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Prison Playwrights

By Tom Kropp

I discovered a magazine called Writer's Digest while in prison. It intrigued me and I subscribed. That's how I started writing.

If someone told me last year that I would write most of a play that would be acted out at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC and that it would get good reviews, I would have thought it nuts.

But it happened.

On August 31st, 2019 the play "Jailhouse Confessions" occurred at the Kennedy Center receiving some good reviews. Now there's also a book with that title available from Amazon. I wrote most of the book and play. after I discovered organizations called the "Prisons Foundation" and the "Safe Streets Arts Foundation." Dennis Sobin is the director of both organizations and they work with incarcerated artists and writers.

"Jailhouse Confessions" consists of funny stories about celebrities and other people in prisons. Prior to writing it I had quite a few short stories published in magazines, mainly urban crime and urban fantasy stories. I'd never even seen a play before.

I actually started writing stories while I was in what prisoners call, The Hole, and prison staff call "Segregation." I wasn't allowed a typewriter, so I wrote my stories and the play using a bending rubber pen and my mom typed up many of my stories for me and sent them out. My prison staff tried very hard to suppress me from writing and submitting stories. The prison administration claimed that "prisoners are not authorized to author and publish any stories, novels, or plays." It's extreme censorship that I broke the rules on by simply writing stories. Very 1984 type ruling by prison staff. The fact is most prisoners, including me, will be released in the near future. Most of us don't receive any job training before our releases. Writing has become a great form of therapy for me and many other incarcerated writers. Prisons should be encouraging such hobbies, not trying to stop us from doing it. Dennis Sobin's foundations serve a positive function, for prison writers and artists.

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