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Ex-convicts stage autobiographical play

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NEW YORK (AP) -- The climb from a prison cell to a room in a castle is steep and painful, but four people who did it want to tell theatergoers how.

The three men and a woman are former prison inmates who committed a range of crimes from drug dealing to murder. Their total time behind bars amounts to a lifetime. Now their life experiences are the basis of a play officially opening off-Broadway on Sunday.

The four are members of the Fortune Society, an organization that theatrical agent and producer David Rothenberg founded to help ex-convicts rejoin the world.

One of the men was arrested 67 times. Another killed a man at age 17 and spent 30 of his 47 years in prison. A third spent continuous years on drugs and four of those years committing crimes. The woman went to prison three times for drug sales.

Rothenberg, who produced the play "Fortune and Men's Eyes" in 1967, asked them to write short autobiographical essays. He was so moved by the results that he organized them into a script for a play called "The Castle."

The play takes its title from the Fortune Society's imposing 1913 building at 140th Street and Riverside Drive that was Catholic girls' school until the 1970s.

The building eventually became an abandoned eyesore and crack house. The Fortune Society leased it in 1998 and opened it as The Castle in spring 2002. The building house offices and residential space for 62 Fortune clients.

The play tells the real-life stories of Caz Torres, Kenneth Harrigan, Vilma Ortiz Donovan, and Angel Ramos. They talk about being raised in crack dens, abused by state caretakers, brutalized and abandoned by parents.

"We are typical of the people who arrive at The Castle," Ramos tells the audience. "We enter with a lot of baggage and it isn't made by Samsonite."

Torres tells the audience, "When I look back I feel like crying. I never had a chance. That's not a complaint. Just a fact. I think that if I ever started (crying) I couldn't stop."

Ortiz Donovan, who sold narcotics for years, tells spectators she once blacked out for 15 hours after doing drugs, and that just about scared her straight.

The group started performing the play from time to time in-house for Fortune's clients, staff and board members. It was received so enthusiastically that Rothenberg invited his old Broadway pals to see it.

Producers Eric Krebs and Chase Mishkin saw the play and are now producing it off Broadway.

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