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Sing Sing

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Sing Sing

Abstract
This is a film review of *Sing Sing* (2023), directed by Greg Kwedar.

Keywords
Rehabilitation Through the Arts, Theater, Prison

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Sing Sing (2023), dir. Greg Kwedar

This film is based on the true story of Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA), a program pioneered at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility that allows inmates to participate in an acting class that culminates in a performance before an audience. Much of the cast is comprised of former inmates who took part in the program, and they play themselves. Colman Domingo gives a standout performance as John “Divine G” Whitfield, a former inmate and writer who contributed to the screenplay, along with Clarence “Divine Eye” Maclin, who plays himself in the film.

The film begins with Divine G performing a Shakespearian monologue, and after the performance ends, we see the cast assume their prison clothes and return to the world that is all too real to them. Images of constriction abound in the film, as we are constantly made aware of the doors and walls that bind them, and the fence that separates the prison from the outside world. The extensive use of handheld camera also gives the film a realistic tone, so that we feel almost as if we have been brought inside the prison to be trapped with them.
The story surrounds the production of a play that was actually written for the group after its members called for disparate elements including cowboys, pirates, Egyptian mummies, gladiators, and Robin Hood. The director obliges by writing a musical comedy, and auditions commence. Divine G is clearly disappointed when he loses the audition for the part of Hamlet (whose famous soliloquy is somehow squeezed into the play) to newcomer Divine Eye, who does not seem as serious about acting as he is about hustling and protecting his own power in the prison. But Divine G helps him prepare for his parole hearing, and helps him learn to act, just as he helps everyone. Divine G has been in prison for years for a crime he did not commit, and his efforts to be exonerated continually run up against the dispassionate bureaucracy of the prison system. Nevertheless, he continues to be a kind person to all, and seems to have found his vocation in the theater program.

Much of the film focuses on the exercises that the group does, which like many acting classes focus on letting go of inhibitions and becoming vulnerable to each other. This is not easy for Divine Eye, who hangs onto his tough guy persona for as long as possible. There is no sudden break into tears or conversion such as might happen in a traditional Hollywood movie; instead, this film expresses a more gradual and honest transformation, as he learns to accept the support of his peers, and learns to trust Divine G and the others. As Sean “Dino” Johnson (who plays himself) puts it, “we want to become human again” and give up the violence and anger that has defined them. It is all too easy to remain in the violent reality of resentment in prison, but this program challenges that.

Divine G has his own difficult moments when a close friend dies, and when his appearance before the parole board fails to yield his release once again. But his community stands by him: when he asks to return to them, they lovingly take him back. There is real redemption for these
men, and genuine healing occurs through their encounters with each other and with themselves. This film shows that people can change when given the chance, and that even those that society has rejected can find the strength and courage to rejoin it without rancor by moving through their pain. The journey is not an easy one, but it is possible, and the fact that this is a real program that has yielded results for the very real people in the film reminds us that redemption stories do not only exist in Hollywood fables.