — in the 18 years he has been at Angola, serving a life sentence for a murder he says he didn't commit. "I've read about LSU in the newspaper; I've seen parts of the campus on TV news. But today is my first time to see it for myself. It's real; it's tangible for me now."

If the inmates were excited about performing for LSU theater students and professors, the students were just as animated about the opportunity to see what they had to offer.

Percy Tate performed in the one-act play he wrote about child abuse to a rapt audience. The pain of the abuser and the grief of a father who begged his incest child to get up from the floor were evident in Tate's portrayal. The students watched with soaked faces.

The second piece, "A Day Between Friends," took a more active preaching stance about the consequences of not taking an active parenting role in child-rearing. A prisoner was outraged when he learned that his 14-year-old daughter was pregnant and her son was a juvenile, until his friends let him know, in no uncertain terms, that he had to accept blame.

The students nodded their heads.

The message in "Who's Killing the African American?" by Clifford Doleman was about drugs and how they are destroying the black community. A pup tent breaks out on stage between dealers. The violence on stage was so real the audience shriek back.

In the end, the students gave the actors a spontaneous, prolonged standing ovation. Their description of the inmates' work at LSU DRAMA, Page 2C

In "Who's Killing the African American?" Angola Drama Club players enact the violence associated with drug dealing. In the foreground, Lawrence Jenkins is on the ground at the mercy of Majishidim Abdul-Karim. Behind them are Percy Tate, lip- nging, and Gary Tyler, standing. At left, LSU theater students give the Drama Club a standing ovation.

At left, Daniel Dixon is searched before leaving the penitentiary with the Drama Club. Above, inmate/actor Quinton Blackstone talks with LSU students before the performance.
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included the comments “powerful...moving...inspiring.”

Acting students suffer from occasional burnout, and exposure to the inmate actors’ display of raw talent and intense commitment was “renewing,” said David Jensen, a professional actor working with LSU’s theater department.

“We hope to take our show on the road and share our message,” Tyler said after the show. “We recognize that we were part of the problem; now we want to be part of the solution in heightening public awareness about issues that are important to us.”

Deborah Hardy, a local poet who has worked with the club for three years, said the group’s hard-won progress is phenomenal and would not have been possible without the warden’s support, an initial grant from the state Division of the Arts and help from the St. Dymphna Home.

Since their appearance at LSU, the actors have accepted other invitations and scheduled tour dates for Southern University, Lafayette’s Festival Internationale, and the Contemporary Arts Center and the Artists Theater Company in New Orleans.

“We would really like to take the show on the road in a big way — go into schools, universities and community centers,” Hardy said. “But we’re still struggling, looking for funding and trying to see how we can make it work.”

Whitley is an avid supporter of the Drama Club. “These guys have something to say. They show a slice of life most people are never exposed to. They’re sincere, and they’ve worked hard to get their act together. I’m really proud of them, and I support their efforts to put the show on the road.”

The penitentiary supplies the bus for the trips. Corrections Major Foster Andrews, who was in charge of the LSU trip, said only those inmates with “Class A” status are allowed out. Of the 22 inmates in the Drama Club, eight have been approved for trips. The two security officers who accompanied the troupe of actors volunteered their own time after hours for the extracurricular duty.

Michael Glover of “The Angolite” called the outing “a breakthrough, a tremendous learning experience.” He said he was impressed that the work was being viewed by a “drama critic” rather than a reporter who routinely covers the prison beat.

“When the fact that they are inmates becomes secondary to their work as actors, that is a breakthrough. That they are regarded as artists first is exciting and a real tribute to their work.”

Additional dramatic criticism is in store for the Drama Club as critics from the west coast are flying in to see a future production, Hardy said.

“We’re ready,” Tyler said. “If we can take our message out to the people and help alleviate future suffering, then we will have done what we set out to do.”