Slamming Forward, Unfettered:
Performance at the Jail

by Susan Waltner

What could be more desirable than to move an audience to tears, receiving expressions of deep gratefulness, and stimulating a strong desire to be congratulated by everyone present? As artists, these are real, sometimes reachable and sometimes idealistic goals. They were all evident in a performance produced in Northampton this summer by co-directors Amie Dowling, SC MFA, and Julie Lichtenberg, MFA University of Illinois. What made the performance particularly remarkable was that the performance was in the Hampshire County Jail, and the performers were inmates.

All of us have moments of wondering what value dance, which we love so much, is to the world. There are a variety of answers, but this kind of work leaves one with no doubt as to the power of movement and theater.

The theater is in the jail, the stage is one end of the visitor’s room, the audience has been invited and instructed to arrive early, wearing no jewelry, no open-toed shoes, and no watches. ID’s are checked at the door. Though not identifiable, one feels sure that security guards are standing by. A minute into the performance, all that is forgotten, and the men have begun to transport the audience to another world—their world. This piece, “not so very far from here” is set in a bus station waiting room. Here, in phone conversations and in verbal and physical interactions, they tell/show their stories of struggle, fear, addiction and faith. By the end of the hour-long performance, the audience experiences the cast and identifies with them as fellow human beings, with histories, hopes and dreams. The audience has cried, laughed, and understood. After the performance there is an outpouring of warmth and appreciation from the audience.

In this work, the Performance Project, Amie and Julie draw on their artistic skills and experience and their commitment to working with non-traditional movers. They’ve made art. They have collaborated with multigenerational groups, “at risk” youths, students, and men and women who are incarcerated. “not so very far from here” is the third play they have produced at the jail. The focus of the Performance Project is the formation of a strong artistic ensemble that has come together to create a theater and movement work of artistic merit. The members give voice to their stories and ideas, creating a work of which the participants claim full authorship. In this process, the group may negotiate some difficult terrain, but they come to depend on each other for the project’s success.

Amie and Julie comment:

“As artists we desire to situate our work within an artistic context, as opposed to a social work context. We are drawn to this work because it merges our interests in social justice with art, but it is the striving for artistic growth that keeps us engaged. There is a delicate balance between the voices of the men participating in the project, and our voices as artists within that process.”

An article by a reporter in the local paper, The Daily Hampshire Gazette, had these comments in response to one of the previous performances:

The company spared sentiment and sought no sympathy. Men worked for weeks on such theatrical skills as voice and movement. They didn’t try to become actors, but they moved far enough out of their own experiences so that when they came back, to star in moments of their own lives, the stories slammed forward, unfettered. (Parnassus. Gazette. 1-05-01)

Amie graduated from the Smith MFA program in 1997. She came to the program with impressive previous work in the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange and since graduating she has been working with her company, the Dance Generators, a multigenerational dance company. She has also continued to teach a course in the FCDD—Community Crossover—which introduces students as to how the arts can be used as tools for social change. In the Spring of 2003 it will be taught at Amherst College. “not so very far from here” is a beautiful example of her goal for the course. After the performance the cast members spoke to the audience about how creating the work had contributed to their sense of hope about their future. Everyone left the performance with boundaries dissolved, and a deep sense of the common humanity of us all.

NOTE: The Performance Project was founded by Amie Dowling and Julie Lichtenberg in 2000. Since its inception they have collaborated on 3 pieces while in residence at the Hampshire County Jail and House of Corrections. This fall they founded a performing ensemble on the outside, with men who have been released and will be teaching a workshop for women at the Hampden County Jail.
Ray Banks ’03, a dancer with the Dance Company in Boston and a student at Bates College Dance, was part of the Faculty Dance Concert at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Ray Banks ’03 said he was part of a larger collaborative effort to incorporate and present new works to the public. He performed a solo piece called “A Procession of Dancers” that he created for the concert. Banks said he was excited to be part of the event and told attendees about his experience working with the Dance Company.

Mount Holyoke College

Mount Holyoke College held its annual Winter Dance Concert on January 30th. The concert featured a variety of dance styles, including African, contemporary, and modern. The performances were choreographed by students and faculty members. Attendees were encouraged to wear comfortable clothing and shoes.

Smith College

Smith College held its annual Winter Dance Concert on January 31st. The concert featured a variety of dance styles, including contemporary, jazz, and hip-hop. The performances were choreographed by students and faculty members. Attendees were encouraged to wear comfortable clothing and shoes.

Alumni News

Amherst College

Amherst College held its annual Winter Dance Concert on February 1st. The concert featured a variety of dance styles, including contemporary, jazz, and hip-hop. The performances were choreographed by students and faculty members. Attendees were encouraged to wear comfortable clothing and shoes.

Hampshire College

Hampshire College held its annual Winter Dance Concert on February 2nd. The concert featured a variety of dance styles, including contemporary, jazz, and hip-hop. The performances were choreographed by students and faculty members. Attendees were encouraged to wear comfortable clothing and shoes.

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Tere O’connor dance
Press release written by Ryan D’Ottavio for UMass Residential Arts Program

Tere O’Connor Dance performed as part of the “Off-Center” series on October 4. Mr. O’Connor has been commissioned to create a new dance at Mt. Holyoke College with Five College dance students. The work will premiere in the Mt. Holyoke Faculty Dance Concert on November 7-9.

Tere O’Connor Dance has become known for transforming the mundane into the poetic. Comprised of myriad and widely-varied dance styles including modern, classical ballet, ethnic forms, mime, social dance, and others, his choreography has recently been used in a bold new work. As The Village Voice asserts, O’Connor’s dance emerges in fragments—it’s all crazy subtext with rage, grief, and loneliness erupting from bouts of stand-up comedy, clichés intended by Greek choruses, scenes, songs, dances and quiet soliloquies.” Quite a stew. O’Connor, 43, stopped performing about five years ago to concentrate on choreography. But the new work has brought him back into the performing arena. “I’m trying to make a dance that comes from an imagined world where I never had any dance training or studied any dance thought.” This is a fresh approach that has yielded equally fresh material, energized with both a new-found vigor and steadfast elegance. For example, O’Connor has recently taken the interesting step of integrating text into his dance, illuminating a whole other dimension in which O’Connor’s usual political discourse can run rampant. Nevertheless, as The New York Times has stated, Tere “now subjects his text to the same kind of rhythmic scrutiny he has always applied... ...but the last words must belong to IGY Dance: “For the restless and unsatisfied, prepare ye: nothing is sacred.”

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MERTILL ASHLEY
by Meghan Fair

On October 25th, Merrill Ashley, former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, will be speaking at Mount Holyoke College as part of the FCD Residency program. Following the lecture, she will be teaching a group of intermediate and advanced ballet dancers a selection from the ballet Ballo della Regina which was originally choreographed for her by George Balanchine.

Merrill Ashley was one of the last Balanchine Ballerinas, dancers who were members of the New York City Ballet well before Balanchine’s death in 1983. During her time in the company, Ms. Ashley performed principal roles in numerous works by Balanchine. She was known for her stunning allegros and athletic, yet graceful technique. In 1997, after dancing with the company for more than 30 years, she retired. Immediately following her retirement, she became a teaching associate at the New York City Ballet, where she teaches Company class and helps to coach dancers in their roles. Today, she continues to play an important part in the dance world, appearing as a guest teacher at many schools, and staging Balanchine ballets for companies.

Partial Listing of

**Five College Dance Department Calendar of Events 2002-2003**

*For full list of events: www.fivcolleges.edu/dance/calendar*

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**December**

5-7 University Dancers Concert
UMass - 8 pm - S45-2511

6-8 Ambrose College Dance/Theater Performance Project: original five college student choreography
Experimental Theater, AC - 8 pm - S42-2411

10 Smith College Grad Event
SC - 7:30 pm - S55-3222

**January**

2 Alahambra: Arts in India Study Tour

5 May O’Donnell Residency - MHC

**February**

12-15 Hampshire College Minter Concert
Main Studio - HC - 8 pm - S59-889

13-15 Smith College HMA Concert
Theatre 14, SC - 8 pm - S55-3222

21-22 Off-Center Series: Brazz Dance Concert: Augusta Soledade
Bowker, UMass - 8 pm - S45-3111

27-1 Five College Dance Department Faculty Dance Concert
Kendall Studio Theatre, MHC - 8 pm - S58-2848

**March**

1 Five College Dance Department Faculty Dance Concert

HMC (See above)

3 George Carpa Concert
FAC Concert Hall - 8 pm - S45-2511

26 Workshop and Lecture by Nai-Ni Chen and Prof. Zhenzhi Shen of the School of Science and Technology, Springfield, MA

27 Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company In Concert: Passage to the Styler River

27-29 Hampshire College Div 3 Concert
Main Studio - 8 pm - S59-889

27-29 Mount Holyoke College Student Concert
Kendall Studio Theatre, MHC - 8 pm - S58-2848

**April**

3-4 Off-Center Series: Alexandre Beller
Kendall Studio Theatre, MHC - 8 pm - S45-2511

3-5 Smith College Spring Concert
Theatre 14, SC - 8 pm - S58-2787

10-12 Hampshire College Div 3 Concert
Main Studio, MHC - 8 pm - S59-889

**May**

1 Rhythm in Shoes
FAC Concert Hall, UMass - 7:10 pm - S45-2511

1-3 Alive With Dance Concert
Bowker, UMass - 8 pm - S45-2511

2 Smith College Grad Event
Scott Dance Hall, SC - 7:30 pm - S55-3222

8 Off-Center Series: Mike Monkey
Bowker, UMass - 8 pm - S45-2511

9-10 Ambrose College Music 18/Final Project.
Kendall Theatre, AC - 8 pm - S45-2411

24 Mount Holyoke College Commencement Concert
Kendall Studio Theatre - 8 pm - S58-2848