

Women Inmates Inspire Latest Judy Dworin Dance Project

'Meditations From A Garden Seat' Debuts At Charter Oak

November 01, 2012 | By SHARMA HOWARD, Special To The Courant, The Hartford Courant

To gardeners, the riotous yellow blooms of the dandelion represent usurpers of visual harmony. But a child often sees beauty in these untamed [flowers](#), making festive chains and picking them as bouquets.

What we perceive as beautiful, what constitutes a flower or a weed, what is valuable and viable, what we deem as unredeemable — all of these questions are raised in the thematic framework of issues regarding incarcerated women in Judy Dworin's Performance Project's upcoming production. Titled "Meditations from a [Garden](#)

Seat," the multi-media work makes its debut Nov. 1 to 3 at the Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford.

The [performance](#) blends dance, visual elements, spoken word and songs. Dworin depicts hope in a grim environment, and her piece, which arose from a workshop at Niantic's York Correctional Institution, gave the women, whose stories are woven into the piece, a place to blossom.

Dworin hopes that the piece will raise awareness about the importance of reintroduction to [society](#) — incarcerated women will return to their communities, and we must realize we are not separate from them, Dworin says.

"One of the things the women are identified as are being weeds — they are things people think can be cast aside and not regarded as worthy," says Dworin of the piece, which meshes the writings of inmates, an essay "In the Garden" by social activist Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Dworin's own careful collaging and writing.

While the garden drapes itself around the piece, metaphorically expressing themes such as nurturing, self-empowerment, freedom, reflection, hope and transformation, it doesn't shirk from the stark realities of women in incarceration.

"It creates the kind of psychological [world](#) that exists for the women in prison — that darker psychological place and how to emerge from it," says Dworin.

The lack of prejudice and judgment that is the gift of a child is highlighted in a section where a woman speaks of the joy she had in giving her mother bouquets of dandelions. Her mother never dampened her pleasure by informing her they were [weeds](#). Once grown up, the woman realizes her childish pleasure could be viewed as misguided — yet, as an inmate, she identifies with the dandelion. She says she will include a place for weeds in her own garden:

"But come here

Take a closer look

You might discover how out of us weeds

The most [beautiful](#) 'pretty little flowers'
Might grow."

But many of the stories are not pretty, tracing inmates' descents into incarceration. Nor are the biographies that that are poetically sketched in the section titled "[Love](#) Letters," written by Kathleen Wyatt of Willington, who is a performer in the piece as well as a former inmate at York prison. "Love Letters" weaves together the stories of about 30 different women, and targets the male- dominated social structure as the root of female suffering, and incarceration.

Although Wyatt describes her own upbringing as stable, with a mother who nurtured an unfettered idea of her possibilities as a [woman](#), she came to realize that many of her fellow inmates had more damaging experiences. Ninety-five percent of women incarcerated are abused by men from infancy, says Wyatt.

"I woke up when I was in there and realized, 'My God, how fortunate I was, most of the [women](#) had no choice and no one told them they deserved better,'" Wyatt says.

Wyatt's eight years at York were tough — and she received critical sustenance and regeneration from tending the prison's small garden outside her unit.

"I was able to re-group and find myself and remember what my life was like and what it could be like," says Wyatt.

"Meditations from a Garden Seat" arose from an outgrowth of Dworin's ongoing effort to expose inmates at York prison to dance. The powerful effect of a previous piece performed at the prison during a residency last year encouraged her to develop a work for the general public.

Working with her on the residency was visual artist and teacher Guido Garaycochea of Groton, who also volunteers his time as a painting instructor at York.

"Every time she works on a theme it is going to be coming from the inmates. They express their feelings and their biographies and sometimes tell what they did and why they are there in a way that is poetic and beautifully expressed," says Garaycochea.

That is why Dworin likes to keep the choreography true to the theme, and viewers can expect movement that expresses the context of the work.

"I'm interested in creating movement with visual words," says Dworin, who does not like her choreography to have a certain artistic "stamp," but rather be harmonious with the essence of the piece.

In "Meditations from a Garden Seat," that essence is a [journey](#), says Dworin.

"I'm interested in movement that feels authentic," Dworin says. "I'm not interested in virtuosity for its own sake at all. It's also about making things that are difficult beautiful. Taking worlds that are dark and pulling the [beauty](#) from that."

MEDITATIONS FROM A GARDEN SEAT is performed at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 1 to 3 at Charter Oak Cultural Center, 21 Charter Oak Avenue, Hartford. Tickets are \$25, and \$15 for seniors and GHAC Let's Go! Members, and \$10 for students. Information: <http://www.charteroakcenter.org> and 860-249-1207.

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News That Moves! September 2013

Stunning Success at The KO Festival!

On Friday, August 2nd, Saturday, August 3rd, and Sunday, August 4th, the JDPP Ensemble performed *Mediations from a Garden Seat* at the KO Festival, at Amherst College. The Holden Theater was an intimate space where the audience felt like they were one with the artists as they performed this beautiful and moving piece. The response from the audience was a testament to how deeply they were affected. Talkback panels included the Executive Director of the Emily Dickinson Museum and the Executive Director of “Voices from Inside,” a local group that works with prisoners on creative writing as well as Judy and the Ensemble. Many audience members commented on the beauty of the piece, how the artists’ control and use of their bodies deeply conveyed the emotion of the words that were spoken. Many were amazed at how the use of the garden related to the feelings and spoken words of the women in prison.

Sabrina Hamilton, Artistic Director of the KO Festival, had this to say, *“The combination of forms—theatre, dance, prose, poetry, music and visual art (in the form of stunning set pieces by scenographer Marcela Oteiza and the soft garden-hued costumes so elegantly and simply lit by Blu) creates a work of sublime beauty. It puts breath and air into the room, not unlike the way I imagine the prison garden brought those things to the incarcerated women at York.... so many people should have the opportunity to see this work”*

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August 2-4 Fri. & Sat, at 8 p.m., Sun. at 4 p.m.

About **MEDITATIONS FROM A GARDEN SEAT**

A Judy Dworin Performance Project production

Conceived by **Judy Dworin** and developed with Associate Artistic Director **Kathy Borteck**

Gersten and the Ensemble

Ensemble Performers: **Robert Byrd, Mellissa Craig, Heidi Klecak, Tracy Lombardo, Lisa Matias, Alexa Melonopoulous, Christine Perry,** and **Jeff Shortt**

Guest Performer: **Kathy Wyatt**

Scenic Design by **Marcela Oteiza**

Lighting Design by **Blu**

Sound design by **Martiza Ubides**



"Often women in prison think of themselves as weeds; everyone outside wants to get rid of them." – Judy Dworin

"For me the garden was a place of healing to the soul... it brought comfort to the heart blistered by the sultry suns of life," –Harriet Beecher Stowe in her 1855 essay "Meditation from Our Garden Seat."

What kind of courage does it take to face an irrevocable mistake and survive its consequences? MEDITATIONS FROM A GARDEN SEAT reflects upon women in prison who have been identified by their bad choices as they struggle with the daily reminder of their actions. The stark reality of women's lives behind the razor wire and the healing seeds of redemption are explored in the interwoven language of dance, innovative set elements and spoken word. Juxtaposed with the words of that historic icon for emancipation, Harriet Beecher Stowe, this work was developed from a residency by the Judy Dworin Performance Project with women serving time at York Correctional Institution in Niantic CT – women whose prison garden has become a remarkable source of healing, regeneration, and through work with JDPP – artistic inspiration

Running Time: 55 minutes

About JUDY DWORIN PERFORMANCE PROJECT

JDPP is an arts non-profit based in Hartford, CT, founded by Judy Dworin in 1989.

It is an organization of professional artists who –on stage, in schools, in prisons and in the community–innovate, inspire, educate and collaborate. JDPP harnesses the arts as a powerful catalyst for creative expression through performance, community building and positive change.



JDPP is the home for three distinct programmatic offerings. **The Ensemble** inspires change through innovative, movement-based performance on stage that examines social and personal issues of our time; the ***Moving Matters!* Residency Program** brings dance/theater into schools through collaborative projects and arts education programs that explore movement and the creative arts as tools for learning and personal growth; and the **Bridging Boundaries Arts Intervention Program** couples arts intervention with social work, to bridge the forced separations of populations affected by incarceration.

For more information visit www.judydworin.org

About THE COLLABORATORS:

Judy Dworin (Executive and Artistic Director) founded the Judy Dworin Performance Project, Inc. (JDPP) in 1989 based on a commitment to the important role the arts can and do play in challenging and creating change in our universe – personal, educational, and global. In addition to her work as Artistic Director of the Ensemble and a lead teaching artist for several of JDPP’s residencies, Judy has taught in Bulgaria and Taiwan as well as throughout



New England. She is on the Teaching Roster for the State of Connecticut and is the recipient of many awards, the most recent being an honoree of the Connecticut Women’s Hall of Fame. Her commitment to education has also had a forty-one year history at Trinity College, where she established the Dance Program, co-founded the Trinity/La MaMa Performing Arts, Semester in New York City, and chaired the Department of Theater and Dance for many years. She recently contributed a chapter to the book, “Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre”, edited by Jonathan Shailor, and published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers that discusses the initiating JDPP project with the women of York Correctional Institution that has catalyzed a powerful trajectory of Judy’s work with the incarcerated and their families.

Blu (Lighting Design) lived in NYC for 20 years where he was resident designer at the Cubiculo and La MaMa E.T.C., was a Bessie Award winner, and lighting designer for such renowned dance theater artists as Eiko and Koma, Ping Chong, Donald Byrd, Sally Gross, Nancy Meehan and Paula Josa Jones to name a few. He now lives in Bloomfield, CT with his wife, Judy and their family of dogs, turtles, fish, birds, frogs, toads, and bats.

Kathy Borteck Gersten (Associate Artistic Director) has been collaborating with Judy Dworin since 1986. She was a founding member of Dance Services Network and its Director for 6 years, Past Dance Vice President for the Connecticut Association for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance, on the Artist selection panel for First Night Hartford, Dance Committee member for the Connecticut Standards for Dance and the State Guide to Arts Program Development K-12, Dance Certification Committee member for the State Dept. of Education, Artist panel for Art/Artists Residencies, Arts Development Grants, and a board member of the Connecticut Dance Alliance. Currently, Kathy is a Teaching Artist and co-coordinator in JDPP’s Moving Matters! Residency in Hartford schools, as well as York Correctional Institution, Hartford Performs and, is a guest lecturer in the Department of Theater and Dance at Trinity College. Kathy received the 2009 Distinguished Artist Award from the CT Dance Alliance and is a Master Teaching Artist for the CT Department for Economic and Community Development Office of Culture and Tourism’s Office of the Arts. She is a member of the Greater Hartford’s Dance Umbrella and board member of JDPP.

Robert Byrd (Ensemble) Robert Byrd is a New Haven native whose love for dance and drama has been instilled and evolving since childhood. Although not formally trained in dance, Robert served as member and co-captain of New Haven's *Mob Squad Drill and Drum* team for over 7 years, where he performed competitively in front of large and small crowds, leading his team to numerous victories. He made his dance debut in JDPP's production of "In This House," playing the role of Adam Jackson. Robert is embarking on the study of many dance forms such as African, Caribbean and also Modern. He has appeared in many performances with Sankofa Kuumba, and the Caribbean American Dance Company and is a new company member with DancEnlight.

Mellissa Craig (Ensemble) is a Hartford native who holds a Bachelor of Science in Biology from Trinity College. She began her dance career with Cultural Dance Troupe at age 10. Today Mellissa is a dance instructor for JDPP's Moving Matters programs and at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts Elementary and Middle schools. She has also participated in workshops and performances for Sankofa Kuumba, Hartford Public Schools, New Britain Parks and Recreation, and the Multicultural Arts and Technology program at CCSU. Additionally, she is a trained stilt walker and has conducted numerous classes and workshops for students across the country and abroad, as far as Cape Town, South Africa.

Heidi Klecak (Ensemble) is a graduate of the University of Connecticut and the Hartford Conservatory, and has attended Wesleyan University taking graduate courses in Dance and Movement Studies. She has served on the dance faculty of Eastern Connecticut State University, Saint Joseph College and The Hartford Conservatory among others. She currently is owner and Director of the Stafford Academy of Dance LLC, and Directs the Figments Youth Dance Ensemble. Heidi also teaches creative movement at the Preschool for the Arts in Ellington and Tolland, and choreographs a musical production for children each summer with Act Out, Sing and Shout.

Tracy Lombardo (Ensemble) received a BFA from Adelphi University. She performed with Adelphi Dance Theater for two years, studied with Frank Hatchett for one year and participated in a Broadway Dance Center Showcase in NYC. Tracy also performed with Sonia Plumb Dance Company for five years. Presently, Tracy is teacher and choreographer of New Steps Dance Center in Glastonbury as well as JDPP's residency programs for youth with Incarcerated parents and Parkville Community School.

Lisa Matias (Ensemble) received her BA from Trinity College, Hartford, CT., where she was awarded the President's Fellowship in Theater and Dance. She has taught and performed with several companies throughout the Northeast. Lisa currently teaches at Trinity College and at her own studio, Lisa Matias Dance Centre. Lisa has been with JDPE since its inception and continues to be inspired by Judy's work.

Alexa Melonopoulos (Ensemble) began her dance training with Estelle Jones. She earned her BA in Dance from Hofstra University and holds an MA in Dance in Higher Education and Administration from New York University. She has had the opportunity to perform with choreographers Eleo Pomare, Remi Charlip, Rosalind Newman, Robin Becker, Stormy Brandenberger, Lance Westergard, Lili Weiss, John Mead and Ching Wen Yeh. Alexa has been affiliated with a number of groups including Washington Square Repertory Dance Company, Sonia Plumb Dance Company, and Works / Laura Glenn Dance. She is currently the Director of Dance and Arts Department Chair at Miss Porter's School in CT.

Christine Perry (Ensemble) originally began her dance training in her home state of NH at Southern New Hampshire Dance Theater. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from the Hartt School at the University of Hartford with a BFA in Dance Performance in the Spring of 2009. She also had the privilege to train at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance on scholarship. She worked with Graham legends such as Denise Vale, Donlin Forman, Steve Rook and Peggy Lyman Hayes and performed such famous repertory including *Diversion of Angels* and *Night Journey*. Along with dance she is a professional stage and production manager and has done extensive technical theater work in locations across the Northeast. Christine is currently in her third season for Hartford based modern dance company dancEnlight under the direction of Lorelei Chang. She is also currently a faculty member at Premier Dance Theatre, West Hartford CT and Limelite Dance Center, Wetherfield CT and is Waterfront Supervisor and Programming Coordinator for the Town of Chester Parks and Recreation.

Marcela Oteiza Silva (Scenic Design) is an Interdisciplinary visual artist and Professor of Theater Design at Wesleyan University Connecticut, USA. Marcela received her BA in Fine Arts at the University of Chile. She earned a MFA in Design for performing arts at California Institute of the arts (CalArts). Her grant awarded pieces are Interdisciplinary performances, including collaborations with composers and choreographer to create hybrid works, such as: "The heart play" by Heiner Muller a music-based dance theater piece (composer Alba Triana) And "Pornographic Angel" with director Claudia Tatinge Nascimento, a digital media and performance play. As a designer she has worked in over twenty productions for theater and Dance. Marcela has an extensive visual art exhibition record, both in the US and abroad.

Jeff Shortt (Ensemble) is a 22 year old music student; he has been a gymnast for 18 years, and studied dance for 15.

Kathy Wyatt (Guest Performer) Kathy was a resident at York Correctional Institution and is now employed as the Volunteer Coordinator for CCAR (Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery). She is an active member of the Connecticut Coalition for Judicial Reform and the Windham Reentry Roundtable. While at York she participated in Wally Lamb's writing group and two of her pieces are part of his latest anthology of writings by York women entitled "I'll Fly Away: Further Testimonies from the Women of York Prison which received the Connecticut Book

Award last year. Kathy participated in all of the York residencies of the Judy Dworin Performance Project during her time there and was a writer and narrator in the performance pieces that culminated each residency. She has performed her work 'Love Letters' at the Warner Theater in Torrington as part of a fundraiser for Chrysalis programming at the prison, at 40 Forward! at Trinity College, as well as Wesleyan University, Eastern Connecticut State University, and UConn.

WHAT THE PRESS HAS SAID:

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