
Mummy's the Word

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Alotincommon (Lamont Bryant in center), with Egyptian guards (JamesE. Williams and Mosi Eagle) and Mummy (Dexter Robinson)

By Donna Lamb

Talk about hilarious, I just attended one of the funniest plays I've ever seen in my life: "Breakin' the Mummy's Code" written and directed by Brent Buell. No, it's not a new play on Broadway (though, judging from the laughs, you may see it there soon) or even off-Broadway. It's the latest play produced by Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) and performed by prisoners at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York.

This madcap tour de force is a play about putting on a play – in this case, a fictional RTA production written by the prisoners themselves. In the play, when the show's director (Kelly Watts) "discovers" that the audience has arrived, he tells Katherine Vockins, RTA's founder and producer, that the scenes by the six playwrights who wrote the play are wildly divergent. He confesses that he couldn't get all the incongruent parts edited together in time for rehearsals, so what the audience will actually see is the play's first run-through, not the finished production.

What follows is the sidesplitting tale of a young Egyptian prince named M&N (David James) whose high priest, Alotincommon (Lamont Bryant), sends him on a quest to solve the mystery of his "mummy's" murder. He's given a series of poetic clues to lead him on his journey. He arrives in Olde London just as the Black Plague hits; stumbles onto Robin Hood – the rapper, of course – and his Merry Men, where he meets Fryer Tuck (Patrick Griffin) and his beloved Marion (played by volunteer Amina Henry); sails the ocean in a bathtub and is rescued by dancing pirates and Captain Hooker (volunteer Cecily Benjamin); encounters Agent 008, James Bail (Dario Pena); finds himself witnessing a shootout in Dodge City; meets Hamlet (Clarence Maclin); ends up in the middle of a Restoration comedy; escapes from the Roman Coliseum with the help of two gladiators (Mosi Eagle and James E. Williams); and finally solves his mystery on the BQE – the Buried Queens of Egypt.

As the zany plot progresses, you never know when the actors may suddenly break out of character to complain about their lines, ask for a cue, or explain why they cut whole chunks from a scene, since it is, after all, just a run-through. These untimely interruptions are always extremely funny and add to the hilarity.

The production also features a variety of dance numbers from the waltz, to the Texas two-step, to break dancing, choreographed by Lisa Byrne. She was also riotously funny in her role as Clarice the Confidant. Furthermore, there are original songs and music by Brent Buell and dance beats composed by prisoner members of RTA, Anthony Soto and Patrick Griffin. The show's many sets, built by Sing Sing's Vocational Woodworking Department under the direction of Robert Johannessen, were mounted on rollers and constantly changing as part of the choreography of the show itself. Outside volunteers Joanna Chan and Linda Atkinson were assistant directors.

The 70 roles in "Breakin' the Mummy's Code" were performed masterfully by 19 prisoners and 4 female volunteers. In addition to the participants mentioned above, outstanding performances were turned in by Brian LaBrosse, Guy Youngblood, James Jones, and Tyrone Johnson, as well as Elder Beaudouin, Joseph Thomas, Za'id Ali, and John Whitfield.

Playwright Brent Buell, a terrific actor and singer in his own right, will appear in the soon-to-be-released comedy feature film Grand Opening and the political thriller Al Qarem. He also recently completed his first novel, Daniel and My Revelation.

Buell, who has volunteered as an acting teacher and director with RTA for four years now, calls his work with RTA "the most rewarding experience of my professional life. While this play is slapstick comedy," Buell continued, "the men of RTA want people to present a serious message: that whatever obstacles you face in life, if you persevere and cooperate with others, there is nothing you can't accomplish." He explained, too, that since life in prison is bleak, the play also serves as a wonderful, colorful escape that lets both performers and prison audiences travel through space and time to many exotic locations.

Buell went on to say that New York State has a recidivism rate of 69%. However, the recidivism rate is close to zero for men who went through the RTA program and were subsequently released over the last nine years.

Buell explained as well that RTA's purpose is to change public perception of the over two million men and women currently held behind bars in the United States. "They are not animals; they are not unreachable," he declared. "They are human beings who may have made terrible decisions at a point in their lives, but they deserve the opportunity to become fully productive citizens both in and out of prison. People really can change. Rehabilitation Through the Arts has proven it again and again."

RTA is a not-for-profit foundation run by theater professionals who volunteer their time. Contributions are tax deductible. For further information, contact Katherine Vockins at (914) 232-7566 or pci19@optonline.net, or visit www.p-c-i.org.