TRUTHS IN SEARCH OF TRUCE

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

By LARRY PARNASS
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NORTHAMPTON

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 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 running

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that time being true to oneself.

On the other half of the story, middle-

school living room with sofa, chair,
dining table and book-
cases. He haunts it, as
wanders the space picking up the tiny red chairs that were
positioned atop pieces of furni-
ture there, surreally, when the audience entered. He sets
them into a cardboard carton.

In a later scene, a fat, dim-witted
doll-sized furniture, each one a symbol of a home that
didn’t stick. To the mounting
dramas of celio music, he
sees and then topples.

The directors, and the
company, keep Washburn’s
story. 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 men by
picking up and carrying pieces
of furniture.

In several scenes, Washburn,
though solidly built, projects
himself through the air to land
on the arms of a comrade. He
ever lays his head against the
chest of the actor holding him,
gesture so intimate it startles.
But he admits being there;
then the message is sent,
then found it right. “I feel secure there. It
fell so good I thought. This
is really going to work.”

“We are not easy to work with.
Amie and Julie are the best.
I’ve never heard much,” he
said of the directors.

In scenes that alternate with
Washburn’s saga, the middle
brothers capture the tensions of
trying to get ahead with life

it, right? But I made it.”

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

Over several scenes, the	household weathered conflict,
and the characters’ efforts to
stay about growing up. They
looked for themes and caught
early versions on videotape. They
took a break and then told him
he was carrying himself with a
military bearing again.

In one of those scenes, Washburn
and Danny, played by
Charley Rivers, are
released from the military
program that spared him in

Shapre the plot, members
of the company, all of whom are
enrolled in the jail’s Life Skills
program and supervision.

Ramires, as Sunny,
looks at scenes playing cards and
gaming about money.

Santoni, who plays Danny’s
boot camp buddy, lends an
American’s view of this family
and you’re getting sloppy,”

Shapre tension peaks in a con-
frontation between Marvin and
the others, over that older
brother’s career goals. One of
that is: “I will put up with so much
weaker, smaller and more
lowly, that often he feels he is
the same.” He answers: “With one
the way he stands. ‘Damn, stop

wearing out of his memories of trying,
usually without success, to get
his parents to accept him as he is.

of a conversation with his girl. It
runs for more than a minute.

“Nah, you tell me first,” he
says.

“You tell me first,” she

“Just tell me and I’ll tell you.”

He asks who’s in the room
with her. “Nope. You tell me first,” he

as un hurried as love

should.

“Our relationship is better.

I’ve been in and out of jail.

The performance project. led inside

the Hampshire County House of Correction

by directors Amie Dowling and Julie Lichtenberg,

reaches the goal of being good theater by trusting

art to invent a fuller truth

than facts alone provide.

Washburn walks the stage
that’s been set mainly for the
middle child, J.R., by his
teacher J.R., played by Chris Mcleod,

Workshop and stock grows and then topples.

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times in eight years — every

six. He is,6 years away, played

by Orlando Wright, is pushing
himself through endless inter-
views, determined to land a
working job in the middle of
the show. J.R., played by Chris McLeod,
is working on his GED, but is
a slow learner in the show.

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

“Why didn’t you know I’d make
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