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The New York Times

Late Edition
Today: Windy, chilly, clearing skies
high 43. Tonight, clear, breezy at
times, cool, low 32. Tomorrow, sunny
high 48. Yesterday, high 48, low 38.
Weather map appears on Page B24

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ONE DOLLAR

Two Once-Angry Men Revisit a Prison Triumph

By JESSE MCKINLEY

The last time Jerry Ciauri was in a theater for a performance of "Twelve Angry Men," in 2003, the critics were emphatic. Some shouted at the stage, others stomped their feet. A couple even took it personally. "They don't hold back," said Mr. Ciauri, an aspiring actor with thick Brooklyn accent and a barrel-chest-

ed build only a Soprano could love. "I don't know of any crowds that are easy, but this one was a little less than easy."

Part of the unruly response could be attributed to the surroundings. Mr. Ciauri played Juror No. 3 in a performance of the play at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, the maximum security prison in Westchester County, N.Y., where he was serving a sentence of 12 to 25 years for his involvement with the Colombo crime family.

But things were quite a bit more comfortable on Thursday night when Mr. Ciauri and Sean Johnson, one of his fellow Sing Sing cast (and cell-

block) mates, who played Juror No. 10, took in the hit Broadway revival of "Twelve Angry Men," the jury-deliberation drama currently at American Airlines Theater. And while both men said they enjoyed the show — "I knew all the lines," Mr. Ciauri said — they agreed it was their up-the-river production that was the true success.

"Nine of us have left the prison now," said Mr. Ciauri, 46, choking up a little bit at the mention of Sing Sing's 12 angry men. "And nobody's gone back."

The production Mr. Ciauri and Mr.

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Johnson performed in took place as part of a program called Rehabilitation Through the Arts, which stages all-inmate productions of plays (there are no musicals at Sing Sing) inside the confines of the prison's auditorium, where guards wait in the wings, many costumes and props would be considered contraband off-stage, and if anyone makes any unscripted exits, the show most certainly does not go on.

Mr. Ciauri and Mr. Johnson, who served 12 years on charges of drug possession, bail jumping and forging documents, became jailhouse actors with the help of Peter Barbieri Jr., a freelance director and designer, and Katherine Vockins, the director of the program, which has staged 14 productions at Sing Sing since 1996. "I was talking to inmates and asked, 'Is there talent?'" Ms. Vockins recalled about the program's beginnings. "And they said: 'What do you want? It's all here.'"

That said, the rehearsal process is never simple. Several times Mr. Barbieri was forbidden to enter the prison because of security alerts. "We had to go on our own to practice," Mr. Ciauri said. "Sometimes, scenes were learned in the prison yard. Other times prisoner counts forced an abrupt halt to rehearsals.

Then, too, there was the small matter of the knife used in "Twelve Angry Men," a critical prop that caused understandable technical problems. The solution? A tinfoil-covered comb, which was driven into a table (and a hidden piece of Styrofoam) at a particularly dramatic moment. "It worked fine," Mr. Barbieri said.



Edwine Seymour for The New York Times

Jerry Ciauri, second from right, and Sean Johnson, with dreadlocks, speaking with actors after a performance of "Twelve Angry Men."

"And it certainly got a reaction from the crowd."

About two-thirds of the theater program's scripts have been written by the inmates themselves, and all have to be approved by the warden for language and content. Not surprisingly, the subject matter of "Twelve Angry Men" — 12 jurors discussing the fate of a young man accused of a capital crime — also provoked some deep emotional responses in the prison audience.

"There was almost a standing ovation when the first juror in the play raised his hand for not guilty," Mr. Barbieri said. "And it kept getting louder with each vote."

The play also caused some soul-searching in the actors, since all of them had had personal experience with the court system.

"I have to wonder if, when they were talking about me, if someone stopped to ask a question," Mr. Johnson said.

For Mr. Johnson, who is black, playing the character of Juror No. 10, a white racist, also presented unique challenges. His solution, however, would have pleased any acting coach. "I started developing a character that had a self-hate," said Mr. Johnson, who is now 39. "Not only for everybody else, but for himself."

Both Mr. Johnson, who is now working as a counselor for gang members, and Mr. Ciauri — who had a bit part in the 1990 Sydney Lumet crime drama "Q & A" before being arrested for his off-set activity — want to continue their acting careers. Both men also gave head shots to Scott Ellis, the Roundabout's director, after Thursday night's show.

But even if the acting business doesn't work out, Mr. Ciauri, for one, said he was happy to simply remember his big moment in the big house.

"I thought it was a beautiful thing," Mr. Ciauri said. "Because that's not such a beautiful place to be."