

## Marin Shakespeare Co.'s prison theater program continues to expand in state



*San Quentin prisoners perform the Shakespeare-inspired “Parallel Play” at the prison last October. The Marin Shakespeare Company has been teaching Shakespeare to inmates there for more than a decade. (James Cacciatore/Special to the Independent Journal)*

By [Adrian Rodriguez](#), Marin Independent Journal

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*Azraal Ford, right, performs in a “Parallel Play” production at San Quentin in October. The play was staged in the Garden Chapel at the prison. (James Cacciatore/Special to the Independent Journal)*

The Shakespeare for Social Justice program helped Henry Montgomery get through his final five years of incarceration at San Quentin State Prison. “My heart became pretty hard for a moment,” said Montgomery, 48, who lives in Milpitas and is pursuing certification in music recording and technology from Foothills College in Los Altos. “This helped me get back in touch with emotions that I actually lost. It helped me heal.”

Thanks to more than \$160,000 in state grants, inmates at Folsom and High Desert state prisons will soon benefit from the same Marin-based prison arts program.

About \$21,500 will fund new weekly classes starting in June at Folsom Women's Facility, where for the first time incarcerated women can study and perform Shakespeare. Another \$24,400 will expand the program to High Desert State Prison in Susanville later this year.

"We've been doing this programming with very little funding for a long time," said Lesley Currier, managing director of the San Rafael theater company.

"They are seeing this transformation, the impact we are having with the inmates, and I think that's one of the reasons the state has started funding these types of programs," she said. "We are happy to be part of the reason." The Marin Shakespeare Company has been teaching the Bard's classics to inmates at San Quentin since 2003. The program expanded to Solano State Prison in 2014. The remaining funding will go into continuing these programs.

Currier and Suraya Keating, a fellow director, use drama therapy to teach inmates how to share stories, which helps them connect with themselves and others.

The inmates over the years have performed "The Merchant of Venice," "Much Ado About Nothing," and other definitive productions with the goal of promoting group support, creativity and self-expression, Currier said. "We delve into complex thoughts," Currier said. "'Macbeth' and 'Julius Caesar' are about committing murder and the psychology behind that: Why they do what they do, how they feel after they do it."

She said the comedies remind the inmates what it's like "to play and be silly," she said.

Krissi Khokobashvili, spokeswoman for the state Department of Corrections, said the Shakespeare program has been a success. "Shakespeare is hard no matter what your experience level is," she said. "The inmates are taken totally out of their comfort zone; some guys make fun of the performers. But when they see the production, it actually turns into this level of respect that they have for each other."

It's something Montgomery knows all too well.

Released in 2012, he has continued working with the theater company and is part of its Social Justice Theatre Troupe, a group of formerly incarcerated actors that started this year. They have performed in Marin and San Francisco so far.

He can't give up performing, he said. "It did so much for me. But the best part was the healing."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrian Rodriguez covers Mill Valley, Belvedere, Tiburon, Corte Madera and Larkspur for the Marin IJ. He also writes the weekly business column Movers & Shakers, which appears in Friday's paper. Reach the author at [arodriguez@marinij.com](mailto:arodriguez@marinij.com) or follow Adrian on Twitter: [@adrianrrodri](https://twitter.com/adrianrrodri). Reach the author at [arodriguez@marinij.com](mailto:arodriguez@marinij.com).

