

# preVIEW

CONNECTICUT

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## Inside & Out

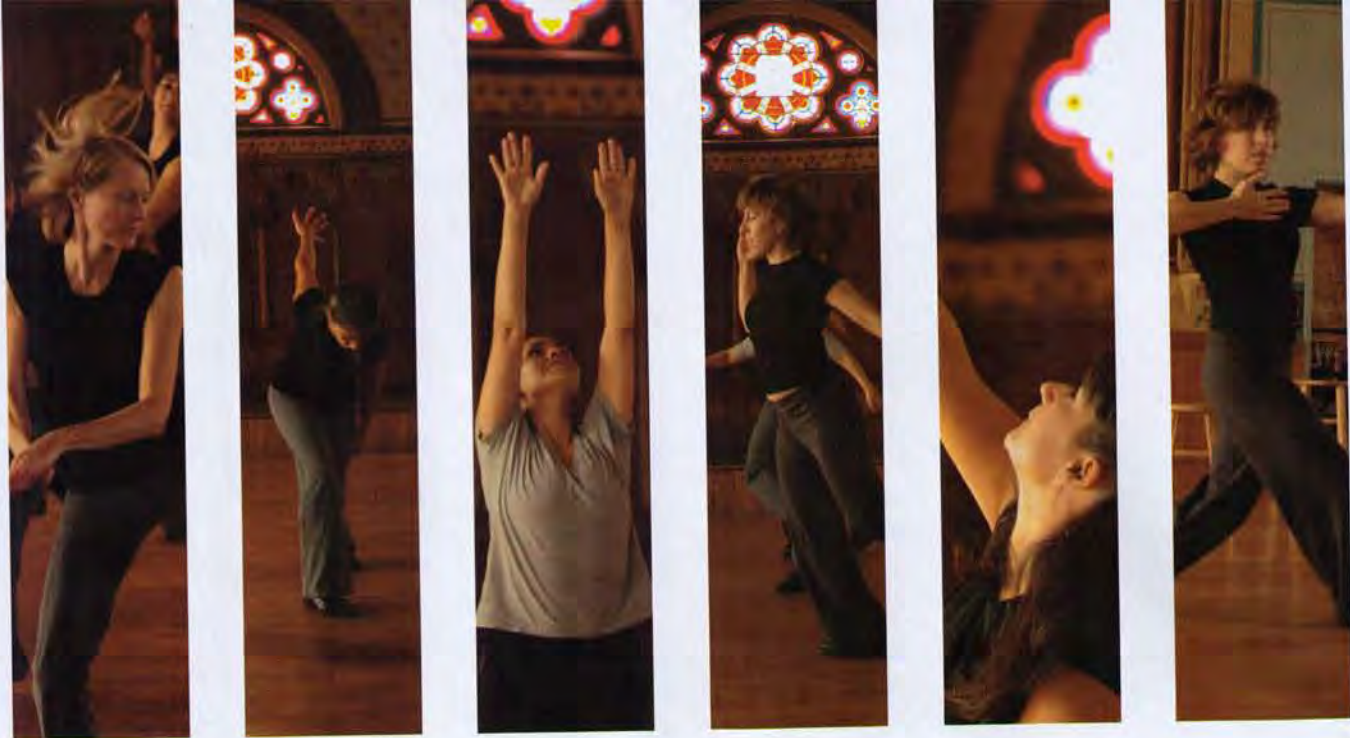
A new piece by the Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble explores the lives of women behind bars

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NICK LACY PHOTOS

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A NEW PERFORMANCE PIECE WRITTEN BY AND ABOUT FEMALE INMATES OF CONNECTICUT'S ONLY WOMEN'S PRISON WILL DEBUT IN HARTFORD

BY CHARLES HIX

Near the midpoint of *Time In*, a performance piece that integrates dance, music and spoken word, is a section titled "My Hairstory." In this monologue a woman remarks, "In the four months between my guilty plea and my sentencing, I think a lot about my hair. How it has been to every party, done every drug, been there with me each time I've had sex. It has gone with me to my prom, my graduation. It has been there when, at 14, I lose my virginity to Kevin, and at 18 when I stab and accidentally kill him while he is beating me. When the police arrive, I use my hair to hide my face."

Deliberately gritty but ultimately affirming, *Time In* depicts time's passage as experienced by incarcerated women. The piece has its public premiere at the Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford on Nov. 2. However, a far more private premiere took place in August before an audience of inmates and staff at the maximum security York

Correctional Institution in Niantic, Connecticut, where *Time In* was created. Joe Lea, the primary facilitator for arts programming at York, recalls, "The audience was enthralled, and the women received a standing ovation — not only for their individual performances but also for their courage to participate in a project that required them to dig deeply within themselves and come up with things they had been keeping in for so many years." At that premiere, 32 York artists sang, danced and emoted side by side with eight artists from the outside.

The inmates will not perform in Hartford. "It wouldn't be possible for them to participate outside the prison," notes Judy Dworin, artistic director of *Time In*. But the women's spirits — and their stories — will be very much present at the upcoming Hartford premiere. Dworin characterizes the absent contributors as "good women who made bad choices. There are so many stereotypes about women in prison. People

think, 'Here's the crime and here's the woman who committed it.' The woman and the crime become synonymous. But it's not that black-and-white. So many of the women have histories of domestic violence, of being raped by family members as children. *Time In* doesn't allow you to write off and forget these women because they're tucked out of sight."

She explains that the mixed media project began as "the result of a chance meeting with novelist Wally Lamb in May 2005 at a conference for volunteers for prisons where my ensemble was performing." Her Hartford-based dance/theatre company, the Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble, was officially founded in 1989. Its repertory is known for its exploration of socially charged issues. She is also professor of dance and chair of the department of theater and dance at Trinity College.

Wally Lamb is another multi-faceted Connecticut resident. In addition to writing best-selling novels (*She's Come*

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*Undone* and *I Know This Much Is True* were both Oprah Book Club selections), he is an educator who in recent years has taught writing to York inmates. He edited the collection *Couldn't Keep It to Myself: Stories of Our Imprisoned Sisters*, published in 2003.

In the spring of 2005, when Dworin learned that Lamb had praised her ensemble, she wrote him a query about forming a movement group at York, which is Connecticut's only penal facility for women. Currently, it houses approximately 1,400 inmates.

According to Dworin, Lamb was too enmeshed in finishing his third novel to participate directly in any new under-

taking at York, but he promised moral support. After discovering that both a dance group and a choral group already existed within the institution, Dworin's vision enlarged. She approached Linda Bird, musical director of the a cappella singing group Women of the Cross, who signed on immediately. Artists met with prisoners and officers, and *Time In* started to congeal. Inmates wrote, rewrote, edited, revised, refined, adapted, expanded, consolidated, and compiled. Their texts were incorporated into song lyrics and provided imagery for dances. Women of the Cross forged additional lyrics as well as original music. Meanwhile, the ensemble

developed dance movements. "It was not an I-process," says Dworin. "It was definitely a We-process."

Lamb is scheduled to introduce *Time In* on its opening night in Hartford. The performance will be followed by a talk-back session with cast members, plus former York inmates, including contributors to *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*. ♪

*Time In* plays Nov. 2-4 at the Charter Oak Cultural Center, 126 Charter Oak Ave., Hartford. For ticket information, telephone (860) 249-1207.

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