

PRISONS

Female Inmates Use Dance To Keep Time Behind Bars

By JANE GORDON

HARTFORD

BENEATH the stained-glass windows and stenciled walls of the Charter Oak Cultural Center, dancers from the Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble and the singers of Women of the Cross, a spiritual trio, acted out the lives of inmates from the York Correctional Institution, a women's prison in Niantic.

In their rehearsal last month for the upcoming performance of "Time In," an exploration of time spent behind bars, the performers spoke of waiting for the hours to pass, of how they came to be inmates and of how they supported one another.

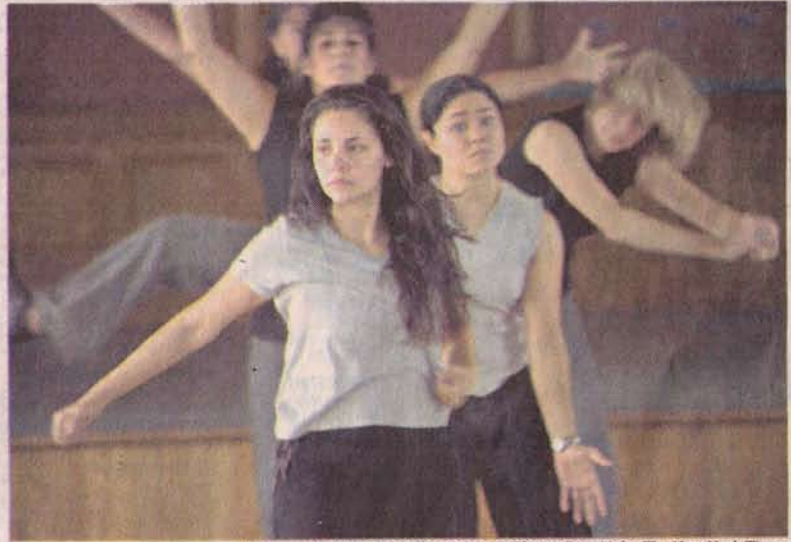
The performance was an outgrowth of the writing workshop given for York inmates by Wally Lamb, the Connecticut author of the novels "She's Come Undone" and "I Know This Much Is True." Mr. Lamb has been working with the women's stories for many years and has published a nonfiction anthology,

"Couldn't Keep It to Myself: Wally Lamb and the Women of York Correctional Institution: Testimonies of Our Imprisoned Sisters." The inmates' pieces were edited and reshaped into dialogue during a six-month arts residency by Prof. Judy Dworin, chairwoman of the dance department at Trinity College in Hartford, who choreographed the show.

"One of the things I've learned in my seven years at York is that the equation by which women land in prison is complex and multifaceted, not at all a matter, as some people assume, of 'we're good people, they're bad people,'" Mr. Lamb wrote in

an e-mail message.

"When the women not only write, but then share their writing with folks beyond the prison walls, it helps to dispel stereotypes and gets the public thinking about them as human beings first, inmates second," he wrote. "That's where Judy's mission and mine intersect."



Photographs by M. J. Fiedler and C. M. Glover (Lamb) for The New York Times

IN REHEARSAL Members of the Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble work on "Time In." Left, Wally Lamb and Judy Dworin.

More than 30 inmates danced and sang with the ensemble in a performance of "Time In" at the prison in June. In August, the inmate performers sat in the audience at the prison and watched the ensemble perform.

"Time is a loaded topic for women who are serving time," Ms. Dworin said. "There were tears, joy, women standing up and singing louder than the performers. At the end of it, there was this enormous standing ovation, and hugs and thanks. These kinds of moments in performance are the reason we do this. It's certainly the reason I do it."

The inmates were not permitted to perform outside the prison, so the ensemble will be performing "Time In" without them at the Charter Oak Cultural Center Nov. 2 to 4. Mr. Lamb will introduce the first day's performance.

Laresse Harvey of New Britain, a former inmate at York who saw the performance recently at a school in Southbury, said it captured the essence of the five and a half years she had served at the prison.

"Time is valuable," she said. "I choose to live life and have experiences now, and I never take a beautiful blue sky for granted."