

States of the Union

BREAKING THE RECIDIVISTIC CIRCLE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



A FEW WEEKS ago at a dinner party in Westchester I met a young black man named Jeff who told me he had done time in Bedford Hills prison and was now a member of The Family, a group of ex-inmates engaged in repertory theater. He showed me a contract signed by Joseph Papp that committed the troupe to mounting an open-run production of a play called *Short Eyes* at Papp's Public Theater in New York City. (The

first preview was held on February 28). Jeff was holding a copy of the script, and as we sat side by side on the sofa he read a passage from it.

Written by Miguel Piñero, a 27-year-old former inmate of Sing Sing now out on parole, the play takes place in a "lockup" similar to The Tombs in Manhattan. The speech Jeff chose to read was that of a prisoner named Longshoe, who was trying to explain what it felt like "when you step out of the joint": ". . . the impact . . . everything's coming down . . . and bang knocks you dead on your ass . . . and you fight to get up . . . and all you can do is throw a brick . . . because that's the only thing that carries any weight. . . ." "Throwing a brick" is street parlance for committing a crime.

We have in this country more than a million ex-prisoners, but the chances of meeting one of them at a dinner party in Westchester are very slim. Most vanish instantly, returning to the streets that cradle their addictions and encourage their crimes; if they surface again, it is usually to throw another brick. According to the Federal Commission

on Law Enforcement, seven out of every ten arrests are repeats.

Jeff and the 16 other members of The Family have managed to escape this melancholy sequence in part because of the efforts of a half-dozen Westchester women who were ready with large quantities of aid and comfort—clothes, money, cars, affection—long before Papp's contract arrived to convert a shaky band of penniless ex-cons into a company of solid professionals earning Equity wages. In part, too, they owe their good fortune to one Marvin Felix Camillo, the director of *Short Eyes* and The Family's gentle godfather. Camillo is a professional actor who, since 1970, has been touring prisons, putting on shows for the inmates and organizing workshops there. "He's the one who did all this," Jeff told me. "You got to meet him. He's like some kind of saint."

I agreed to come to a rehearsal the following Tuesday. I liked the idea of The Family because it was trying to break the old recidivistic circle. On the other hand, I was aware that America had a long history of failed prison reforms and misfired "rehabilitation" efforts, and that most of these had been dreamed

up by well-meaning humanitarians like the good ladies of Westchester. The rule seemed to be: The better the intentions, the worse the consequences. A most chilling example was the prison built by Quakers more than a century ago in Philadelphia. Designed to give the inmates maximum opportunity for reflection, penitence and self-reform, it kept each prisoner in total solitary confinement. Many went mad.

In any case, I went home to read the play and to ponder the perils of life in and out of prison. Something in the section Jeff had read reminded me of an incident I had witnessed years before at a Manhattan clubhouse run by the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonprofit research foundation dedicated to legal reform. As part of its program, Vera was trying to help young men in trouble with the law through a combination of job-placement and counseling. At the center of the episode was a teenager named Jordan. Months before, he had been arrested for disorderly conduct and had been turned over to the organization by the courts.

Vera was having trouble with Jordan. It had gotten him a job as a counterman in a coffee shop, but he never showed up. Then he was given a position with a small auto repair shop, and after attending faithfully the first week did not return. Finally, a big advertising agency on Madison Avenue hired him to work in its mailroom. This was Jordan's last chance—if he goofed, Vera would have to send him back to the judge and a possible prison sentence—and no one was betting on his prospects. But his counselor, a tough-minded ex-convict named Dirk Van Lierop, decided to give it one more try. He tipped off his fellow counselors at the clubhouse, all ex-convicts, and they gathered around the boy.

"You're not very strong, are you, Jordan?"

"No, I guess not."

"You know what they do in prison to little guys like you?"

"Uh-uh."

"Don't you know, man? You mean you really don't know?"

"No, I don't know."

"Life is very simple up there, man. Either you a boy or a girl, a barracuda or a tuna."

There followed some vivid description. Then:

"Yeah, Jordan, that's what's gonna happen to you. You gonna be a tuna. And you know why, man? You know why? 'Cause you're still throwin' bricks at the penitentiary. Just dibblin' and dabblin', that's what you're doing. Never mind goin' to work, never mind comin' to group. Just dibblin' and dabblin', training to be a tuna." I never learned what happened to Jordan.

WHEN I arrive at the Public Theater on Tuesday, The Family is rehearsing the same scene I had heard in Westchester. Longshoe, the only white prisoner in the play, is trying to keep Juan from going to see a visitor. He has a premonition that something bloody is about to occur. Longshoe can barely stand since he has been popping pills for epileptics, "A" trains—so named because they are downers and the "A" train takes you downtown. Director Camillo sits in the front row of the theater and has the cast run through the scene again and again. They are having trouble touching each other in appropriate ways (should Juan keep Longshoe from falling?) and Camillo interjects low-keyed suggestions: "Help him sit down. . . . Grab his arm. . . . Good."

During a break, Camillo tells me that touching is "a prison no-no." He says the men are "a lot more loose" about such things now than they were in prison. "It's the freedom," he explains.

Camillo appears to be in his mid-30s. He is wearing jeans and a shiny satin blue and red jacket over a faded pink T-shirt. This, according to his friends, is his entire wardrobe, for he has sunk all his money and

time into The Family. "I'm doing what I want to do," he tells me. "I've always loved acting. Even as a kid in New Jersey I used to hold circuses in my backyard—two cents admission. I grew up on the streets like these guys, but I had my acting and that helped. I tell them that if you want to be an actor, you act. The things they've achieved have come through hard work. We've always worked, even when there wasn't a dime coming in. It didn't matter where we performed, just so we kept at it. In Portchester once we did a show in a parking lot, with car lights for spots."

I also meet the playwright, Miguel Piñero. We go into the Green Room where there are several leather chairs around a table. "I'll sit here," Piñero says, pulling over one that is cushy and has arms. "I really dig this chair." Piñero says he wrote most of *Short Eyes* in Sing Sing and that it is his first full-length play. I ask him how it feels to be out.

"It's hard out here," he answers. "It's hard to go back to the old neighborhood—the dance steps are different, the clothes are different, even some of the buildings are gone. But I'm kind of satisfied with a lot of things. I got this play. And when I walk down the street [on the Lower East Side] some of the old men greet me and call me 'Don.' That's a sign of respect, you know. When I die, I want to leave something behind that says I was here, and not just graffiti; something that says, 'Mikey lived.'"

The actors are recalled to the stage—previews are to begin soon and there is still much work to be done—so I take my leave, thinking about the different ways members of The Family try to touch each other: Miguel's brash bid for immortality, Marvin's natural altruism, the serendipitous decencies of those Westchester ladies. No dibblin' and dabblin', no barracudas and tunas. No solitary confinements. I wish them luck.