



Students build community through college, correctional facility program

Theater class celebrates playwrights

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ENTERTAINING—Students at Moorpark College and at the Ventura Youth Correctional Facility meet virtually to rehearse their one-act plays as part of their joint theater class production. The two institutions have partnered together for two years to bring a creative outlet to young adults in the correctional facility. Courtesy photo

Nathaniel G. would consider himself a newcomer to the world of theater. Before this spring, the young adult at the Ventura Youth Correctional Facility in Camarillo had never acted in play or written a script.

But that all changed when Nathaniel, whose full name is being withheld due to privacy and safety reasons, decided to enroll in a theater class hosted by the youth facility in partnership with Moorpark College.

“I was interested in learning scriptwriting,” he said. “It was the first time I’ve done anything like that.”

Those who’ve been working with Nathaniel consider him a natural. Over the course of the semester, he created a one-act play titled “Tilikum” that classmates

and teachers describe as an honest and hilarious look into male friendships and coming of age.

“It’s been such a pleasure to see that creative process develop from a blank page to one idea to even more ideas,” said Anthony Marengo, VYCF’s college and education transition coordinator. “Looking at what he has now is amazing.”

Nathaniel’s play is one of two original works from the correctional facility being showcased tonight at 8 p.m. Fri., April 30, during Moorpark College’s virtual “Student One Acts,” a showcase of 10-minute plays created by students.

To watch the presentation, visit tinyurl.com/mponeacts430.

The other student plays on tap are “Dinner for Two” by Wynnie Eaton, “After Just Four Days” by Evelyn Rogers, “Close to You” by Jade Morrisey, “Perspectives” by Edan Habot, “The Great Lights” by Elisabeth Melcher, “A Potato’s Interview” by Alex Greenslade and “I Know I Am in Love” by Kira Wefers.

The show not only represents a diverse set of voices, but marks the first time students from the community college and the correctional facility have worked together to create original plays.

“These are voices that need to be heard and need to be respected and deserve our attention,” Moorpark College theater professor Suzanne Fagan said. “They are a joy to listen to and watch.”

Partnership

The partnership between the institutions began two years ago when VYCF, which provides trauma-informed treatment to youth under 25, asked Moorpark College to bring an educational program to its facility.

The theater arts department jumped at the opportunity to provide a creative outlet to young adults at VYCF and to help reduce recidivism rates. Led by professor Moira MacDonald, the hour-long class features a mix of regular class work, readings and performances.

“Moira has been so incredible with our students. It’s her commitment to excellence that has really resonated with our students,” Marengo said.

Through in-person and online classes, MacDonald guides the students through the creative process of writing original plays.

"I try to give them different tools and exercises and examples. We read plays and then I step aside to see where they take it," she said. "All of them created personal plays. . . . I was stunned by the variety of work and the quality of the writing."

The program has been in place for two years, but the pandemic and the transition to virtual learning gave students at the college and the correctional facility a unique opportunity to collaborate together for the first time.

"It's been interesting to learn what goes into (theater) and the different elements," Nathaniel said. "I have an appreciation for the amount of effort and teamwork."

Meeting together on Zoom each week, students in both programs broke off into groups to make each playwright's written work come to life.

"It's been a great collaboration," said Moorpark College student Rachael Gula, who directed "Hell's Broken Heart" by VYCF student Stella H. "It's been interesting using Zoom during this time of lockdown. It's cool how we are able to connect in a way we otherwise wouldn't have been able to."

Moorpark College student Ricci Bester-Adams, who directed Nathaniel's play, felt the same. Through the collaboration, the group found a balance of providing feedback on lines while honoring the sincerity and rawness of the story.

"This has been a very cool experience to . . . get to know (Nathaniel's) mind and where he wanted to go with the script," she said.

Beyond the educational and social benefits of the partnership, the program has provided youth in the correctional facility with a creative outlet to build relationships and develop empathy for healing.

"Many of our students say their creative expression is very therapeutic and helps them and that resonates with us. We want to continue offering them opportunities to access those types of courses that will help them in any way," Marengo said. "I am very grateful for the partnership with Moorpark and this opportunity to access that area where they can find some success."

