

The reality of PRISON



Sophomore drama students, Chip Davis and Casey Morris as prison guard and inmate in the play "Thousand Kites" that opened Wednesday.

Drama department explores the N.C. prison system with a mix of documentary film and community theater

By Garret Kilgore
STAFF WRITER

"Thousand Kites" unveils the oppressive reality of the U.S. prison system and its effect on prisoners, guards and their families in the emotional production presented by Theatre UNC Asheville Stages.

"In the play 'Thousand Kites,' a kite represents a message or a letter going in or coming out of a prison," said Scott Walters, associate professor of drama. "The ideas and renowned work of Appalshop show the true devastation caused by prison construction, and the emotional and political toll burdened on rural communities, prisoners, guards and the families of both."

Appalshop, a nonprofit-multi-disciplinary arts and education center, based in Whitesburg, Ky., wrote the play and sent scripts to universities. Appalshop strives to artistically expose community problems through original films, radio, photography, books and spoken-word. They expose destructive problems facing the nation, according to Casey Morris, prisoner in the production.

"This play is a little different than most," Morris said. "All of our lines are not directed towards actors in the play they are a projected meaningful message for the audience. The play works on a whole different perspective than most. Everything that is written in the play, are words taken straight from the mouths of many families, prison guards, prisoners and communities. We are acting real life."

In 1999, Appalshop with the collaboration of DJs Amelia Kirby and Nick Szuberla, began the idea of exposing America's prison crisis through a hip-hop radio show near the Supermax prison Wallens Ridge State Prison in Whitesburg, Ky., according to Appalshop.

"Through Kirby and Szuberla's radio show, called 'Holler to the Hood,' poems and letters to and from the inmates of the nearby Wallens Ridge State Prison, as well as letters from local families and community members began flooding in," Walters said. "They pulled all of this information together and created a play from the actual works of inmates, guards and their families."

Scott Walters works as a teacher in a N.C. division of prisons. He teaches a drama production course and a literature course to inmates convicted of everything from armed robbery and murder to sexual assault. He worked with an inmate who burnt his elementary school down, according to Walters. "I have been teaching in a N.C. prison for about six years," Walters

said. "The course I taught a class focused on Joseph Campbell's ideas about the heroes journey. Used as an application to the inmates' own lives, they see their time in prison not as a wasteland of waiting until they get out, but as a thought provoking experience in which they are challenged. Hopefully when they leave they will bring wisdom back to the community. I try to get them to look at their experience in the prison as being something that is preparing them for a positive outlook when they go back home."

UNC Asheville hosts the first ever production of this play in the nation, which will eventually perform in many professional theaters all over the country, according to Walters.

"The play itself is supposed to have a lot of audience interaction," said Brian Sneed, assistant director and double major in drama and creative writing. "Thousand Kites is broken up into three parts. The first part is the actual performance written by Donna Porterfield, where a prisoner, guard and five chorus members speak out. There are two parents of both the prisoner, guard and also one voice representing a community. The first act is the script play which lasts about 45 minutes, followed by a 15-minute intermission. The unique second act is the showing of the documentary film 'Up the Ridge', a harsh reality documentary about the effects of the building of the Wallens Ridge Supermax prison just outside of Whitesburg, Ky, created by Appalshop with the help of Kirby. The third act is then an open discussion with the audience."

The play runs the gambit from anger to sadness to humor. There are funny stories about prison food, tricks played on guards and music written by Appalshop, according to Walters.

"The ultimate goal is to raise awareness, Walters said. "I think most of us have a vague idea about prison, and believe the people in there ought to be there, and they probably have it pretty good. The more research we have done, we have found this to be far deeper than what one may think."

This is not a play designed like political theater telling people what to think. It is rather a play that raises questions and asks people to empathize with the situation, according to Walters.

"I think the questions raised are 'Is this the best way to deal with crime?'" Sneed said. "15 prisons have been built each year for the past 20 years. All of that is derived from Nixon's first initiation of

instilling 'political toughness on crime', which was his campaign slogan. As a result we have the birth of the prison industrial complex, or the privatization of prisons as a corporation. A huge concern with the prison system is the privatization of prisons, such as the Wallens Ridge State Prison shown in the documentary. Communities buy a prison, rent it to the state and then pay a yearly fee, increasing income into the community. This is a multi-million dollar industry. Prisons are now more business-oriented."

The Avery-Mitchell Correctional Facility shows how prisons put in rural environments make communities dependant on them, according to Sneed. The people want to work there due to the higher wages in comparison to poorly paid jobs of the community.

"One of the most important issues touched on by this play is how these prisons, primarily built in rural communities, harm the community," Walters said. "The Supermax prisons are usually built in economically depressed towns. The state sees it as a way to economically bolster the town. The minute this happens, all of these people take jobs there. They become stressed out due to the conditions they are working in, and suddenly there is an upswing in alcoholism, substance abuse and domestic violence."

Since 1987, prison population has risen from under one million to almost three million, due to sentencing guidelines, elimination of parole and the three strikes you're out policy, according to Walters.

"I think the people will come out with far more awareness of how the prison system actually works," Sneed said. "The play will show how the fundamental system may not be the most appropriate, and certainly not an efficient system for punishing certain rehabilitating criminals."

50 percent of people in the federal prison system, and 49 percent in the state prison system are there on drug charges, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

"We must think if this is really an effective way to deal with this," Sneed said. "If we sent people to a rehabilitation center, it would cost a lot less than the average \$25,000 to \$60,000 we spend each year per prisoner. People of Asheville smoke marijuana for instance, and even though I do not smoke, I feel that the most dangerous side effect is imprisonment."

Author Alan Elsner, advocate for the injustices of American prisons, says that there are three things you get when you become a prison

guard: a truck, a gun and a divorce, according to Walters.

Walters describes a book by Elsner called "Gates of Injustice: The Crisis in Americas Prisons."

"Elsner mentions a story in his book about a kid who was thrown in jail on a 72 hour drug bust. It wasn't even a prison it was a jail, and in that 72 hours he was sexually assaulted by someone with AIDS. So he came out after 72 hours with a full blown case of AIDS. This story should make everyone take a step back and think about you or someone you know going into prison for a minor drug charge, and basically coming out with a death sentence."

Alan Elsner heard about the book used in regards to the play and will be attending and answering questions for the first two days of the showing, according to Walters.

"I really didn't think too much about the prison system before this production," Sneed said. "I kind of considered prisons as this distant island. I kind of had an oversimplified image of what a penitentiary system was. I think a lot of people think the same way, or portray their ideas of the prison system strictly based on what the media reports."

Organizations dealing with this dilemma, will hand out materials in the Belk lobby, so people can be proactive about the cause, and not just go home mad at the system, according to Walters.

"Some of these stories we are bringing in front of everyone are so overwhelming in nature," Morris said. "It will hit every one very hard. We come close to tears during rehearsals, because we give it all we got, and we can see the impact this play will have on the audience."

Appalshop is filming the play as an artistic portrayal of their hard work and research, according to Morris.

"I represent all prisoners," Morris said. "I am speaking for all of them, just as the guard and the chorus are representing their many voices. My first line is, 'I am a prisoner. I am not one prisoner, but many. I have one mouth that speaks many voices, and have two ears that have heard many stories.' So basically I am a conduit for all of the people who have been incarcerated."

"Thousand Kites"
Wednesday-Saturday, 8 p.m.
Sunday, 2 p.m.
www.unca.edu/drama.
uncathousandkites.blogspot.com
thousandkites.pbwiki.com
www.myspace.com/1000kites



The Asheville AFFILIATES presents
Enter the Mind of Moog a benefit for the Bob Moog Foundation
Event and Afterparty with Telepath
Thursday, 6:30 p.m (event); 10 p.m. (afterparty)
The Orange Peel
Tickets: Event \$20 (advance); \$25 (door)
Afterparty \$10 (advance); \$12 (door)
Event and Afterparty \$25 (advance); \$30 (door)

Reckless Kelly and Sons of Bill
Thursday, 8:30 p.m.
The Grey Eagle
Tickets: \$10 (advance); \$12 (door)

Reckless Kelly is here to promote their recently-released live recording album, "Reckless Kelly Was Here".

Peter Sagal Reading
Friday, 7 p.m.
Malaprop's Bookstore/Cafe

The host of NPR's news quiz show "Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me!" 'Square' Peter Sagal will be discussing and signing his book, 'The Book of Vice: Very Naughty Things (and How to Do Them)'.

Lifeshouse and The Midway State
Friday, 9 p.m.
The Orange Peel
Tickets: \$20 (advance); \$22 (door)

Lifeshouse isn't "Hanging by a moment" anymore. They are hanging on by four albums including their multi-platinum 2000 debut, "No Name Face."

Tegan and Sara and Northern State
Roxy Theater in Atlanta
Friday, 8 p.m.
Tickets: SOLD OUT

Celebrating their fifth album released, the duo Canadians have come along way since their first tour in the United States with Neil Young. Since then they have toured with Rufus Wainwright, Ryan Adams and Hot Hot Heat.

Todd Snider
Saturday, 9 p.m.
The Grey Eagle
Tickets: \$20

Truth, beauty and humor.

Ben Lee and Cary Brothers
Wednesday, Nov. 28, 8 p.m.
The Orange Peel
Tickets: \$14 (advance); \$16 (door)

Happy Thanksgiving!

Thursday, Nov. 22
Eats lots of Turkey...or Tofurkey.

912 MPG
Gasoline = 31,000 calories per gallon.
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Bicycle riding = 912 miles per gallon.



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