



Actor James Franco, center, a visitor to Two Rivers Correctional Institution at Umatilla, poses with inmate actors Bradley Foote, left, and Allen Mills following an inmate performance of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" at the state prison on Sept. 24.

Contributed photo

The Bard Behind Bars

Since 2008, Stallings has led the inmate troupe through three plays as director

No curtain, no stage, small audience – yet within the concrete walls and razor wire of Two Rivers Correctional Institution, the unmistakable buzz of showtime hung in the air.

A dozen inmates were putting on a full-length production of Shakespeare's comedy "Twelfth Night" at the Umatilla prison. "Without it, it would be another Saturday night in prison," one inmate said.

Sitting in the audience on Sept. 24 were Hollywood actor James Franco and film director Gus Van Sant. They had come to Umatilla, and submitted to the elaborate security precautions to be admitted inside, to see the fruits of a volunteer effort by Portland actor Johnny Stallings. Franco, nominated in 2011 for a Best Actor Oscar for *127 Hours*, and Van Sant, a two-time Oscar nominee for Best Director, were appearing that weekend in Portland for a screening of a film collaboration between the two.

Over the past several years, Stallings has led the inmate troupe through three plays as director. "Hamlet" was performed in 2008, followed by "A Midsummer Night's Dream" last year and "Twelfth Night" this fall. Each production has had several performances for fellow inmates and the general public; those audiences usually consist of invited area officials, approved visitors including family and friends, and many supporters of Open Hearts Open Minds, the non-profit organization that funds some of Stallings' work.

The Shakespeare plays grew out of a once-a-week group dialogue facilitated by Stallings, who for five

years has been meeting regularly with about 20 inmates for three hours of discussion on topics that range from love to anger to integrity. In discussing the plays and working to learn and understand the dialogue, they examine the possibility of changing themselves for the better. "Their humanity comes across strongly, in spite of what they have done," Stallings said.

Most of the actor-inmates had limited experience in theater, let alone tackling the Elizabethan English of a Shakespeare play. For the actors, Shakespeare's words carry a personal meaning. In Stallings-led discussions with the audiences afterward, there is an undercurrent of the tragedies, in the inmates' victims' lives and their own lives, that brought them to this medium-security prison.

"For three hours, you forget everything," said one inmate to the audience. "You see me as something other than a prisoner," said another.

Stallings began with the tragedy *Hamlet* and gradually lightened the tone by producing Shakespeare comedies. Like productions centuries ago, the all-male cast plays roles both male and female.

A prime qualification to be in the play? "The willingness to wear a dress," said one inmate. "If we made a break for it, we'd be easy to spot," said another in a costume borrowed from Portland Opera.

Bushra Azzouz of Portland is preparing a feature-length documentary focusing on last year's production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Information is available at www.openheartsopenminds.net.



ABOVE: Using a plastic sword, inmates Raymond Alderman and Jack Baird portray a fight scene from "Twelfth Night" performed this fall at Two Rivers Correctional Institution at Umatilla.

LEFT: In a costume borrowed from the Portland Opera, inmate Jason Beito plays Duke Orsino in the Shakespeare comedy "Twelfth Night."

Life skills classes and other programs play a key role in rehabilitative education at Two Rivers Correctional Institution. Programs include the following:

- **Contracted Blue Mountain Community College classes:** GED, Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, Keyboarding, Careers.
- **Other contracted classes:** Domestic Violence prevention; various college courses (paid for by inmates), Pathfinders "Parenting Inside Out Program"
- Volunteer-led 12-Step Alcoholics Anonymous
- Volunteer-led Yoga Class
- Volunteer-led Faith-based Religious Services (many different faith groups, services and activities)
- Volunteer-led Guitar Class
- Volunteer-led Veteran's Administration Visits
- Volunteer-led Piano Practice
- Volunteer-led Toastmasters
- Chaplain-provided, Religion-based Anger Management
- Guest Concerts
- Guest Speakers
- Fund-raising Activities for Charities
- Group Dialogue/Shakespeare Projects
- **Outside Community Work Crews:** In 2011, work crews were hired by West Extension Irrigation District, Hermiston Irrigation District, Hermiston School District, City of Stanfield, City of Echo, Hat Rock State Park, Umatilla County Fair, Hermiston Baseball Commission, Good Shepherd Medical Center and Finley Butte.