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## Ex-convict steps from prison theatricals to professional stage

By **Judith Newmark**

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Norman is thrilled. He should be. The policeman is his first role in a professional play. Many actors consider that a treasured memory.

For 28-year-old Norman, it's even more: It's his first role in a play in which all the actors got to go home after the show.

In his past, they simply went back to their cells.

Norman started acting in the Prison Performing Arts program, while he was doing time for armed robbery. With his role in Mustard Seed Theatre's production of "Measure for Measure," he becomes its first alumnus to move on to the professional stage.

"I am in awe," said Norman, who's already lined up his next part. He'll play one of Penelope's suitors in Mary Zimmerman's stage adaptation of "The Odyssey," a drama that St. Louis Shakespeare opens in July. "I had no thought about the theater at all until I met Agnes" — Agnes Wilcox, founder of Prison Performing Arts.

"Now this is my music," Norman said.

It's quite a change in direction for a man who spent 10 years behind bars at Missouri's Northeastern Correctional Center in Bowling Green. Norman doesn't like to go into detail about his past. "I did a lot of bad things, a lot of bad things except hurt a child," he says, grimacing. "When I went in, I was 17 years old."

When he was a senior at Hazelwood Central High School, Norman and another teenager committed a series of armed robberies at fast-food restaurants and an auto parts store. A few years after he began serving his sentence at Bowling Green, Prison Performing Arts started working with inmates there.

Prison Performing Arts grew out of programs that Wilcox started through The New Theater, a St. Louis theater company that she headed for years. Since the theater dissolved in 1999, Wilcox has devoted herself to performing arts programs for incarcerated men, women and children.

Today, the nonprofit organization runs programs at the St. Louis City Juvenile Detention Center, City Workhouse, City Justice Center, St. Louis County Jail, Hogan Street Regional Youth Center, Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Vandalia and Northeastern Correctional. Its next big fundraiser, a Birthday Bash for the Bard with a special "Shakespeare Jeopardy" game, will be April 28 at Duff's Restaurant.

No one at any institution has to participate in Prison Performing Arts' programs; it's strictly voluntary.

"We are a stealth literacy program," Wilcox said, "and we provide creative opportunities for people who have no other creative outlets." The theater, she said, develops a wide range of life skills, including communication, self-control, cooperation and individual and group responsibility.

After Norman joined in, Wilcox cast him as Brutus in a production of Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar."

"Tim always spoke beautifully, and he learns quickly. He's extremely bright," she said. "He also has the self-discipline to carry a major role." Still, she is both surprised and delighted to see that he has taken his newfound passion for theater to another level.

Prison Performing Arts never was intended to turn former offenders into actors. The theater is a poor career choice if you need steady employment. When it comes to day jobs, Norman has the same one that many other actors do: He works at a restaurant.

Sweetie Pie's at the Mangrove, a Southern and soul food restaurant, is owned by his mother, Robbie Montgomery. She is a veteran vocalist who has sung with

everybody from Frank Sinatra to Ike and Tina Turner. Norman says he's lucky because, thanks to his mother's history in show business, his "boss" is willing to arrange his work schedule around rehearsals and performances.

Since he was paroled last year, Norman has stayed in touch with Wilcox, who runs a support group for alumni. They get together to read plays, and they perform at Prison Performing Arts fundraisers. When Deanna Jent, the artistic director of Mustard Seed Theatre, met him at one of those benefits, she suggested that he audition for "Measure for Measure."

"Deanna is a blessing to me," Norman said of Jent, who directed the production. He also learned a lot from the other members of the large cast. "I was like a fly on the wall, listening to Richard (Strelinger) and Jim (Butz) and Jason (Cannon)."

Some members of the cast did not know about Norman's past until they saw the extremely unusual biographical note that he wrote for the "Measure for Measure" program. In program notes, actors usually describe their training, list favorite roles or cite awards they've won. Norman's bio reads, in part, "This is my first play and first steps onto a stage since I've been free. My steps may seem small to all who see — but they are huge to all who couldn't leave with me."

Jason Cannon, who stars as the Duke, found out about Norman's history one night at rehearsal when a few actors chatted during a break.

"Maybe if we had heard something going into rehearsal, it might have flipped me out a little," Cannon said. "But by the time Tim brought it up, we'd already known him a good three weeks, and he's an absolute sweetheart. It just didn't matter."

Cannon and his wife, Sarah, another actor in the "Measure for Measure" cast, said they never felt a moment's anxiety about working with Norman. They don't think that any of the actors did. "Whatever he did, that's clearly not who he is now," Cannon said. "I'm just thrilled for Tim. It's a great example of the power of theater and art."

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