TRUTHS IN SEARCH OF TRUCE

'59 Places,' a theatrical work written and performed behind bars, builds bold drama from actors' own stories

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BEFORE he could play himself on stage, Joshua A. Washburn had to find himself. Where to look?

He could have considered the place around him at the Hampshire County House of Correction, where he's held for a drug conviction. But it was what came before, out in the world, he reasoned, that was his story — and his alone.

THEATER REVIEW

Washburn paged through the fat file of papers he'd once requested from the state Department of Social Services. He was 10 years old when he came under that department's care and protection. It was the start of eight years in which he lived in 59 different homes in 24 communities, though some were homes for just a single, unsettled night.

As he makes clear in "59 Places," the latest work of the theater project local directors Amie Dowling and Julie Lichtenberg oversee at the jail, Washburn left most of those homes less trusting.

Last March, by joining the directors' second project at the jail, Washburn, now 22, got a new reason to consider the places he'd been. Rather than see the 800-page DSS file as a repository of bad memories, he weighed it as a resource.

It contained a March 1989 investigator's report of abuse he allegedly suffered. "The child has fresh black eyes, starting to turn blue," one sentence read. Details of trauma flowed. "Child was then dragged across kitchen floor by the hair," it read.

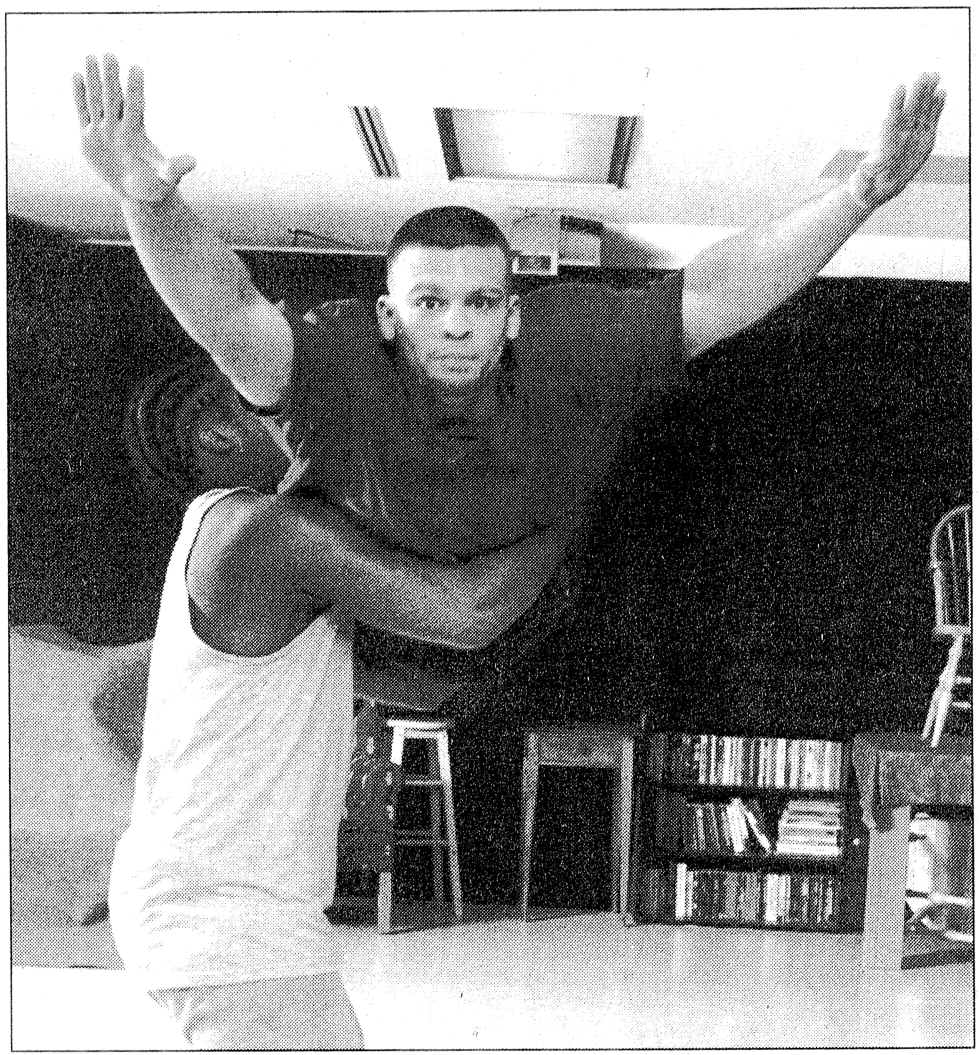
The file let him recall the long list of addresses to which he was sent for foster care. "There's no way I would ever remember all those places," Washburn said the other day, after performing with the seven other members of the company.

Yesterday, the team did "59 Places" one final time at the Northampton jail. Over the week before, in four performances, more than 100 people — fellow inmates, family members, court officials — had taken seats in the improvised theater space in the jail's visiting room.

For the cast, all of whom contributed life experiences to the drama, the final show yesterday capped a six-month project. Dowling and Lichtenberg say their work is designed to get men in jail to reflect on their status, invite them to give voice to their stories and, together, build the trust and confidence it takes to create a theater work that has artistic merit.

The new work, like the performance in

■ See 59 PLACES/Page D3



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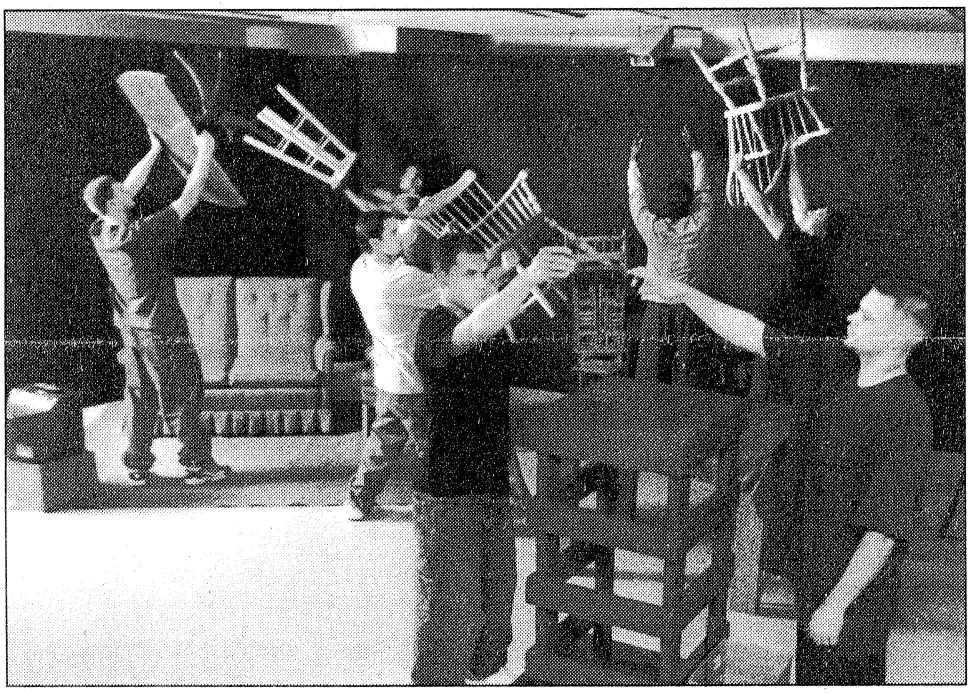
Joshua Washburn flies forward in the theater piece "59 Places," supported by Chris McLeod. The two are part of an eight-member company, all of them inmates at the Hampshire County House of Correction, who created the hour-long work in a six-month project with directors Amie Dowling and Julie Lichtenberg. The piece takes its name from the number of different homes that Washburn lived in, in 24 different cities or towns, over the course of eight years in foster care. In creating the piece, the company drew on experiences of its members.



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Members of the company, in a scene from "59 Places," move furniture to illustrate the endless shifts that an actor in the company, Joshua Washburn, faced while growing up in the care of the Department of Social Services. They performed the work for the last time Wednesday.

‘59 Places’ describes world that a dislocated teen, now an inmate, found waiting

■ **Continued from Page D1**

January that ended an earlier effort, was compelling theater. It was good therapy for the men to create it, and they say as much. But foremost, it hit its goal of being good theater by trusting art to invent a fuller truth than facts alone provide.

And by adeptly using choreography, performed confidently by men with no dance training, it tapped movement’s power to make a simple story — that of men longing for the stability of home — a beautiful one as well.

Washburn not only found himself, he found ways, over months of workshops and rehearsals, to trust his collaborators and to portray what happened to him without asking for pity. “It was like a puzzle,” Washburn said of the sessions that went into the production. “We had to find the pieces.”

Search for an ending

Only days before the final dress rehearsal Aug. 7, the company found its ending.

The play weaves two story lines. One is Washburn’s, presented episodically and punctuated with this company’s version of call and response. One character counts, from the number 1 heading on up to 59, the end of all those childhood places. Washburn barks out an answer, as if flipping through flashcards that help him try to recall the homes, though many times he’d rather not.

Helped build a house, he says numbly. Another number. *Stepmother beat me*. And another. *Good food. Ran away after one night*.

In variations, in other scenes, another character calls out the places, town by town. The company seems to have realized that the meaning of being compelled to move 59 times in eight years — every six weeks, on average — takes time to sink in.

Washburn walks the stage that’s been set mainly for the other half of the story — a simple living room with sofa, chair, dining table and bookcases. He haunts it, as he wanders the space picking up the tiny red chairs that were positioned atop pieces of furniture there, surreally, when the audience entered. He sets them into a cardboard carton.

In a later scene, he unpacks the doll-sized furniture, each one a symbol of a home that didn’t stick. To the mounting drama of cello music, that stack grows and then topples.

The directors, and the company, keep Washburn’s story spare. The other story line balances it, by presenting a more conventional domestic scene inside the home of three brothers, with dialogue and stage blocking.

Characters from that other story join Washburn in many sequences, including one in which all of the men illustrate the dislocations of moving by picking up and carrying pieces of furniture.

In several scenes, Washburn, though solidly built, projects himself through the air to land in the arms of a comrade. He even lays his head against the chest of the actor holding him, a gesture so intimate it startles. He admits first being leery of the message it sent, then found it right. “I felt secure there. It felt so good I thought, ‘This is really going to work.’”

“We are not easy to work with. Amie and Julie are the best. They put up with so much,” he said of the directors.

In scenes that alternate with Washburn’s saga, the three brothers capture the tensions of trying to get ahead with life while being true to oneself.

Older brother Marvin, played by Orlando Wright, is pushing himself through endless interviews, determined to land a technology job. Middle brother J.R., played by Chris McLeod, is working on his GED, but is a peacemaker in the home.

J.R. is doing battle with fractions, in a book at the dining table. He asks Marvin, “Can I get some help with this Mr. Smartypants, Mr. College Degree?”

The Performance Project, led inside the Hampshire County House of Correction by directors Amie Dowling and Julie Lichtenberg, reaches its goal of being good theater by trusting art to invent a fuller truth than facts alone provide.

They’re both glad that young Danny, played by Carlos Rivera, is about to be released from “boot camp,” a quasi-military program that spared him time in jail.

To shape the plot, members of the company, all of whom are enrolled in the jail’s Life Skills Program, swapped stories about growing up. They looked for themes and caught early versions on videotape. They improvised more, edging their interactions closer to being a script.

In one moment, McLeod approaches a character named Leo who is his cousin, and tries to draw him into conversation. Leo, played by Danny Ventura, has just come in from work and sits slackly watching TV.

McLeod says the scene grew out of his memories of trying, usually without success, to get his own father to talk. His father is not in good health today, McLeod said.

“I’m trying to use any little thing to get him to jump in the conversation, but he never jumps in,” McLeod said of the scene. “Hopefully, when I get out of jail, he’ll still be alive.”

“It’s fiction and non-fiction. A lot of the scenes came from our lives,” McLeod said. “We’re people in here. We’ve just made mistakes.”

Brother Danny arrives from boot camp burnished by its discipline. He tells his brothers: “You guys didn’t think I’d make it, right? But I made it.”

A bunkie from the camp, Sam, played by Matt Santoni, arrives as well.

Over several scenes, the household weathers conflict, as Marvin tries to stay on track and Danny’s resolve to carry himself with a military bearing appears to falter.

He berates his friend Sam over little things, a signs he’s reaching for the camp’s discipline as if grasping for a lifeline. He blows up over crooked silverware on the dining table. “We’ve only been back two days and you’re getting sloppy,” he shouts.

The tension peaks in a confrontation between Marvin and the others, over that older brother’s career goals. One of the men harshly critiques everything — his answers, the way he stands. “Damn, stop moving your hands around so much,” one says.

It’s a reference to the way this black man gestures as he speaks. The speaker implies Marvin better start acting white, but before long he’s asked whether he thinks he’s white — a charge that ignites Marvin.

At the performance I saw, McLeod’s mother, sitting in the front row, laughed with surprise to hear racial issues laid so bare.

Orlando Wright, the inmate who plays Marvin, says that over the many weeks of the project, he came to understand what it means to perform this way.

“They had to tell me a lot. You have to want it. It’s hard,” Wright said after that performance. One day, he found members of the company finally putting it all together. “I thought, ‘God, we’re finally acting.’”

“I hope some doors are going to open up for me — and maybe because of this project,” he said.

Real moments

The vignettes build and coalesce, if for no reason other than that they are real moments that happen under a shared roof. People argue and laugh. Actors Fred Maguire, as Slim, and Domingo Ramirez, as Sunny, lend light humor in scenes playing cards and grousing about money.

Santoni, who plays Danny’s boot camp buddy, lends an outsider’s view of this family. He weathers a challenge from the brothers about who he is and why he’s there. His character suggests a way to be both strong and sensitive. “I want to get my writing published,” he tells Marvin and J.R. “Get people to know what I’ve been through.”

In a particularly effective moment, McLeod, the middle brother, lets us listen in on half of a conversation with his girl. It runs for more than a minute without breaking its magic.

“Nah, you tell me first,” he says.

Pause.

“Just tell me and I’ll tell you.”

He asks who’s in the room with her.

“Nope. You tell me first,” he says.

It is as unhurried as love should be.

“So tell me.”

The spell breaks when someone comes into the room with him. But he gets the three words he’s after.

Having created a pleasant but ordinary set for the brothers’ story, the company brusquely pushes it aside, as the piece builds, and shifts to movement. A house full of men is a physical place anyway. The sequences set that energy free. We see anger and restraint, terror and trust.

“It took a long time finally for us to get everything going in that movement scene,” said Santoni. “It was a real roller-coaster ride with a lot of us.”

The ending arrives after Washburn has exhausted himself looking for what he calls the 60th place — the place he wants to be. There are three rumpled white sheets on the stage, props from an earlier movement sequence. As Washburn walks to the center of the stage, the company produces a fourth white sheet, this one attached to a piece of wood, and sets it on the floor.

When it is lifted again, the actors create a neat white roof with it. The three sheets form walls. Washburn walks into this symbol of a peaceful dwelling that’s risen magically. The sense of relief is stunning.

“I’m finally home,” Washburn said of the sequence. “My dream come true.”