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Maximum security, and a starring role

VOLTERRA, ITALY

Inmates become actors in an Italian prison's thriving theater company

BY ELISABETTA POVOLEDO

As a sound-system blasted a cha-cha, the men began to dance. Wearing outlandish costumes with oversize hats and wigs, and boots with 15-centimeter heels from a Milanese store that caters to drag queens, they strutted and pranced.

But this was no ordinary cast of actors. The performers were convicted criminals serving anywhere from five years to life in a maximum-security prison for crimes as varied as armed robbery and murder.

"Theater is surreal, it's all fiction," one inmate, Dorjan Cenka, originally from Albania, later mused. Dressed completely in white with heart-shaped red lips, Mr. Cenka was trying on his costume for the latest show by the Compagnia della Fortezza, the theater company named after the Medici-era fortress that houses the Volterra jail where the convicts are imprisoned. It would be his first time on stage and he confessed to being a little nervous. "I'm shy, I don't like to speak in public," he said.

With a sway of his hips, he swished his Marie Antoinette-era skirt, the powdered wig on his head tottering. "I'm doing this to get over my resistance."

The current show — "Alice in Wonderland, a Theatrical Essay on the End of a Civilization" — is loosely based on Lewis Carroll's masterpiece, but the text weaves in soliloquies from other authors, in this case Shakespeare (predominantly Hamlet) but also Genet, Pinter, Chekhov and Heiner Müller.

It is an intellectually challenging performance that Armando Punzo, the company's director, calls a "tragedy of power" in which the characters try to break free of the roles imposed on them by their playwrights. In the show he plays the part of Carroll, and on a sweltering hot day last week he was adjusting chains around his neck that will tie him to prison bars during one scene. "Underneath it all we are all in prison if you think that we spend our lives inside a role," Mr. Punzo said. "That condemnation is taken to its extreme in prison."

Mr. Punzo, who worked as an actor with avant-garde troupes before his stint at Volterra, has chosen to live his life on the inside. For the past 21 years, working five hours a day, six days a week, he has built up a challenging repertoire for the company, including plays based on works by Brecht, Peter Handke, and even the tale of Pinocchio.

Around 50 inmates are involved on a regular basis, some as actors, others behind the scenes.

Mr. Punzo said he has never been "driven by notions of psychological assistance or therapy or social reform, it's always been about theater." He added, "It's not about giving the inmates an outlet or a recreational break. It's work."

What the program has done, however, is build self-respect, and a love for the stage.

Miming holding a skull in his hand, Antonino Mammino said that when he acts the part of Hamlet, as he does in this show, he feels like the character. During the day he is a sanitation worker, cleaning toilets, and in the evenings he rehearses his part and sleeps in the prison. (The prison and inmates declined to give information about what crimes the prisoners committed and the length of their sentences.) Once he has served his time, he said he wants his identity documents to list his profession as "actor."

"Theater gets into your blood, and then you can't do without it," he said. After more than two decades, "the company has come to represent the history of this prison, which has grown with it," said Maria Grazia Giampiccolo, since 2003 the director of the Volterra Prison, which also runs a gourmet restaurant. "What they do is real theater. It's not just an activity for inmates, but good theater."

Of Italy's 205 prisons, about half have theater programs, but none is as renowned as the Compagnia della Fortezza, which has won some of Italy's most prestigious theater awards. "It's been very successful," said Franco Quadri, a theater critic for the Rome daily La Repubblica and founder of the Ubu Prize, a national theater prize that the company has won for best show twice. "The public goes into a frenzy," he said.

The company's productions can take years to morph into their definitive

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form. There are no auditions. The actors grow into their roles, creating them with Mr. Punzo over many rehearsals. Though "Alice" had its debut this week, Mr. Punzo said the show was still a work in progress.

Fame for the Compagnia della Fortezza reverberates both outside and inside prison walls.

"Alice's" Ophelia, François Kanouté, a soft-spoken trilingual former tennis player, asked to be transferred to Volterra from another prison so he could participate in the program. "Everyone knows

this is the place to do theater," he said.

Jamel Soltani, from Tunisia, recently starred in another show co-produced by Carte Blanche, the association that runs the theater activities in the prison, headed by Mr. Punzo. That show, "Elisabetta and Limone," toured to Naples, where Mr. Soltani slept in the local jail. He is now in a work-release program and could be out during the day, but he prefers to spend his days in the jail, working on his part in "Alice." "I'm sacrificing my freedom. I should be out, but I chose to be here," he said. "People tell me I am crazy, but I am an actor."

Mr. Punzo's dream is to create a stable repertory company, with a winter season and a permanent theater, which would allow him to pay the actors. But this draws on different legislation and would require agreements with government ministries and local administrations, and the future is still uncertain.

It's partly a matter of money. Italy's prison population, as of last week, was 53,710 in structures designed to hold about 43,000. The overcrowding is making it difficult to fund and carry out many of the alternative programs offered to inmates, said a spokeswoman for the Justice Ministry, who was not authorized to give her name.

The company produces a new show every July as part of the VolterraTeatro Festival, which showcases "experimental, impossible theater," said Cinzia De

Felice, the festival's chief organizer and Mr. Punzo's wife. Prospective audience members have to apply to the Justice Ministry weeks in advance for a seat inside the prison. The waiting list tends to be long.

Several past shows have toured Italy, but not everyone gets to participate. "It depends on a number of factors," including time left to serve, potential danger to society and a psychological evaluation, said Domenico Netti, a coordinator with the Carte Blanche Association.

There's been some trouble in the past. During one tour in 1995, several inmate-actors were charged with robbing banks in between shows. They were quickly ostracized by fellow inmates and sentenced to more prison time. Since then there have been no criminal performances.

Mr. Punzo said that the prison authorities trust the inmates enough to allow them to build sets using chainsaws, or use ropes for props. "We explain to the guards what we need to make theater," he said. "The inmates know that if they cross any lines it's all over."

"It's all been a bit of a miracle," Mr. Punzo added. But he doesn't take anything for granted. "Just one gust of wind and this could all topple," he said. "And that would be a real shame."

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More images from the rehearsals for Volterra's "Alice." global.nytimes.com/arts