

The Hamilcast: An American Podcast  
Episode #17: In New York you can be a new man

Hosts: Gillian Pennsavalle and Bianca Soto  
Guest: Kate Powers

Description: Our guest this week is Kate Powers, a facilitator and teacher with Rehabilitation Through the Arts at Sing Sing and Fishkill Correctional Facilities. We talk about how Kate uses Shakespeare and Hamilton to inspire inmates. We were so moved talking to Kate about the work she does that we decided to skip Chernow, so the book discussion will pick up next week.

Transcribed by: Autumn Clarke, Proofed by: Kathy Wille  
The Hamilcast's Transcribing Army

Ok, so we are doing this . . .

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GILLIAN PENNSAVALLE: Hello, everyone!

BIANCA SOTO: Hello, hello!

G. PEN: Welcome back to the Hamilcast, I am Gillian

B. SO: I'm Bianca!

G. PEN: How are you?

B. SO: I'm good

G. PEN: I'm okay

B. SO: I'm really good

G. PEN: I'm alright. We've been talking about, we will eventually be talking about the Federalist papers, so Bianca so kindly brought over some Federalist wine

B. SO: I did!

G. PEN: On this lovely afternoon

B. SO: It's a cabernet sauvignon and we have Ben Franklin on the label

G. PEN: Yeah!

B. SO: I thought it would be a nice, festive beverage for us

G. PEN: It's excellent, it's nice and bold and red, not unlike this Mercury retrograde that we're going through

B. SO: Still going through

G. PEN: See how it all comes back with the technical stuff? Okay, I don't know, I'm super excited about our guest today and I hope that doesn't sound not genuine because we say that a lot, but everyone we have here is exciting and amazing and interesting and a couple weeks ago, maybe months ago now, we tweeted a link from someone who works with inmates in theater and there was this beautifully written article about how she introduced them to Hamilton and how they reacted.

B. SO: It was two months ago, actually

G. PEN: Two months ago?

B. SO: I just found the tweet, it was April first.

G. PEN: So, we are joined by Kate Powers today. She is a stage director, she's worked in New York and regionally across the United States. She's been a facilitator and teacher with Rehabilitation Through the Arts at Sing Sing and Fishkill correctional facilities since 2009, and she's been a Drama League directed fellow and a Fullbright scholar in Shakespeare.

B. SO: Wow.

G. PEN: So, welcome, Kate, thank you so much for skyping with us today.

KATE POWERS: Happy to do so, ladies!

G. PEN: That article was so, so moving

B. SO: Very moving. I just reread it again and it brought tears to my eyes again

G. PEN: We have so many questions for you and we just, I guess just tell us, tell us everything! How did you, what came first: the theater or the passion for rehabilitation? How did this all come to be?

K. POW: So, theater came first

G. PEN: Okay

K. POW: By a long margin, but a whole bunch of years ago, I started, and I will say Shakespeare's probably to blame for almost everything

B. SO: Isn't he always?

K. POW: Yeah! So, I've been a member for a lot of years of an organization called "The Shakespeare Theater Association". It used to be "The Shakespeare Theater Association of America," but we recently dropped the "of America" in an effort to include more of our international comrades. But anyway, every year I would go to the conference for this organization, which is principally comprised of artistic directors, managing directors, and education directors from theater companies for whom Shakespeare is part of their mission. So, they don't have to be a full out Shakespeare festival but maybe they are committed to programming at least one Elizabethan or Jacobean play every season. And I would meet all of these folks and one of the people I would sit with every year and talk to and hear one more amazing story from was Kurt Toffland, who for many years was the artistic director of Kentucky Shakespeare Festival and who started a program at the Luther-Luckett Correctional Facility called "Shakespeare Behind Bars," which is also now a documentary, so if people are interested, that's available, I think it's still streaming on Netflix. "Shakespeare Behind Bars," it's about an hour long

G. PEN: For sure! That's on my list the minute we hang up.

K. POW: It's a beautiful piece. So, Kurt would tell me every year, he'd tell me one or two more amazing stories, more amazing than the last, more transformational, more powerful stories about the guys in "Shakespeare Behind Bars" were having and the things that they were discovering about themselves and about the way that they wanted to engage with the world through the work that they were doing with Shakespeare inside this prison. And every year, I think, "Oh my gosh, that's amazing, I want to do that!" And then I'd come back to New York and get caught back up in what it is to be a freelance director, and kind of forget about it a little bit, and then I'd go to the conference the next year and he'd have a new story and I'd think, "Oh my god, that's amazing! I need to do that!" And so this went on for a couple years because the other thing Kurt said, not just to me but to anyone who asks about doing this kind of work in prison, "Do not begin to do this work unless you know you have about five years to give to it, because the hole that you will leave behind you is so much bigger than the emptiness that was there before you arrived." That you need to be really mindful of that, right? That whatever you imagine your reasons for going in there are, you really have to be prepared to take care of the men and women who are incarcerated because they have been without, with all due respect to victims and victims' families, I don't mean to be cavalier about it, but the people that we incarcerate in this country have suffered enormously, and for many of them, part of the reason that they're in prison is because of a whole range of economic and social and structural racism issues that led to or facilitated some tremendously bad choices. So, I hesitated to get involved for a while because I thought, gosh, I'm a freelance director, I don't know in five years where I'm going to be or what I'm going to be doing. So, that kind of kept me from taking the leap for a little while, and then at a

certain point I said, "To heck with it," and I jumped in. So, yeah, that was 2009 at Sing Sing.

G. PEN: Wow. I want to just ask you, I want to go straight into the Hamilton stuff and then of course we can go back and talk about whatever you want, but that article was so moving. Can you explain to people that maybe didn't read it yet because we will absolutely share it again, what about Hamilton made you think, "Alright, this is something that needs to be shown"?

K. POW: Well, one of the things I mention in that piece is that the men with whom I work at Sing Sing, and just to be clear about the nature of the venue, Sing Sing is a maximum security facility. Nobody is at Sing Sing for jaywalking.

G. PEN and B. SO: Right

K. POW: Those are class A, gentlemen who have been convicted of class A felonies. Most of them have not ever been to the theater in their lives. It just wasn't part of their experience growing up because of the neighborhoods they grew up in and economic challenges that their families faced or the fact that there even wasn't a family to begin with. So, when we're making plays in there, usually, a lot of the guys will say this, especially at the beginning of the process, they'll say, "What is this going to look like?" because they, and a couple of the guys who are really, really smart men, who have gotten every educational opportunity that the prison system offers that they've taken advantage of, say, "When I read a play, I can't see it, I don't know what I'm looking at," and a lot of actors on the outside have this too, when they first read it, it's hard for them to envision it, and sometimes we know when we read a play and we think, "Oh! Yeah!" as we're reading it, that's a sign that it's a really exciting script because you can start to see it in your head. So, normally, I will bring in production stills from a handful of different productions so that I'm not prescribing, "This is what our production will look like," but to say, "Here's what some productions of this play have looked like," and we'll make our own decisions about what we're going to do, but it just helps them start to see it a little bit. Especially lots of the plays that we do, you don't see too many people of color in the production photos. If you're doing August Wilson, sure, but if you're doing Arthur Miller or if you're doing John Steinbeck or if you're doing Shakespeare, it's harder to see people of color and the population inside that facility is overwhelmingly black and brown, so I'm always looking for ways to make sure that those guys see themselves represented. In fact, we just finished performing "Twelfth Night" and the production photos of "Twelfth Night" I eliminated a lot of pictures right out of the gate because I thought, I'm not bringing in a picture that's all white people. I want to make sure that we see ourselves.

G. PEN: I'm sorry, I just read the article that you sent me earlier, reading what the inmates were saying about breaking down their barriers and what it meant for them to be a part of this, and one of them said that they thought Shakespeare

was only for white people. And he said, the more I read it and the more I got involved, Shakespeare has no color to him, it's just

K. POW: Yeah, that guy, his prison nickname is "Sweets" and Sweets said to me about two weeks ago, he said, and it's kind of funny, his speech pattern, he will say my name four or five or six times in a sentence, he says, "Kate, Kate, I just realized, Kate, Shakespeare's for everybody, isn't he? And I almost missed him!"

B. SO: Wow.

G. PEN: Oh my god, Kate

B. SO: That's incredible.

G. PEN: Whoa. Holy shit.

K. POW: Put that in your pipe and smoke it!

G. PEN: The chills are just—I didn't mean to get you off track

K. POW: That's okay, that's okay! So, we often have to make do with production stills or maybe, sometimes, when we're trying to envision what something might look [like], I can bring in a little video tape of a production, but it's usually sort of the recorded or made for television or whatever, it's not really, I can't take them to the theater. But then the cast of Hamilton steadfastly refused to go to the Grammy's in LA, they said, "If you want our performance, we're going to do it live from the stage of the Richard Rodgers theater." And I thought, god, this is an opportunity to take them to a little tiny piece of a Broadway show, because this isn't like how it got restaged for the Tonys and it's not being done in an LA performance space

B. SO: It's not a movie adaptation, it's as live theater as you can get, aside from being in the audience

G. PEN: To be fair, when that film adaptation comes out, I will be watching it on an ENDLESS loop, let's just say that, I understand what we're saying here, but I'm just saying. That's going to be very exciting.

K. POW: All those things can still be true.

G. PEN: Yes. For sure.

K. POW: But I've been, like so many of us, the past several months listening to the Hamilton soundtrack on a loop, pretty much

B. SO: Basically, yeah

K. POW: As I'm travelling around the city, and we talked a little bit about it from time to time. I'd just mention how Lin-Manuel was using language to build character and that the rhetorical devices that define the character of George Washington, as Miranda has created him, versus the rhetorical devices that define Thomas Jefferson, for instance. He's using very different pieces of rhetoric, and he's using rhythm, and he's using music, and I just thought it was a great way to combat some of the preconceived ideas that some of the men in my program have about Shakespeare kind of talking funny and nobody uses language like that anymore, and I thought, actually, right now, with a thirty million dollar advance on Broadway, we're using language like that. And, by the way, it's people who look just like you. So, it had kind of been part of our conversation, and I had said to the guys a couple weeks before I brought it in, I said, would it be interesting to you if we were able to bring the material in, would you guys like to see it? And the response was pretty enthusiastic, in a room where, to be honest, getting an enthusiastic response is tough to come by because everybody's got those prison shutters pulled down pretty tightly, so an enthusiastic response might not be discernable for somebody who hasn't been in that room before. It's like an almost imperceptible nod and an "uh-huh."

B. SO: It's like a glimmer of hope and it's like, oh! There it is!

K. POW: Right. So, we watched, and the other thing that I found really interesting was looking at the clip of Lin-Manuel Miranda at the poetry jam at the White House in 2009 when he's just written what he calls the opening piece of a concept album, which, of course, becomes the opening number of Hamilton. But at the time, that's how he contextualizes it. He says, you know, this is the guy who is the living embodiment of hip-hop, Alexander Hamilton, and it gets this laugh

[2009 Poetry Jam clip begins playing]

LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA: I'm actually working on a hip-hop album, it's a concept album about the life of someone I think embodies hip-hop, treasury secretary Alexander Hamilton.

[The crowd laughs]

L. MAN: You laugh! But it's true!

[2009 Poetry Jam clip ends playing]

K. POW: And then he begins that number, and when he finally gets to the "What's your name, man? Alexander Hamilton" the audience at the White House laughs! And I perceived, I'm not trying to describe something to Lin-Manuel Miranda that he didn't experience, but as I watched it, what I thought I observed

was that there was almost this little shadow that went across his face for a second, of, “Huh. I thought I was serious, and they laughed...”

B. SO: And they think it's funny. Not necessarily funny, but what a ridiculous thing.

[2009 Poetry Jam clip begins playing]

L. MAN: What's your name, man? Alexander Hamilton.

[The crowd laughs]

L. MAN: His name is Alexander Hamilton

[The crowd laughs]

L. MAN: And there's a million things he hasn't done, but just you wait, just you wait!

[2009 Poetry Jam clip ends playing]

K. POW: And we're constantly in my program at Sing Sing, talking about how important it is to be willing to take the risk of looking ridiculous in the pursuit of something you believe in, that, for as much as these guys have been through, that kind of vulnerability can be really scary. So, I thought that was really interesting, and watching him kind of, watching Lin-Manuel in that video tape kind of scan that room at the White House and, it was almost, again, this is just my perception, again, I'm not trying to put anything on him, but my perception was that he almost thought, “Well, do I camp this up because they want to laugh? Or do I stand firm and do what I'm here to do?” and by the end, of course, they're not laughing. They're listening and they're leaning in and there's a cutaway to the President and the First Lady looking absolutely rapt and engaged by what he's doing. And I thought, it took him from 2009 to the end of 2014 to get this piece up, five years of how many nights were in the middle of that where he might have thought, “What the hell am I doing? This isn't getting anywhere,” you know, all of those, and I'm working with a population of guys who know more than the rest of us do about a lot of long, empty, uncertain nights. Because they've got fifteen or twenty or twenty-five years of sitting alone in a cell at night, “What have I done? What have I done, and what can I do? What's possible for me? Where do I go from here?” So, it was sort of that confluence of things, being able to sort of see how the piece started in that clip from 2009, and then being able to show what the opening number turned into, and then when the cast got invited back to the White House to perform, and to have the First Lady stand up and say this is maybe the most important piece of art she's ever encountered,

[White House clip begins playing]

MICHELLE OBAMA: And it was simply, as I tell everybody, the best piece of art, in any form, that I have ever seen in my life.

[White House clip ends playing]

K. POW: And to be standing there with five black and brown men saying that, I thought, I think my guys need to see this.

G. PEN: The thing that really struck me, and I think it's what I quoted when I shared the link, was that someone said when you showed them the, I believe it was the Tony performance, and I'm tearing up just thinking about it because it struck me so hard, "Nobody laughed when he said his name this time." And I just thought, shit, no, and it's also the emotion of what the show has become and what the show means for everybody and how it resonates for so many different people and what that person that said that to you, what it meant to him and how it could change his life going forward or at least just one performance or something. But just that one line, to me, was so heavy and held so much, and I just thought, I need to talk to Kate immediately. It's just incredible, the way...I don't know, it just, it really makes me speechless, which, if anyone listens to the podcast, that's pretty rare.

K. POW: I was going to say, that's not the best feature in a podcast host...

G. PEN: I know! Well in certain instances it's worth it because it's just like, how, I mean, there's so much to learn about. I have a question—how do these inmates become a part of your program?

B. SO: That's what I was wondering as well, is it a voluntary program? And then, how did the productions work? Are there auditions?

G. PEN: I read that there's a wait list? What is that...? What's going on there?

K. POW: Sure, sure, so, the program, Rehabilitation Through the Arts, started at Sing Sing twenty years ago this summer. In the ensuing twenty years, we're now at five different facilities in New York state, four prisons for men, and then the women's prison at Bedford Hills. At each facility, not immediately, but over the course of the first couple years of the program being at the facility, the incarcerated participants will create a steering committee. We believe as part of the work that it's really important that we are giving the folks in the program the opportunity to practice leadership skills, so they create the bylaws of the group at each facility, so the policies and how it works are a little bit different. We certainly share among the facilities, we'll say, you know, this group over here at Greenhaven, they've done this thing and we think that's a great idea, and then the guys at Sing Sing will maybe say, yeah, we think that's a great idea, we're going to incorporate that into what we're doing, or they'll say, actually, you know,

that one's not for us because the environment's different here, right? But the point is they are making the rules about what happens if a guy blows off rehearsal, they're the ones who are going to talk to him about that, they're the ones who are going to, and at Sing Sing, usually in late May/early June, the men who comprise the steering committee, who are chosen by the membership of the group, will interview until they get about fifteen to twenty guys off of that waiting list that they think are ready to join the program, because there are some men, let's face it, who want to join the program because they perceive that they will get to hang around women sometimes because actresses and female facilitators will come in to teach classes and so on. So, the guys who show up just because they want to stand near women tend not to stick because the work is too hard. And the payoff of being around a woman is not great enough when you're being asked to look ridiculous in front of your peers if you're not really ready to take that challenge. So, the men on the steering committee pick and they sometimes will say to a guy, "We don't think you're ready, why don't you come back in a year?" But there is a waiting list of about a hundred me, it's totally voluntary, the guys have to decide they want to be in the group, and then they have to get on that list, and then they have to go through that selection process by the steering committee

G. PEN: So, it's an interview, basically? So, they say, hey, I'm really interested in this, and then someone from the committee says, alright, let's have a conversation, or do they look at records, or...?

K. POW: Nope, they don't look at records

G. PEN: Oh, that's awesome. That's awesome.

K. POW: It has nothing to do with your crime or conviction or the length of your sentence, that is not a factor. So, we've got guys who've been convicted of everything you can imagine in the group. So, the group is really diverse in that way, so in the rest of the facility, where there might be some discrimination against people who are convicted of certain kinds of crimes, that isn't part of our group. So, whether you're convicted of rape or murder or armed robbery or a drug offense, whatever it might be, you're welcome in this group. That's not the deterrent.

G. PEN: Do you have—this might be a little off topic—do you have any experience with people who you have met who have been wrongfully convicted?

K. POW: Yes. Absolutely.

G. PEN: Yes? A very dear friend of mine was and he has since been released and that's incredible but he was on death row for a crime he didn't commit for eighteen years in Arkansas, so just, the way he dealt with being there is art. He says to this day, now he is an author and an artist and he does magik and energy

work and he gets to live the life that really got him wrongfully convicted in the first place but he always says, he's the first person to say and he's said for a long time, as he should, that art is what kept him as sane as possible and I don't know if he would be one to be on the waiting list for the theater, but still to have an outlet like that and to be able to create, I think is so important, and when you're in that situation, whether you're guilty or not, because being in those walls is just like you said, the suffering is really unbelievable, and again, like you said, not to take anything away from the reasons people may be there

K. POW: Right. People say to me, somebody says to me at least once a week, "Why do these murderers get free Shakespeare classes?"

B. SO: Oh god

K. POW: At least once a week, somebody will say it, and I'll say, my response to that is, "Who do you want coming home?" Because ninety seven percent of the people we incarcerate in this country, for whatever crime, eventually are coming home. So, do we want people who've been parked in a box of their own bitterness and anger and hurt for twenty-five to thirty years? Like that thing about if you chain up a dog and you beat them, guess what? Pretty soon you have a mean dog.

G. PEN: Yeah, and that's what Damien says too, these people are treated in the most horrible ways, and then what's going to happen when they come out? There is no rehabilitation, except for things like what you're doing, which I think is so incredibly important and that is such a big, not to get all political about it, but that's a huge part of it.

K. POW: Yeah, one of the things that we believe very strongly in our T.A. is we're not making actors, we're teaching life skills through theater, because, and we've had a couple studies commissioned, quantitative studies to demonstrate the efficacy of the work, it turns out, and as theater practitioners we kind of intuitively knew this, we just never named it, but it turns out, the act of putting on a play teaches you the sense of shared responsibility with other people, it teaches you delayed gratification, it teaches you nonviolent conflict resolution skills, your critical thinking skills, your reading comprehension improve, your tolerance for ambiguity, things are not always black and white in the rehearsal room, and you have to live with that, you have to sit with that. All of those things, and Shakespeare, like the kind of confidence the guys get from engaging with something really difficult and then tackling it. And there were guys, you know, we had on Tuesday night what we call our "processing session," so we performed last week "Twelfth Night" twice for the population of the facility, and then once for an invited civilian audience of about two hundred seventy-five people

G. PEN: I was just going to ask if it's open to the public in any way

K. POW: It is open to the public in a way. It's not open in the sense, oh, you can just stroll up to Sing Sing on the night of the play and walk in

G. PEN: Of course

B. SO: Is it like family members?

K. POW: We just got permission last year for the first time for the men's families to attend, for a lot of years the department of correction said that it was a security risk to have the families come

G. PEN: What?!

B. SO: Why?

K. POW: Because there's a department of corrections

G. PEN: So, who watched? If it wasn't their family and friends, then just other inmates?

K. POW: No, we've always had a performance for what we call "civilian guests" or "community guests" who come in from the outside, and I would say for the bulk of the time that we've done it, that's been people who maybe are sort of predisposed towards some criminal justice reform or just general humanitarian kind of lefty progressive folks who wrote checks to support the work. So, it's great, last year was the first year that the families could come, and one of the things that the men have been saying to me for about five years is, because until we were allowed to invite their families to the performance, we would always video tape it and then send the families a DVD afterwards, so at least they could see what their son or their husband or their brother was accomplishing. But so, this was the first time that I, because I didn't direct last year, this was my first opportunity to look those wives and those mothers in the eye and tell them, "I'm so proud of your son and here's why," or, "Here's what I saw him work really hard with and overcome this spring while we worked on this project," and I judge that these women and these families don't get to hear that very often about their person, their beloved person

B. SO: Right, probably never, actually. Your kind of answered this I guess a little bit before, but I was curious, have you experienced any surprises? Like on your end, any actual big transformations that you've seen in the characters of these people through this process?

K. POW: Oh, yeah, it's so beautiful. Sweets, the guy we were talking about earlier, he was quoted in the Marshall Project article, the one who said, "Shakespeare belongs to everyone, doesn't he? And I almost missed him." When Sweets first joined the program, his first show was my first show inside, and I

remember him saying to me, “Kate! Kate! You have to teach me how to laugh, I don’t know how to laugh. I grew up in this very serious household,” and he couldn’t stand in a circle and do the warm up with us when he first joined. He was so uncomfortable with having to do a vocal warm up and make funny theater person sounds or blow through his lips on a vibration or play a game of zip-zap-zop or whatever

B. SO: Good ol’ zip-zap-zop

K. POW: Right? It’s an oldie but a goody. But he couldn’t do it! He couldn’t make eye contact. He was mortified.

B. SO: I think as silly as those things are, as we know, Gillian and I are both actors, you have theater experience as well, even us though, you feel silly, you feel really, even though there’s such like, not, don’t seem like that big of a deal, you realize doing that that all of a sudden this vulnerability opens up in you and people who have had the lives and the backgrounds and whatever experiences while being incarcerated, that’s not an easy thing that you’re willing to give up, that vulnerability.

G. PEN: And I was thinking earlier, and I’m not undermining, I’m making a comparison, Kate, you were saying before how it teaches your life skills and social skills—that’s why really stuffy people take improv classes, so that if their job calls for being social, they don’t want to be actors, that’s not their goal, but it helps to be able to “Yes, and” somebody or to whatever, and Mike, my husband, is an actor and he’s an improviser and every year he teaches improv to high school students upstate and these improv games and sometimes there are kids who need to be taken out of their shell and when you said the ability to look ridiculous, I mean that is something

B. SO: That’s rule number one

G. PEN: That’s rule number one

B. SO: Don’t be afraid to make a fool of yourself

G. PEN: Yeah and Mike is also a director, he directed our web series and that’s sort of his thing, like if, I play kind of the straight woman in our show and in season two he was like, “I’m going to write you something where you have to scream and yell because I want you to be able to look ridiculous,” and that’s such a core thing in general and so just to hear how it transcends high school students upstate and stuffy accountants who need to learn how to lighten up at the Christmas party and take improv classes and these people who are in prison that need to learn the same exact skills and the same, they learn it in the same way and just what you’re doing and how you’re doing it is so incredible. Bianca and I

are wiping tears from our eyes as we're listening to you, it's really, it's just, it's amazing. So, anyway. Sorry.

K. POW: It's okay! So, one of the humdingers about the work, and part of the answer to the "why do these murderers get free Shakespeare?" in addition to the "who do you want coming home?" thing, is the recidivism rate in this country, which means likelihood to reoffend within, and in this country we keep track of the first two years after someone is released from prison, so the national recidivism rate is about sixty-eight percent, that means two thirds of the people that we incarcerate, when they come home are back in prison for a new crime or a parole violation within two years. If it's a new crime after two years, we don't count it in that percentage. So, the number's really higher than two thirds. Guys who do prison performing arts, it's less than ten percent.

B. SO: Wow.

G. PEN: That's amazing.

K. POW: Because they learn to communicate.

G. PEN: I was actually just going to ask you, are you in touch with anyone that's been in this program that's been released?

K. POW: Oh sure! Yeah, we have a homecoming party every year. We have more than a hundred alum

G. PEN: Kate, you're killing me. You're killing us over here.

K. POW: We have, we call it the homecoming party, once a year, and we honor all the folks who get released within a given year and shout them out but we have over a hundred alum who've come home now, and a lot of them will turn up at that party every year and bring their new spouses or bring their baby and tell us about the job that they're doing now or the degree they're pursuing. And actually, right now we just started in the last year and a half, a program for the participants who've come home so that they're still, obviously, it's a different schedule because they've got a whole different life that they need to adjust to but once a month they get together in a space that Carnegie Hall has donated to us, and they are working on a project together right now with a facilitator about what reentry is like. And the idea is that eventually the guys who are on the inside will create a piece that's about what their expectations are about what reentry looks like, and then we'll sort of weave that together with what the folks who've come home have found to be the reality of reentry and build a piece of theater around those divergent expectations and actual experiences.

B. SO: I think that's incredibly important actually, because I've thought about people, let's say, who've been incarcerated for ten, fifteen, whatever years

during, I guess the most recent time when the world has changed so astronomically, I don't know how people handle that, and there's this box that you type things on and it does all of, that didn't exist before, and I don't know how anybody grapples with what reality is after not dealing with it for so long

G. PEN: Yeah, when my friend Damien got out, he said credit cards really freaked him out because, I guess the trial started when he was about seventeen, but he was in prison for eighteen years and not only did he not do it, but then he's there, and then there's that, and then he gets out and like, swipe a credit card or

B. SO: Things that we take for granted, obviously, every day that are part of regular life

G. PEN: That really made him nervous and he told me that and I was like, yeah, no, I get it, like what is this thing? And what is this? And he was handed an iPhone when he got out and he was just like, okay, like I don't think he's really computer-savvy, but he's really good on his phone, he's tweeting, and he's a hell of a texter, I'll say that, but it is things like that, and not only the age, you go in when you're seventeen and then you're thirty something, but just in all of that time

B. SO: But I think even part of that could, and Kate, you can tell me if I'm completely off base here, but if you get out, let's say, and you're completely unfamiliar with your surroundings and what the world has become, and if maybe you don't feel a connection to what is your existence now, it could potentially reinforce your own habits, to go back to something that you're familiar with

G. PEN: Yeah, it's all you know

B. SO: Right

K. POW: Well, and we don't prepare people for reentry, really, and we don't really mean, and I'm sorry, this is a little on my soapbox but I don't know how to not get on it on this issue

G. PEN: Go for it Kate. Go.

K. POW: But, you know, we say as a culture that you've paid your debt if you've served your sentence, but we don't really mean it because in most of the country you still have to check the box that says you're a convicted felon on either a housing application or a job application, which is legalized discrimination, which is what that is

G. PEN: Or your jury duty survey, which I just sent back, that also asks that question too, which I think is very interesting.

K. POW: Nobody's going to put you on a jury if you check the box that says you're a convicted felon because they've made a decision about who you are and how you perceive the world, based on the fact that you've done time

G. PEN: Absolutely

K. POW: And also, we deny formerly incarcerated people to vote in most of the country. They never get, they're disenfranchised for most of their lives in the United States

B. SO: Is that true? I didn't know that!

K. POW: Yeah, in Virginia, they just signed a bill into law about two weeks ago, I think, you'll forgive me, I've been in prison for all of April, so I'm skewed because I was inside the walls so much, but they just signed a bill restoring the vote to the formerly incarcerated in the commonwealth of Virginia, so two hundred thousand people who get the vote back.

G. PEN: Wow. I didn't know that.

K. POW: And we just, Mayor deBlasio, earlier this year, I believe, passed a law in New York City to eliminate the box on job applications

G. PEN: Yes. That I had heard about.

K. POW: And I believe we need to do that across the country. Because it's not like you're not going to run a background check and find out eventually, nobody's trying to pull a—well, maybe a few people are—but in general, the formerly incarcerated are not trying to pull a fast one, I mean, it's pretty clear if there's a twenty-year hole in your employment history that something is up. But especially if it's a job as, like, a dishwasher?

G. PEN: Sure, yeah

K. POW: Is the reason why this guy who is so eager to be here and so ready to work should just be automatically disqualified from consideration? If we mean that he's paid his dues by serving his sentence, why are we still punishing him? And if he can't get a job and he can't find a place to live

B. SO: Then guess what, he's going to end up back in prison

K. POW: What do we think is going to happen? So, one of the best things about my program, aside from the fact that the recidivism rate drops so precipitously for guys who do prison performing arts programs, one of the really cool side effects of our work at Sing Sing is that after a guy's been in the program for a couple of

years and he's done one or two plays, taken a few classes, he has a different sense of himself and a different kind of self-confidence and guys who never thought school was for them, had a very hard time in school until whatever point at which they stopped going, will say, "God, if I could do that John Steinbeck play, and if I could do that Tracy Letts play, maybe I should go to school." So, we become a gateway drug for college.

G. PEN: That's awesome.

K. POW: And the recidivism rate for men who get their four-year bachelor's degree while they're incarcerated is zero percent.

B. SO: Wow.

G. PEN: Wow!

B. SO: How many productions do you do a year? Is it once a year or is it every couple months? Is it just an ongoing thing?

K. POW: So, at Sing Sing we do one full production a year, but eleven full months a year, there is something going on

B. SO: Right, arts programs or whatever?

K. POW: So, like, in the summer and the fall, we'll have three different workshops going on concurrently, like, one on a Tuesday night, one on a Wednesday night, one on a Friday night. Depending on what the men, the men will do a survey and ask people what sounds interesting to them. So, we might have an acting class and we might have a personal narrative writing workshop and we might have a modern dance class going on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday nights for twelve weeks

B. SO: Oh, my god, I love it.

G. PEN: Here's a question: Hamilton will be—high schools will be doing it, the rights are going to be there—do you see yourself maybe doing Hamilton? I don't know, venturing into the singing and rapping and full blown productions, but, because it resonated so, so deeply with the men that you work with, do you think that maybe it can be incorporated some way into the program?

K. POW: That's a good question. To be honest, I haven't gotten that far yet. We have done West Side Story, and last year we did The Wizard of Oz, so musicals are not impossible for us to do

G. PEN: Just one question—who is the person who said that his favorite song is now "Over the Rainbow"?

K. POW: That's Sweets.

G. PEN: Is that really Sweets, still?

K. POW: Yeah, mmm-hmm.

G. PEN: Well, he earned his nickname for sure with that, with his little blurb. He said, and of course we'll link this, but he just said, and again, not to overuse the word, he's so sweet, he said, "We did a play called 'The Wizard of Oz,'" as if he had to tell everyone

K. POW: Contextualize that

G. PEN: Yeah! And so, he said, "We did this play called 'The Wizard of Oz' and now my favorite song is 'Over the Rainbow' because everyone wants to be over the rainbow," and it was just like, god, I mean, it's just... [heavy sigh] you know, now I'm just thinking how deeply the phrase, "In New York, you can be a new man" I mean, so many things about rising up and speaking up and doing what you can to make

B. SO: It would also be very inspirational, just Alexander Hamilton's origin story, if you will, that he came from poverty

K. POW: Impoverished and squalor, orphaned

B. SO: He used his own artistic, his writing abilities to rise up and to become a better man and to become a very powerful man, at that

K. POW: And you could make the case that Aaron Burr should have been in my program, because he murdered somebody and he was never convicted for that

G. PEN: Yeah, he was acquitted!

K. POW: But I've got some guys who've killed somebody in a street gun fight in much the same way through a slightly different duel code to what happened to Alexander Hamilton. I have to say, my short-term agenda, visa vis Hamilton and Sing Sing, is more intimately connected to Mr. Miranda, I think, because he's sort of part of the reason why I'm talking to you because he stumbled across my blog post and he retweeted it with the phrase, "This makes me cry. Grateful, grateful, grateful." And then he promptly broke my website because three hundred fifty thousand people, normally I get, I don't know, ten visitors a week, my director's notebook, and suddenly three hundred fifty thousand people in an hour wanted to look at my page because Lin-Manuel Miranda had pointed them there. So, he started following me on Twitter, and so we had a little conversation privately and so I've invited him to Sing Sing. And he said he would like to come, but he could

not begin to think about it until the summer time. So, I said, well, that's fair, I'm sure you have a few things on your plate

B. SO: One or two.

K. POW: Or sixteen, perhaps he's got sixteen

G. PEN: Oh, at least, a record breaking sixteen

K. POW: So, and this was before the nominations, but I said to him, I just said, "Well, I'll circle back with you after the Tonys, shall I?" and he said, "Yes, please." So, my hope, my fervent hope, is that we can find a way to invite Lin-Manuel to come, and who knows, whether that's just him or some of the other actors would be able to join him, and come inside the walls, and just remind these gentlemen that they have not been completely disappeared.

G. PEN: And if there's anything that we can do to help, please tell us things to tweet and send because we are on Team Kate

B. SO: To raise any sort of awareness

G. PEN: And on this, for sure, we believe in it so much and it's a really incredible thing that you're doing, and it's so, so, so important and we're not LMM status, of course, I don't think we have the ability to break your website

K. POW: Is anybody?

G. PEN: No.

B. SO: No!

G. PEN: No.

K. POW: I'm not sure President Obama has

G. PEN: It's crazy! But we'll do what we can on whatever level we can because it's so important, for sure

K. POW: Thank you, there's a piece that will be coming out, I believe, next week on the Clyde Fitch report site, we had Tim Cusack from Clyde Fitch come to the play last week, and he sat down with three or four of the guys and had pretty extensive conversations with them. And I believe he's writing a two-part article about the experience of coming in and seeing the play and talking to the men about the work. The first piece, I believe is going up on Tuesday, the tenth of May. I will send that your way.

B. SO: Thank you, definitely looking forward to reading that

G. PEN: Can you give us a little list of where people can find you or get involved

K. POW: Or donate?

G. PEN: Yeah! Or donate for sure, of course, and maybe I'll make a little graphic or something if everything should be in one place, this is kind of plug time, so just say whatever you need to say.

K. POW: Sure, so, Rehabilitation Through the Arts is at [www.rta-arts.org](http://www.rta-arts.org). You can also follow Rehabilitation Through the Arts on Facebook and on Twitter. The donate button is right at the top of the RTA homepage, there's also a really lovely, I think it's about a seven minute video on the top of that page where you can meet one of the guys on our steering committee, his name is Kenyata Hughes and he's gotten his Masters degree while he's been incarcerated, he's one of the most extraordinary humans I've ever met anywhere, honestly, but he shares some of his reflections about, and I don't normally talk about the guys' crimes because I want to deal with the guy who's standing in front of me, not whoever he was or whatever circumstances he was in when he was seventeen or when whatever happened happened, but in this video, Kenyata is very open about the fact that he took a man's life when he was seventeen years old and he was kind of hopped up and excited, and that he has to live with the fact that he's created this man-sized hole in the world. And how he has found some ways to understand himself and what he did and come to terms with that and figure out how to move forward. One of the things that I say to the guys is, if you took a life, then give a life. Don't give up yours, do something with your life.

B. SO: I guess, I have one more quick question, sorry

K. POW: That's okay!

B.SO: They just keep coming to me, did you find it or do you ever struggle with that? I would imagine it's probably not an easy thing to leave that at the door, as they say, and just to deal with the person standing in front of you. Do you ever have any trouble with that?

K. POW: Actually, when I'm in the room with the guys, I never have any trouble with it. You can look up every guy in our program. The department of corrections has a website, you can look everybody up, you can see what he's convicted of, and somebody told me about that when I was brand new to this work, and I did it once, and I thought, hmm, I'm not going to do that again. If it comes up in the course of the work, if a guy decides that he needs to share or wants to talk about his crime in some way, I'm perfectly happy to have that conversation with him, but I judge that it's none of my business because I might be looking at a guy who's forty years old who spent the past twenty-five years inside, and he is not

the kid who pulled that trigger. I am not the snotty, over-eye lined eighteen-year-old who started at Carnegie Mellon, and only wore black and looked down my nose at musical theater. I'm a different person. Do any of us want to only be viewed through the lens of the single stupidest thing we ever did?

G. PEN: Of course not, but people don't think of it like that.

K. POW: And I know that I have a certain amount of cognitive dissonance about, sometimes when I stop and think, and I don't even know why, but sometimes, for me, rape is harder than the murder. And I don't know what that is, I don't know why

G. PEN: No, I get it

B. SO: Same.

G. PEN: I understand.

K. POW: That one throws me a bit more. So, I just try to look into the eyes and breathe in the guy who's standing in front of me.

B. SO: I'm sure that's not an easy thing to do, maybe on some days, so I think it's wonderful work that you're doing and I'm sure it's appreciated by a lot of people, not just the inmates but their families even

K. POW: I appreciate what you're saying, I just want to reinforce that most days it's the easiest thing in the world to deal with. Not coming in there with "Oh, I need to fix you," there's a quote by an Australian aboriginal poet, and I forget her name and I feel really bad about that now, but she says, and I'm paraphrasing on top of it, but she says something to the effect of, "If you think you're coming here to help me, keep moving. But if you know that your liberation is tied up with mine, then let's get to work." And that's how I understand what I'm doing. That our culture is broken and that my liberation and my ability to move through the world in good conscience is connected with the work that I do with these guys. It's not like a Park Avenue charity event that I'm doing as a favor to them. It's we, together, are doing the work, and we, together, are understanding more clearly what it means to be human.

G. PEN: Well, Kate, I think that's a perfect time to stop, I know you have to go. Everyone, we will get back to Chernow next week, we got a little caught up in what was happening today. Kate, thank you, not only for the work that you do, but for taking the time to be on this little podcast.

K. POW: Happy to talk with you ladies, thank you so much

G. PEN: Thank you, so much, everyone for joining us. Kate, will you do our little sign off, our little Ham-style sign off, with us?

K. POW: Sure, I'd be happy to! What does that entail, exactly?

G. PEN: I'm G. Pen

B. SO: I'm B. So

K. POW: Oh, okay! I'd be K. Pow!

G. PEN: There you go!

OUTRO:

G. PEN: Hey guys! For all your Hamilcast needs, you can go to [thehamilcast.com](http://thehamilcast.com). I am GillianWithAG on all social media, my show is "The Residuals", [theresiduals.tv](http://theresiduals.tv)

B. SO: And I am [\\_BiancaJean\\_](#) on both Twitter and Instagram

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[Music: Hamilton – The World turned upside down – Instrumentals play]

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