

Fullerton playwright's work premieres in an Iowa prison

Women's facility locale for 'In The Absence of Angels'

By Chris Gresson
Northern Lights

Someone going on stage at the last moment, when one of the lead actresses is unable to perform while becoming a star in her own right, is the stuff of theater legends.

It doesn't usually happen, however, that the reason the original actress can't go on is because she's locked up in solitary confinement.

According to Fullerton playwright Johnna Adams, that is just what happened with the Mitchellville Theater Project production of her drama, "In The Absence of Angels."

"Sammy L. was to play the part of Fanny Belle," author Adams explained. "Needing the date of the first performance, she was caught up in a fight in the yard and was set to the 'back'."

"Shobha H., the stage manager, filled in for Sammy, who is HIV positive and was really looking forward to playing the role. She did a wonderful job of saving the day."

But why, in the first place, was Adams' play being performed in a suburb east of Des Moines in the Iowa State Correctional Institute for Women, Mitchellville?

"The answer comes from the producer, director and founder of the Mitchellville Theater Project, Marti Sivi.

Sivi, a graduate of Drake University with a degree in Criminal Justice Administration, started the project a few years ago to help inmates develop their creativity and explore the cathartic nature of theater. Readings grew into actual performances and the project has surpassed all expecta-

tions.

Their first production was "Mother's Day in the Holding Tank." Since then they have performed "Blythe Spirit," "Steel Magnolias" and, for the week of May 7-11, Adams' life-affirming drama that is laced with humor.

"It has been a wonderful privilege to direct Johnna Adams' world premier of 'In The Absence of Angels,'" said Sivi. "Her touching play shows how fragile human behavior is, with the promise that love endures forever."

Sivi found Adams on the Orange County Playwrights Association Web site and contacted her about becoming involved. Adams jumped at the chance.

Born and raised in Big Spring, Texas, Adams graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Chicago's De Paul University with a major in theater and a minor in playwrighting.

Having written more than a dozen plays, ranging from wild comedy and science fiction to moving, straight drama, Adams is probably best known locally for her offbeat "The Miracle of Mary Mack's Baby," which enthralled audiences at STAGES Entertainment Group in Fullerton last year. Also a brilliant actress, Adams recently played the girl in "Hot L Baltimore."

"Ironically, Adams works as a sales proposal writer for a subsidiary of Motorola known as PRINTRAK. "We are involved with criminal management systems," Adams explained, including automated fingerprint identification systems (AFIS) all over the world. The prison at Mitchellville probably uses

some of our equipment, but I didn't have the opportunity to find out when I went back for the production," she said with a smile.

The play revolves around the character of Grace Rivers, a movie star. Gresson is followed to her eddiball aunt's home in Oklahoma by a crowd of overzealous reporters wanting to know why she tried to kill herself on the set of her last movie. Her star-struck cousin and a group of wacky friends combine forces to convince Grace that life is better than death. The problem, however, is how do you save someone who has everything and still isn't happy with any of it?

The project presented unique challenges for Adams. "I had to rewrite the original play so that all the characters would be women," said Adams. "It also couldn't run longer than one-and-a-half hours because they have to count heads at a 'bed check' every two hours."

"I also found out that some of the nicest women in prison were murderers: I had five in my play!"

Adams has an ongoing correspondence with many of the women at Mitchellville and plans to write another play based on their letters.

A typical excerpt from those letters comes from Heidi A., who played Josephine in the dual-role production: "I am convicted of second degree murder. I am 41 years old and have never even had a traffic ticket. My transition from the free world to prison life has been very tough. Working with Marti and the other women helps me cope with boredom and mental strangulation. It



AUTHOR AND PAINTING: Author Johnna Adams displays a painting from the set of her play, "In The Absence of Angels," which was staged at a women's prison in Iowa. The painting was done by an inmate, "Kathy T.," who is serving a sentence for killing her husband.

helps take me away from this place and allows me to be someone else for awhile."

Also, Jamie S., a 22-year-old who's been in prison since she was 16 and played Grace, thanked Adams for writing the play and offered an observation on her incarceration: "I am sure that most people don't think that going to prison is a good thing, but it has helped me to grow up. And, it has helped me learn that only I know what will make me happy. Plus, I am alive (and nothing is better than that).

Adams filled in a bit more about Jamie: "She's a nice kid who looks like Grade Kelly," said Adams, "and it's heart-breaking to see her behind bars. She rewrote her mono-

logue to be a personal catharsis and it was very touching."

The Mitchellville Theater Project is funded through a grant by the Chrysler Foundation, a charity dedicated to empowering the lives of women and girls in central Iowa.

When asked about the most lasting impression she took away from this unique experience, Adams said, "I found that theater is more powerful than I ever imagined. Some people really need it; it is as necessary as air and water. It is a powerful thing to see in action."

As a side note, Adams also added, "And I was pretty sure that no one was going to walk out on my play. It gives a whole new meaning to the phrase 'captive audience.'"