

A Reconciliation of Opposites

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Hartford's Charter Oak Cultural Center performance space is contained within the oldest synagogue in Connecticut - a location as apt for the theme of time as it is incongruous for an alliance created inside a maximum-security prison.

All art is attempting to be collaborative these days. An emotion-packed opening night performance Thursday followed by a group discussion that extended the narrative of "Time In" revealed why: Group effort has the potential to birth a new form while serving as a literal lifeline to a collective voice.

Song, text and dance generated by female inmates at York Correctional Institution in Niantic was given life outside the prison walls by their collaborators wearing drab prison garb: seven members of the Judy Dworin Performance Project Inc. and Women of the Cross, a trio of a cappella gospel singers.

Artistic director Dworin created an innovative structure in which the tension between incarceration and the liberation of spirit served as a precarious passage by which a new cross disciplinary form is born.

The skillful weaving of personal stories within songs and ruminations about time was a process of emotional discovery shared with the audience. "Time In" conjoined urban rap to gospel and text to movement while returning dance to its origins as a repository of archetypal forces struggling for reconciliation within the body. Deborah Thompson's evocative sign language served as a symbol for the silencing of women's voices while forging a link between speech and movement. The title of the work sums this up as a marriage of content and form: inmates reflecting on what it means to do "Time In" while surrendering personal body movements, voices and text regarding their history of abuse to the timelessness of an art that is universal.

This breaking down of walls was by necessity: Inmates are forbidden to perform out of prison. Yet, the authenticity with which dancers and Women of the Cross embodied the incarcerated resulted in an alternately fierce and joyous narrative voice that could be heard as a collective cry arising from deep within the walls of our celebrity-obsessed, media-saturated entertainment culture. Novelist Wally Lamb led the writing workshop at York that evolved into this collaboration. It is both fitting and poignant that a man served as midwife to the transmutation of women's personal stories of abuse into art. In its formal narrative structure moving from darkness to light, oppression to liberation, female to male, "Time In" captures a contemporary mythology of healing and resurrection through the reconciliation of gender opposites. This is a rare triumphant collaboration that has a life of its own, with implications far from the stage.