

The Formerly Incarcerated People’s Performance Project (FIPPP) Is Partnering with Berkeley Repertory Theatre in New Two-Year Residency Program

BERKELEY, CA (October 31, 2023) —Berkeley Repertory Theatre (Berkeley Rep) **Artistic Director Johanna Pfaelzer, Managing Director Tom Parrish**, Berkeley Rep School of Theatre (BRSOT) **Director Anthony Jackson**, and The Formerly Incarcerated People’s Performance Project **Co-Founder and Producer Mark Kenward** are pleased to announce a new, two-year partnership between FIPPP and Berkeley Rep. FIPPP will be Berkeley Rep’s first ever company-in-residence, as part of Berkeley Rep’s In Dialogue initiative to place their theatre-making capacity in service of local communities.

Since 2019, FIPPP has provided formerly incarcerated individuals the opportunity to develop and perform stories about their life experiences through an ongoing development process led by a team of professional theater directors (**Kenward, Rebecca Fisher, Wayne Harris, and Mark McGoldrick**).

“Hearing stories from those who have been incarcerated fosters understanding about the circumstances and choices that led them to incarceration, what they endured and learned inside, and the hard-won success of their lives after incarceration. Their stories give hope for the human condition and our ability to change and grow, as well as giving all of us the opportunity to reconsider the conditions that prisoners often endure,” said **Kenward**.

To date, FIPPP has produced two seasons of new work, culminating in multi-week festivals at PianoFight Oakland (PFO) in 2021 and 2023. With the sudden closure of PFO earlier this year, FIPPP was looking for a home. As a company-in-residence at Berkeley Rep, all of FIPPP’s rehearsals and performances will be held at Berkeley Rep, culminating with FIPPP’s 3rd festival of new performances in 2025.

This residency follows a collaboration earlier this year between FIPPP, BRSOT, the SF Jail Department of Public Health, and SF Sherriff’s Department to provide a Transformational Arts Program in SF County Jails. Over the course of two 6-week pilot programs, one each in the women’s and men’s facilities, the team of FIPPP and BRSOT teaching artists worked with people currently experiencing incarceration. The curriculum included storytelling, creative writing, movement, acting, and other artistic methods as well as skill-based training in public speaking and presentation.

“This is a great reminder, on the days when we need one, of the power of storytelling, the necessity of creating structures for people to give voice to their own narratives, and of being in creative community,” said **Pfaelzer**.

“Berkeley Rep is honored to partner with FIPPP in support of their efforts to share the stories of formerly incarcerated individuals, and community members impacted by the carceral system,” adds **Jackson**.

“Through Berkeley Rep's School of Theatre and In Dialogue programming, we are committed to uplifting the stories and experiences of the members of our community. The success of our pilot storytelling arts program with the SF Jails would not have been possible without the presence of FIPPP community members. The presentation at the downtown SF Jail by female identifying participants was received with laughter, tears, communal singing, and roaring applause. We are so excited and honored to continue working with FIPPP to strengthen this program and expand to more facilities in the Bay Area and throughout California.”

The hope is to expand this program to other jails in the Bay Area, with many more FIPPP performers trained to be on the teaching teams.

“It is such an amazing opportunity for FIPPP performers to go back inside the carceral system to bring both the gift of storytelling and their own success stories,” said **Kenward**.

Earlier this month, FIPPP officially launched their third season and two-year residency at Berkeley Rep with a series of masterclasses in storytelling and stage skills. These classes are held on Sunday afternoons throughout the fall, led by the FIPPP team of directors as well as guest lecturers **Dan Hoyle** (*character*) and **Candace Johnson** (*voice*).

Over the course of the partnership, in addition to ongoing training, story development, and rehearsal, there will be workshop performances in spring 2024 and a multi-week festival of new work in 2025.

Kenward notes, “FIPPP is so grateful for the opportunity to be a company-in-residence at Berkeley Rep. It’s no secret that things are tough in the world of theater right now, and FIPPP has already experienced this firsthand with the shuttering of PianoFight Oakland. Partnering with Berkeley Rep allows us not only to have a home for our rehearsals and performances, but also to expand on collaborative possibilities with Berkeley Rep like the SF Jails project, and to make even more visible the stories of those most impacted by the carceral system.”

Parrish says, “It is our pleasure and privilege to partner with FIPPP, and we look forward to having the organization in residence. We also look forward to our growing partnership and all the positive outcomes that will result for the people we collectively serve.”

FIPPP believes in the power of both storytelling and conversations. In 2021, FIPPP incorporated their take on the popular Ask Me Anything panel, holding post-show panels with engaging conversations between audiences, performers, and guest panelists on everything from violence from correction officers to the insidiousness of the prison-to-school pipeline to suggestions for heading off juvenile incarceration in vulnerable communities. These panels remove barriers, foster understanding, and develop community.

FIPPP believes that sharing personal experiences from marginalized communities can be transformative. FIPPP tells the often overlooked, powerful, individual stories of the formerly incarcerated around the experience of prison. FIPPP plans to expand their programming beyond the San Francisco Bay Area into libraries, schools, and prisons in northern California. By helping formerly incarcerated people develop and share their experiences and wisdom learned, FIPPP's goal is to change the world for the better one story at a time.

Or, as FIPPP performer **Freddy Lee Johnson** notes, "Hearing the voices of formerly incarcerated individuals is a must. The overall impact will continue to chip away at the inhumane injustices of the incarcerated and broader community. It is time and society as a whole benefits."

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ABOUT BERKELEY REP

Berkeley Repertory Theatre has grown from a storefront stage to an international leader in innovative theatre. Known for its ambition, relevance, and excellence, as well as its adventurous audience, the nonprofit has provided a welcoming home for emerging and established artists since 1968. Over 5.5 million people have enjoyed nearly 500 shows at Berkeley Rep, which have gone on to win six Tony Awards, seven Obie Awards, nine Drama Desk Awards, one Grammy Award, one Pulitzer Prize, and many other honors. Berkeley Rep received the Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre in 1997. To formalize, enhance, and expand the processes by which Berkeley Rep makes theatre, The Ground Floor: Berkeley Rep's Center for the Creation and Development of New Work was launched in 2012. The Berkeley Rep School of Theatre engages and educates some 20,000 people a year and helps build the audiences of tomorrow with its nationally recognized teen programs. Berkeley Rep's bustling facilities — which also include the 400-seat Peet's Theatre, the 600-seat Roda Theatre, and a spacious campus in West Berkeley — are helping revitalize a renowned city. Learn more at berkeleyrep.org.

ABOUT FIPPP

FIPPP's team of seasoned professional theater directors helps formerly incarcerated performers uncover, develop, craft, and ultimately share their stories on stage. With the pressing issues of the school-to-prison pipeline, solitary confinement, reentry, and justice reform on both the local and national agendas, these stories of incarceration and reinvention give an invaluable insight into the conditions in prison, the post-prison experience, and life behind bars for the people who serve time and their families that serve along with them. FIPPP also believes creating good theater is a collaborative process and with their new two-year partnership with Berkeley Rep, the team at FIPPP can bring their performers' stories to life for new audiences.

FIPPP's work is important. According to The Sentencing Project, there are over two million people currently incarcerated in the United States. Often the resources to help them successfully integrate back into their communities are not available after they have served their time. And at any given time, there are almost one million people out on parole. FIPPP believes communication and sharing these diverse stories are key to both helping remove the stigma of incarceration but also foster an understanding on both the societal and human levels. FIPPP provides a space for these voices that need to be heard and works to develop and present the stories of those impacted by incarceration and the justice system to provide a greater understanding for us all. Learn more at FIPPP.org.