

No Holds Barred

Hampshire County inmates create a compelling performance piece

By Mary Bagg

About a half-hour before the Jan. 3 presentation of *Works in Progress* — a movement theater piece that grew from the personal experiences, ideas and philosophies of the eight men who collaboratively wrote and performed in it — the audience gathers in the lobby, waiting to be seated.

But first the ticket-holders fill out some paperwork. They sign forms attesting to their true names, addresses and reasons for attending, and they present picture IDs.

Only then is passage into the performance space granted — through a metal detector and, at the end of a corridor, through two mechanized sliding doors that are operated by a security guard in a main control booth.

This is no ordinary venue but the Hampshire County Jail and House of Correction. And the authors/performers — Joe Holley, Matt Santoni, Dylan Swearingen, Chet Soutier, Michael A. Brown, Moeun Meach, Mike Bogdanovich and Wilfredo Figueroa — are prisoners ready to reveal the stuff they're made of.

In "Scene 1: Recipe," a navy blue-jumpsuited Joe Holley stands upstage in the makeshift visiting room theater (transformed by technical crew Bobby Redmond and Jeff Cousineau) while his identically dressed collaborators line up against the wall. Each man dons a chef's cap, and a deadpan Holley begins to read from a card:

"What Makes Me. Mix together two cups of love, one quart hard worker and one tablespoon of dishonesty. Add one teaspoon of feelings, three tablespoons of tough guy and a pinch of smart ass."

Here the audience laughs, but Holley doesn't miss a beat. "Slowly stir in my tears. Set aside. Dice all the wrong I have done. Serve it with a fistful of suck-it-up ... Let chill."

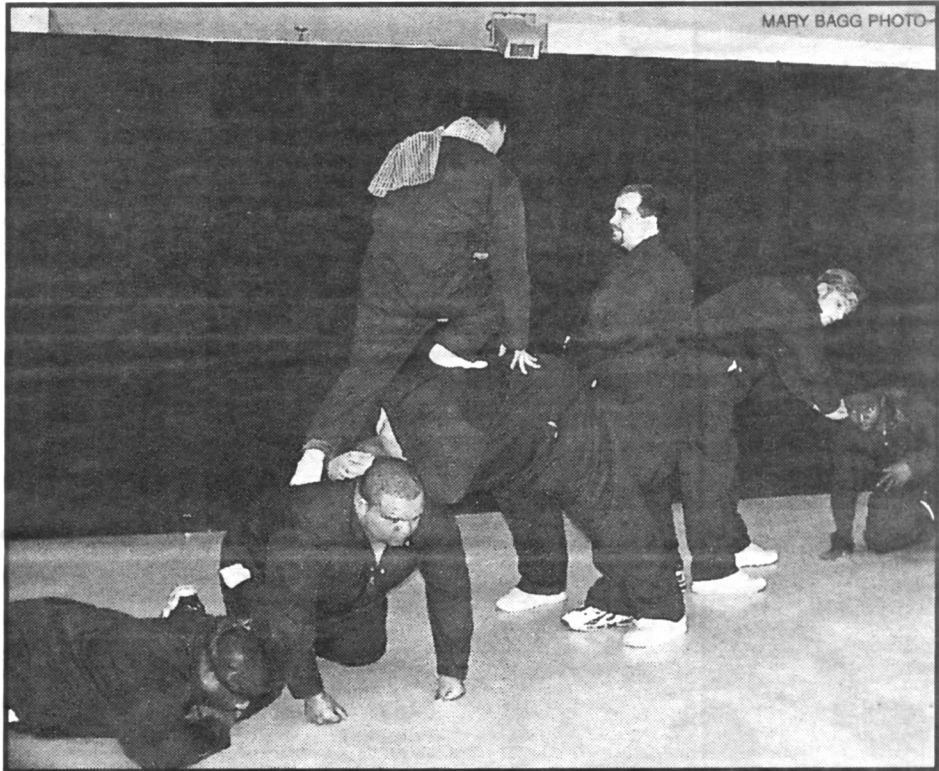
During 14 weeks of workshops that began at the jail last September, Holley and his cohorts cooked up piquant "recipes" for themselves — eight unique lists of ingredients rendered and recited with an endearing proportion of attitude — and carefully folded them into the *Works in Progress* mix.

Project directors Julie Lichtenberg, co-founder of BOOM!theater, a multimedia performance workshop held in a men's medium-security prison in Connecticut, and Amie Dowling, artistic director of the Valley-based multigenerational dance company the Dance Generators, coached the participants for more than a month on voice, movement, storytelling and improvisation — skills that would enable them to function as an artistic ensemble.

Then Lichtenberg and Dowling encouraged the men to embark on a far more challenging phase of the project — to reflect upon their lives, to share their thoughts and feelings with the group, to put their personal narratives into a dramatic production

of artistic merit.

And that they did, struggling to shape raw emotion, haunting memories, exposed weaknesses and dared-for hopes into a viable script — 10 vignettes animated with voiced narrative, evocative body moves, live music and ingeniously devised sound effects (performed by Amherst College Theater/Dance Department sound designer Steven Katz on cello, bi-



Inmates at the Hampshire County Jail build a bridge with their bodies in a performance piece based on Moeun Meach's childhood experience with Cambodia's Khmer Rouge.

cycle horn and assorted toy instruments, bells and whistles).

Works in Progress debuted on Dec. 15 to an audience of 70 — family members of the cast, jail staff and guests from the Valley's arts community — and played the next day to a packed house of other prisoners. It was a hit, back by popular demand for a Jan. 3 encore.

In the audience this time? More invited friends and family. Northampton Mayor Mary Clare Higgins. And a bevy of lawyers and judges — some of the very people who prosecuted these men and sentenced them to jail.

After seeing the Jan. 3 production of *Works in Progress* and talking with the authors/performers later, it became clear that the formation of artistic ensembles should find a place on our country's prison reform agenda. It's already on Hampshire County's.

Both Sheriff Robert Garvey and Assistant Deputy Superintendent Candace Kochin — a "visionary," said Dowling — who helped the directors get the project under way, will try to find the financial support needed to resume the drama workshops.

While it was not the program's primary goal to provide therapy, there's no denying the experience allowed these inmates to explore the healing power of art, to do what artists have always done: confront their pasts, their inner demons and their mistakes and then present the results to an audience for recognition, appreciation and judgment.

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The project — which involved introspection and self-evaluation, a high level of commitment and a developing sense of trust (in both their fellow collaborators and in directors Dowling and Lichtenberg) — allowed the participants to feel something that most people never feel while incarcerated: a sense of accomplishment.

Chet Soutier (“a half cup of Polish mother and a half cup French Canadian father” to which “one cup independence and a table-spoon of hard worker” have been added, along with a dash of “addiction”) stressed that this collaboration “changed his life” almost as much as the birth of his son did one year ago. Both events, he said, forced him to look at himself from a different perspective, to consider alternative outlets for his addictive behavior when his sentence is up in six months.

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Joe Holley, who said all his life he'd been “taking, taking, taking,” lauded his involvement with *Works in Progress* for “the chance to give back.” Both he and Dylan Swearingen (“Pour one teaspoon of put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is into a quart of boiling work ethics ... microwave on high for 20 years”) were intensely gratified by the audience's appreciation of their work, especially when they were bestowed with physical forms of kudos: lots of hugs, a kiss on the hand.

Lack of human body contact in even its most casual form can intensify the emotional isolation of incarcerated men, but the physicality of the project itself was a stumbling block that prevented some prisoners from getting involved. Holley summed up a kind of peer pressure initially leveled at the participants by a few wary inmates who didn't cotton to the thought of grown men dancing around like a bunch of ballerinas.

But, of course, the moves these men make demand no prior knowledge of — nor do they pretend to emulate — a *jeté* or a *pas de jambes*. And when the rest of the prisoners saw what these men had actually done with their bodies, they paid their due respect.

Works in Progress' early moves are carefully worked out, deliberate, as if the men aren't ready yet to trust

themselves as movement artists. But as the scenes unfold, they relax in their roles, become more revelatory in the escalating physical content of the piece as a whole — a visual, tactile metaphor, perhaps, for the growing level of intimacy among the collaborators.

For instance, in “Scene 2: Moeun's Story,” a haunting narrative based, in part, on Meach's being forced to carry ammunition through the jungle for Cambodia's Khmer Rouge when he was a boy, the men's bodies form first a bridge for him to cross and then the jet that carries him to the United States.

In the next piece, “The Numbness of It,” a chilling sequence that mines Willy Figueroa's childhood memory of witnessing a murder, some men swing their arms as if by rote and, stiff-legged, drag the dead weight of their partners, who clutch at their ankles, across the stage.

Movement, if not mood, relaxes in “Walk Like Me,” an improvised scene with Holley as an authoritarian father who tries to thwart the spirit of his incorrigibly non-conforming son, played by Mike Brown. But it really loosens up in “The Box.”

Everyone participates in this playground-like prance, passing a cardboard carton like a basketball or a hot potato, kicking it angrily when it's down on the ground, like the victim of schoolboy brutality. And then the raucous action stops. Matt Santoni, left alone on stage with the box, explores the options of an ostracized man both frustrated and enraged.

In the Recipe scene that follows, the performers milk the subtle and not-so-subtle messages of body language, camping it up with well-placed hand gestures and theatrical embellishments of their culinary props. Mike Bogdanovich (“a super-sized cake” spread with “three tablespoons of don't-take-crap-from-anybody on top”) rolls his eyes in hilarious exaggeration, noting that he can't have his and eat it, too, while Mike Brown (“Chop up 1/4 cup of look-the-best and 1/4 cup of fit-in. Add three slices of get-the-girls and sprinkle in as much fuck-that and don't-be-a-bitch as necessary”) whips off his hat with a pinch of up-yours audacity.

When the cast comes back on stage for “Closing,” there's lots of high-fiving and hand-clasping, exuberant body-hoisting, jumping and square dance-like do-si-doing. No one speaks, but the piece nevertheless sings with some of the feeling that these dramatic efforts roused in the men, especially optimism and pride.

The men grew by leaps and bounds to turn themselves into performance artists, overcoming their own reluctance and making their stories into art — art that moved their audience to laughter, tears and a standing ovation. ■