

A Bleak Prison Break

'Getting Out' Explores a Haunted Past

By Celia Wren

Special to The Washington Post

Wednesday, September 12, 2007; Page C04

The adjective "steely" suits Journeymen Theater Ensemble's intense new offering, "Getting Out" -- and it's not just because of the set designer's artful use of wire mesh.

Marsha Norman's 1977 drama chronicles the travails of a poor, under-skilled [Kentucky](#) woman after her release from prison: As Arlene copes with the knotty temptations of freedom, it becomes increasingly clear that she cannot escape the legacy of her blighted past. Despite a mild triumph-of-the-human-spirit hopefulness in the denouement, it's a bleak tale, and director Deborah Before the play even begins, designer Robbie Hayes's chilling set sets the tone. Hanging strips of ragged wire mesh define the stage area, evoking the fence of a dilapidated prison. They enclose a comfortless apartment, awash in trash -- rags, paper, an empty pizza box, crumpled soda cans.

This is the refuge of the newly reformed Arlene (Alia Faith Williams) after several years in the slammer for forgery and prostitution. During flashback sequences, it's also the stamping ground for Arlene's younger self, Arlie (Tiffany Fillmore), a scrawny, foul-mouthed ragamuffin in a backward baseball cap.

What turned the obnoxious juvenile delinquent into the quiet, tormented adult? As the play toggles back and forth in time, the mystery builds, with the actresses' vivid characterizations fueling the suspense.

Fillmore's now-sullen, now-shrieking tomboy -- whom we first see cross-legged on top of a refrigerator -- is a holy terror, a stark contrast to Williams's grown-up Arlene, with her pinched, pale expression, severe hairstyle and awkward manner. A certain this-is-theater bravura occasionally surfaces in both performances, perhaps, but it's a well-thought-out bravura.

A more relaxed portrait comes from Victor Steele, who plays the prison guard Bennie, an admirer of Arlene's. In one particularly striking scene, the two perch on the bed, sharing dinner from [Kentucky Fried Chicken](#): While Bennie chows down with meditative calm, Arlene eats in a manner that is positively haunted -- her face taut, her movements nervous. Her denim dress makes her look frumpy.

Also making effective appearances in "Getting Out" are Jason McCool as a swaggering, strung-out pimp; Joe Palka as a harried prison warden; and Lolita-Marie Clayton as Arlene's compassionate and -- at least compared with everyone else -- charismatic neighbor. Charlotte Akin does a smart job with the role of Arlene's tough-as-nails mother,

particularly in a sequence in which the character grows increasingly angry while sweeping the apartment, prompting Akin to wield the broom with increasing fury.

Another nice touch comes from the superbly droning prison-loudspeaker announcements that launch each of the show's two acts. Voiced by Kinsey Dickey, the production's dialect coach, and detailing minutiae such as work schedules and visiting procedures, the bulletins immerse the audience in Norman's desolate world.

While exploring that grim reality, the playwright (" 'night, Mother") poses some tough questions about social determinism and the perpetuation of the American underclass. All in all, it's a challenging agenda for a theater company to take on, and Journeymen -- unlike the justice system that deals with Arlene -- acquits itself well.

Getting Out, by Marsha Norman. Directed by Deborah Kirby. Costumes, Emily Dere; lighting, Andrew Cissna; props, Suzanne Maloney; sound, Veronica Lancaster; fight choreography, Cliff Williams III. With Lee Liebeskind and Miles Butler. Two hours. Through Sept. 22 at the Clark Street Playhouse, 601 S. Clark St., Arlington. Call 800-494-TIXS or visit <http://www.journeymentheater.org>.