

Breaking Down the Walls

The Performance Project confronts the scars and stigmas of incarceration.

By Chris Rohmann

Walk With Me

The Performance Project, directed by Julie Lichtenberg. Jan. 17: 3:30 p.m. (free), 7:30 p.m. (\$10), Northampton Center for the Arts, 586-4960.

He sitting at home all alone, no phoned 3 days now, since she's been gone! The fridge was empty all along.

That's Felix Vasquez, recalling his childhood in the Performance Project's latest play. For the past five years, the project has created original voice-and-movement performances with jailed convicts — plays that probe with gritty lyricism the tough realities that lead to incarceration and the budding hopes of people trying to make sense of their past and remake their lives.

Last spring's production, performed in the Hampshire County Jail, was a departure, as four community actors from "outside" joined the inmates. *Walk with Me* is another step outside the prison walls. It's the first full-length play for the project's Outside Performance Company — eight actors, five of them with histories inside the criminal justice system.

Growing up quick, tired of waiting! He's holding it together, but inside he's slowly breaking! Wondering was he a blessing to life or was God mistaken?

Nationwide, over 80% of the prison population are incarcerated for drug-related offenses, nearly 100% are repeat offenders, and a massively disproportionate number are people of color. According to director Julie Lichtenberg, the Performance Project aims at instilling hope and self-respect to stop the cycle of recidivism. The performances also confront the stigma of incarceration, showing these former criminals not as monsters but humans with holes in their lives — voids that have been filled by violence or crime or drug addiction.

But there's little sense of victimization in the autobiographical stories that anchor *Walk with Me*. Rather, what comes through is a clear-eyed commitment to "truth-telling" that details some pretty grim histories without excuses or self-pity.

Take Miguel Vega, whose six-plus years of solitary confinement are represented by the six-by-four-foot rectangle of light he sits in on stage. Or Thea Som, whose Cam-

The scenes and poems in *Walk with Me* are punctuated by passages of group movement that evoke feelings of despair and longing, tenderness and rage, and above all an impressive sense of the cooperation and mutual support the ensemble has developed over months of creative exploration.

The episodic show is tied together by the thematic thread of imprisonment in all its forms, not only penal incarceration but all the ways people on both sides of the bars are imprisoned — by hunger and poverty, drugs and drink, money and possessions, lies and denial. As performer Pam Bardsley put it recently, "Don't think you're so different if you're sitting in your \$300,000 house popping Percosets."

While many of the show's vignettes are introspective and painful, some, imported from last year's show, are hilarious. In a parody of the TV reality show *Extreme Makeover*, an uptight suburban white guy is schooled in ghetto vocabulary, body language and handshakes. Another sketch, spoofing the awkward job interviews faced by former inmates, imagines a Hood Temporary Agency recruiting ex-cons who don't want to go straight.

The multiracial cast also includes veteran actors Court Dorsey and Sheila Petigny, 12-year-old Naimah Petigny and poet Herschelle Reaves. After its premiere next Monday, *Walk with Me* will travel to Albuquerque, N.M., for performances at the Revolutions International Theater Festival and workshops with incarcerated youth, showing them the power of self-expression and truth-telling to turn their lives around.

The child that cried, but no one listened! Is that same man by which this poem was written. ■

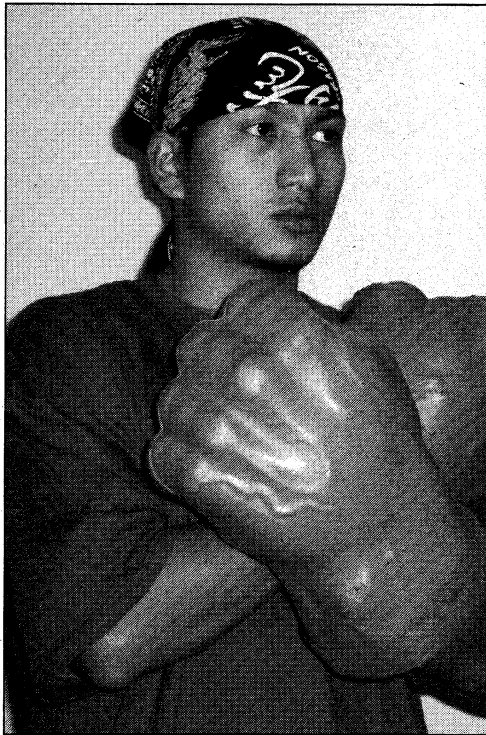


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The stories of former prisoners are brought to theatrical life in *Walk With Me*.

bodian parents survived the Khmer Rouge killing fields only to live inside a wall of silence that alienated their son. Or ten-year-old Felix Vasquez, abandoned by his heroin-addict mother, selling drugs to buy food and feed his media-induced craving for Nikes and bling.

Look at him now, the streets done raised him! He found refuge in drugs & guns and sold his soul to Satan! Feeling hopeless was his best expectation.