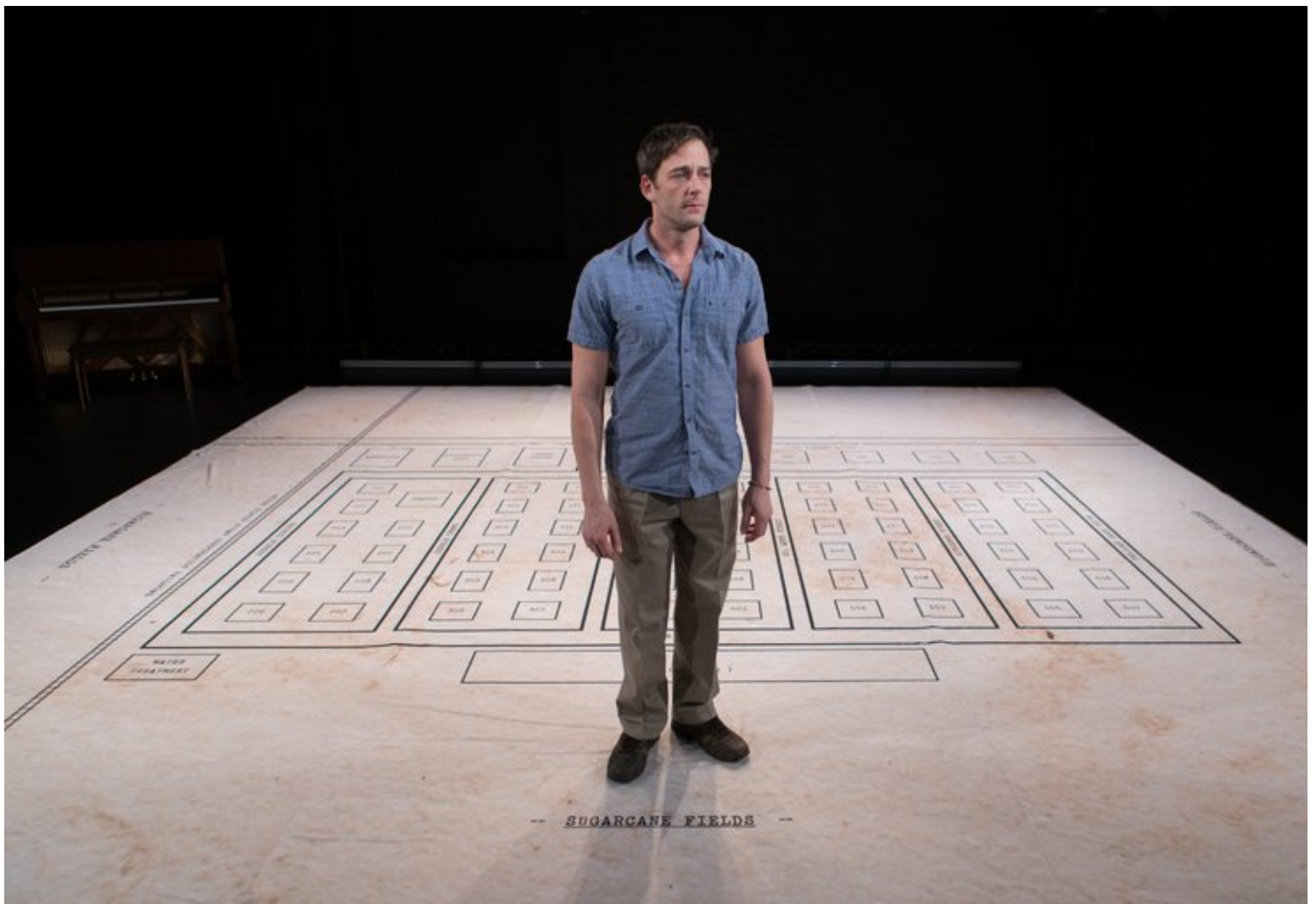


The New York Times

[Theater](#)

Review: An ‘Our Town’ With Sex Offenders, in ‘America Is Hard to See’



Ken Barnett as a disgraced choirmaster in “America Is Hard to See,” a documentary theater piece based on interviews. Credit Emon Hassan for The New York Times

A group of ex-cons in a therapy session introduce themselves, outlining the crimes that landed them in prison.

A bearded guy, Thomas, says he fondled his step-granddaughter for a year and a half before he was stopped. Chris, a fresh-faced 22-year-old, says his girlfriend turned out to be 14. And Chad, a handsome man with haunted eyes, a soft drawl and an aw-shucks charm, says he used to be a teacher. He would rather not go into details, but he molested one of his students.

On Thursday night, as the actors played this scene in “America Is Hard to See,” a smart and troubling new piece of documentary theater, the room was so pin-drop quiet that you could hear the electric hum of the lights. By then, we had already warmed to some of these characters, already seen them as regular people.

The makers of this show — a play with music presented by [Life Jacket Theater Company](#) on the intimate main stage at [Here](#) — want us to hold on to that feeling and struggle with it, to try to figure out how to reconcile it with our revulsion. For now, these men are cordoned off from regular society, living in a Florida community for registered sex offenders called [Miracle Village](#). But they won’t stay there forever.



Joyce Cohen (foreground) as a skeptical therapist with John Carlin, left, and Gareth Tidball. The production features songs by Priscilla Holbrook. Credit Emon Hassan for The New York Times

We watch Chad (Ken Barnett), Chris (David Spadora) and Thomas (John Carlin) make progress toward becoming healthier human beings, and we see that the versions of their crimes that they describe to the play's unseen researchers are not necessarily to be trusted.

"These people have a real propensity for lying," a therapist (Joyce Cohen) warns. "This play of yours, it's filled with, what do you call it, unreliable narrators?"

Paying homage to Thornton Wilder's ["Our Town,"](#) Mr. Russ presents Miracle Village as an ordinary American town, except in the ways it isn't. His characters, like Wilder's, include a disgraced choirmaster — Chad, the former teacher played by Mr. Barnett with such winsome humor and tenderness that you will worry, at play's end, about how well equipped he is to handle his future.

The character most determined to give the guys a chance is Pastor Patti (Amy Gaither Hayes), who invites them to form a band at her church. It's an attempt, she says, "to get more young people in" — a goal whose stomach-lurching naïveté (or is it recklessness?) the play doesn't sufficiently address. But she is a true believer; she even introduces her college-student daughter (Gareth Tidball) to Chris, and they fall in love.

"America Is Hard to See" (the title comes from a Robert Frost poem that was also borrowed for [a retrospective](#) at the Whitney Museum) arrives at an awkward time to ask for sympathy for these men: a moment when the culture is talking avidly about sexual predation and the damage it leaves behind. But this play, an investigation of transgression, redemption and the limits of compassion, takes a hard, uncomfortable look at forgiveness and what it means to put it into action.