



## Metroland Online – June 13, 2008

### Storming the Castle

New York State Senator Tom Duane (D-Manhattan) is regarded as a strong advocate for humane prison conditions and adequate healthcare for inmates. And this week—in an unconventional move to raise awareness for the cause—Duane has invited the cast of the off-Broadway play *The Castle* to give a special performance for New York State legislators at the capitol this week.

When *The Castle* opened at New World Stages earlier this year, *The New York Times* described the play as, “a simple, fascinating production about four ex-convicts, which presents the other side of the coin, describing the obstacles that criminal offenders face upon their release.” The stories of the play’s unique cast and creators, and its distinctive origins instill the production with striking honesty.

Forty years ago, after David Rothenberg produced another off-Broadway prison drama, *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*, the then-theater-publicist was inspired to set aside his long-time career and establish the Fortune Society, a nonprofit prisoner re-entry program with services that span from housing and career planning to counseling and health care. Today, the New York City-based center serves approximately 4,000 men and women each year, and after four decades of work with prisoners, Rothenberg’s career has come full circle—back to the theater—with the new work he co-wrote with four former inmates.

Titled after the Fortune Society’s central residential housing facility (nicknamed “The Castle” by residents for its towering gothic architecture), *The Castle* is an autobiographical drama, which recounts the stories of its authors: their childhoods and downfalls, their arrests and incarcerations, their prison time and eventual release. The play is performed, not by trained actors, but by the authors themselves—Vilma Ortiz Donovan, Kenneth Harrington, Angel Ramos and Casimiro Torres—who, between them, have served a total of 70 years in New York state prisons and jails.

The play was originally performed in-house at the Fortune Society—intended more as a therapeutic process than a theatrical production—but a couple of Rothenberg’s old producer friends saw the show, and eagerly mounted an off-broadway production. Sen. Duane saw the play at New World Stages and, according to Rothenberg, Duane believed his fellow legislators should hear the ex-convicts’ stories.

“We’re putting a face on people in prison,” says Rothenberg. “We’ve found that most legislators have never sat and met with people in prison, or who have been in prison. Hopefully it will help them understand that there is cause and effect in crime.”

It’s not the first time Rothenberg has come to Albany with a mission. He and other representatives from the Fortune Society are frequent lobbyists at the capitol, advocating for Rockefeller Drug Law reform and increased support for re-entry programs. Rothenberg has spent the past few days calling legislators and encouraging them to attend the play. He hopes that the production will help them realize that the state system needs to incorporate the kind of re-entry support that the Fortune Society provides.

“You only hear about the people who are rearrested,” criticizes Rothenberg. “No one tells the story of the guy working the nine-to-five job, doing his best to support his family. No one hears what works, what made the difference.”

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