Breaking Down the Walls

By Chris Rohmann

The Performance Project confronts the scars and stigmas of incarceration.

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 poppin' Percodons."

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 upright 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.

Shed the first tear of your love/ And let the world hear/ How hearts can break/ And still go on loving/ To the memories of a loved one.