

Living



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From left, Craig Bendson as Ferdinand, Paul Williams as King Alonso of Naples and Irby as Prospero, front left, at the California Medical Facility in Vacaville, Thursday. The Eddie Davis as Gonzalo perform a scene from "The Tempest" with James "Demetrius" inmates were featured in the Marin Shakespeare Company play.

CMF inmates shine in their first Shakespeare in Prison play

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Sixteen California Medical Facility inmates comprised the cast of "The Tempest" as Marin Shakespeare launched its Shakespeare in Prison program recently.

Neighboring California State Prison, Solano welcomed the social justice program in 2014 and is slated to perform "Much Ado About Nothing" later this month.

Handling the role of the boatswain, inmate Kasey Askins joined the cast to do something positive, he said. "Othello" is his favorite Shakespeare work.

Craig Bendson wanted to give acting a try. He was selected to play the role of Ferdinand, the son of King Alfonso. "Romeo & Juliet" is his chosen Shakespeare play.

"I think I'm pretty good at acting," he said, dressed in costume, complete with pants reading CDRC, the initials for the California Department of Rehabilitation & Corrections.

The most challenging part of the role was learning to express, with no contact, his affection for Miranda, who was played by the show's assistant director, Sharon Robinson.

The most fun thing? "It's cool, he's like a prince," Bendson said.

James "Demetrius" Irby did Shakespeare in high school. "Macbeth" is his superior Shakespeare work.

He secured the role of Prospero, the former duke of Milan. Irby said he tried to not be obvious about the part he wished to play but was excited to get the leading role.

"This is the first time here," said David Maldonado, community resource manager at the prison. "Everyone is excited about it."

"The population (at the prison) surprises you," he added. "We have a lot of inmates with higher education backgrounds, including fine arts."

Rehearsals began earlier in the year. It's an all-volunteer effort and the inmates can earn some time off their sentence by being a part of the production.

"The Tempest" was performed in CMF's chapel. "For-



James "Demetrius" Irby as Prospero, center, performs in one of the final scenes of "The Tempest" at the California Medical

Facility in Vacaville, Thursday. Irby played the title role without using notecards.



Vince Williams as Sebastian performs in "The Tempest" at the California Medical Facility in Vacaville, Thursday.

givenness is a choice" was painted on one wall.

Technical difficulties delayed the start time a little. The cast and Marin Shakespeare staff gathered in a circle before the show got underway.

"Take a moment to feel your heart," said director Surya Keating. "This is such a huge accomplishment. Is there anyone you want to dedicate the show to?"

The replies ranged from The Bard himself and Jesus Christ to Robinson and Keating for their guidance.

"No matter what happens, there are no mistakes," Keating told the men.

The cast wrote their own lines for the prologue, which included each reciting a plea, followed by all saying in unison, "Please forgive me."

When the performance was over, the cast fielded questions from the audience that included CMF staff and some inmates.

One man praised them for the courage to tackle the show and wanted to know how they bonded during rehearsals. The cast members called each



Cornell Bivens as Antonio, left, receives some encouragement from Vince Williams as Sebastian during the performance. Actors sat among the audience when off-stage.

other by their character's names when they went about their daily lives.

Eric Alexander, who played Trinculo, handled the answer to the question about what it was like to have to drop their prison mask to be part of the show.

"I can't pinpoint what has changed," he said, adding it must have just been experience.

"This has been a life experience for me," said Eddie Davis, who played Gonzalo ("I've learned) what you practice for, you ultimately succeed at."

Irby shared how his fellow cast mates gave him a sense of common ground.

The jingle repeated by the

actors who played the spirits garnered many chuckles as well as a question about its origin.

"I just came up with the easiest thing," said Jurmaii "Red" Riddick.

The audience left repeating it much like visitors to Disney's "It's a Small World."

Paul Williams, who played King Alonso, spoke of seeking out stage shows in Sacramento when he's released.

"I'm trying to figure out a way to go to Hollywood," he said.

Dameion Brown was released from California State Prison, Solano in 2015 and went on to tackle Othello with Marin Shakespeare Company a year later.