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## **TheatreUNCA Stages Premiere Production of "Thousand Kites" November 14-18**

In prison slang, to "shoot a kite" means to send a message. And the new stage production "Thousand Kites" does just that.



TheatreUNCA will be the first in the nation to stage a full production of "Thousand Kites," an innovative recent work by Appalshop and Roadside Theatre, which explores the issues surrounding America's prison systems. "Thousand Kites" will debut November 14-18 in UNC Asheville's Carol Belk Theatre. Curtain is 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday with a 2 p.m. Sunday matinee. All shows are open to the public.

Appalshop is a renowned non-profit multi-disciplinary arts and education center based in Whitesburg, Ky., which produces original films, video, theater, music and spoken-word recordings, radio, photography, multimedia and books. Appalshop's education and training programs support Appalachian communities' efforts to solve their own problems in a just and equitable way.

In three acts, "Thousand Kites" takes the audience on an intimate examination of the impact of high-security prisons on rural Appalachian communities. In 1999, Appalshop launched "Holler to the Hood," the region's only hip-hop radio program. Soon the DJs of this popular program began receiving thousands of "kites" — letters from inmates in the nearby Wallens Ridge State Prison. This new prison was built in the rural Appalachian community of Big Stone Gap, Va., to shore up the shrinking coal economy. The prisoners who were transferred to the new site were mostly minority inner-city men; the prison staff was made up of rural, white former coal miners. The two cultures clashed. And the letters described human rights violations and the serious racial tensions between the two groups.

"Thousand Kites" begins with a short play by Donna Porterfield. The script pieces together the words and writings of real people sharing their experiences and feelings gathered through interviews and the "Holler to the Hood" radio show's Web site that allowed inmates, guards and families to contribute their personal stories. Told through narrative, the play portrays and humanizes all sides of the story.

The second act features a screening of the critically acclaimed one-hour documentary "Up the Ridge." Prompted by the letters sent to "Holler to the Hood," the DJs, Amelia Kirby and Nick Szuberla, set out to make a film that explored the impact of super-max prisons built in rural Appalachian communities. The two began filming in 1999 and followed the story of the Wallens Ridge State Prison for the next six years.

"Thousand Kites" wraps up with an audience forum about these challenging issues. Reuters correspondent Alan Elsner will join the audience on opening night to help launch the discussion. Elsner is the author of the critically acclaimed book "Gates of Injustice: The Crisis in America's Prison," which uses U.S. Bureau of Justice statistics to paint a grim picture of life inside a super-max prison. In addition, playwright Porterfield will be on hand to answer questions about the show. The Appalshop crew will film the discussion for use in future projects.

"Thousand Kites" is directed by Scott Walters, UNC Asheville associate professor of drama. The all-student cast features David Bottoms, Russell Chamberlain, John Coggin, Chip Davis, Sarah Erickson, Skyler Goff, Casey Morris, Bridget Patterson, Rachael Williams, Veronica Williams and Sam Woods. The set is designed by senior Katie Fuller; costume designer is senior Forrest Mason. UNC Asheville Drama Department Chair Rob Bowen is the lighting designer.

Audience members can gain an inside look at the show before taking their seats in Carol Belk Theatre. The TheatreUNCA cast and crew is keeping a blog to detail the development of the show as well as their own reactions to the material. The web log is online at <http://thousandkites.pbwiki.com/>. The site also contains resources, the film trailer and the play script.

Tickets for all performances are \$10 general admission, \$8 for senior citizens and \$5 for students. Because of the intimate size of UNC Asheville's Carol Belk Theatre and the often heavy demand for tickets, advance purchase is strongly advised. Tickets may be ordered by phone by calling 828/232-2291 between 10 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays. Tickets are also available at the box office two hours before curtain and online at [www.unca.edu/drama](http://www.unca.edu/drama).

For more information, call UNC Asheville's Drama Department at 828/251-6610.

(Image provided by UNCA.)