

wnpr

Connecticut's Public Media Source
for News and Ideas

[Donate](#)

WNPR

Wait, Wait... Don't Tell Me!

- [News](#)
- [Programs](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Support Us](#)
- [Search](#)

Exploring the Transition Home From Prison Through Art

By [JEFF TYSON](#) & [LUCY NALPATHANCHIL](#) • SEP 8, 2016

[Where We Live](#)

[TweetShare](#)[Google+](#)[Email](#)



Performer Leesa Srams and dancers Haley Zdebski and Melissa Craig in
"Brave in a New World"

JOHN ATASHIAN / JUDY DWORIN PERFORMANCE PROJECT, INC.

Listen
Listening...

49:17

“Brave in a New World” premieres next week, September 15, at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts — weaving spoken word and dance around the experiences of ex-offenders and their families. It’s the latest piece from the [Judy Dworin Performance Project](#).

This hour, we hear about the upcoming artistic performance that digs deep into what it means to live in prison — and what it means to leave.

Artistic Director Judy Dworin joins us as well as two former inmates who perform in the production.

Has prison affected your life or the lives of your friends and family?

Plus, a Danbury woman who was a teenager when she pled guilty to manslaughter in the 2006 drowning of her newborn baby [has been granted clemency](#). She’ll be released September 30 after serving just 10 years of an 18 year prison sentence. We learn more about this young woman's story.

GUESTS:

- **Judy Dworin** - Founder and Executive and Artistic Director of the [Judy Dworin Performance Project](#)
- **Robin Cullen** - Performer in "Brave in a New World", Board member for the Judy Dworin Performance Project, Consultant, Group Facilitator, Artist, Former Inmate at York Correctional Institution
- **Leesa Srams** - Performer in "Brave in a New World", Artist, Grandmother, Former Inmate at York Correctional Institution
- **Deborah Rogala** - Programs Operations Director at [Community Partners in Action](#)
- **Jill Sandora** - Clinical Social Worker at York Correctional Institution
- **Dirk Perrefort** - Crime Reporter for the [Danbury News Times](#)

Join the conversation on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

Chion Wolf, Lydia Brown and Catie Talarski contributed to this show.

New Dworin Performance Project Unveils Pain of Incarceration



An interview with Leesa Srams.

By **SHARMA PIERSALL**
Special to the Courant

SEPTEMBER 6, 2016, 3:30 PM

For those both inside and outside, identifying the clang of a prison door is irrefutable; it is an absolute sound that reverberates universally.

But its sound is stubbornly subjective. For those who recognize it from TV shows, it might represent justice, and a string of myths and stereotypes. For those incarcerated, it is a sound they never want to shake their soul again, and it is also an identifying part of their life they'd like others to understand.

It is heard only once in Judy Dworin Performance Project's latest work, "Brave in a New World," a mixed media work that will debut Sept. 15 at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts.

"Prison wasn't anything I'd thought it would be," said Robin Cullen, of Middlefield. Cullen has been working with the Dworin performance project for about 18 years and she is one of the performers who has been

incarcerated.

"I noticed it was a lot about circumstances — there were so many good people who made bad choices. Trauma had manifested as criminal behavior, but it was actually survival."

The beginning of the work illuminates the mood with the innocent voices of children, and the quiet sharing of the performers childhood memories: their favorite pastimes, their secret childhood places, their vulnerabilities. Dispersed within this section are games of duck-duck-goose, or ring-around-the-rosie, and lighthearted movements, like cartwheels.

By asserting this essence of humanity, Dworin deliberately takes the audience through her thematic arc: childhood innocence, circumstances leading to incarceration, the struggles or reintegration.

performers who have been part of the Dworin project dancers. In this work, Dworin's 19th full-scale ensembles of those women, as well as one man, who is also performing. Dworin has recently begun to work with the male population at Cybulski.

Get 3 months for ONLY \$1
Fall sale ends 9/22

SAVE NOW ›

Dworin notes that the taped voices of the children as part of the sound score is significant to the story, as their experience is often muted. "Kids keep the fact they have a parent in prison a secret. It affects them emotionally and behaviorally," said Dworin.

Going beyond that, Dworin examines how incarceration affects society. The people inside, she observes, should not be forgotten, as their stories resonate beyond the prison walls.

The performers move the audience through this world, with its ills and joys equally embraced. Dressed in casual black and white street clothes, they share their circumstances, from the beatings that incited their violence, to the vicissitudes to release — from the uncle who arrives at the prison to coerce sex, to the inevitable needle in the arm as a result.

Then there is the woman returning to her home and is greeted by a welcome home banner — a misstep by friends and relatives punctuating her shame, as she feels no sense of accomplishment for serving time.

Movement Tells The Story

The dance that weaves these life experiences together reflect the ebb and tide of joy, isolation, despair, hope, and anger. Dworin employs sweeping, poetic movement that never detracts from her storytelling script.

The sense of rhythm, timing, and emotion is of high caliber. A few sections of movement are arresting. One is the clapping sequence executed by the lone male performer Robert Byrd, whose hands fly around his body, under his legs, slapping out a rat-tat-tat that haunts the telling of his incarceration, which is narrated as he executes his solo.

Another memorable segment is the performers utilizing hollow cubes, which alternately trap them, or at times get swung outward in lightness and freedom.

"Brave in a New World" is full-throttle in terms of having set elements, song, dance, spoken word and costuming. As in other works, Dworin's husband, Blu, imbues the stage with Dworin's thematic vision.

"It will do a lot to create the light and dark in the piece," said Dworin.

A poignant section of the work follows the women as they struggle to obtain the basic needs to participate again in society, such as getting identification or hurdling prejudice in the job hunt.

Prison Stamps Your Identity

In the piece, Kathy Wyatt's story of applying at an upscale boutique post release is wrenching and peppered with some wry humor. Wyatt, who pens her own vignettes, discloses her prison sentence nonchalantly, not realizing it disqualifies her – being from the very world she is seeking to re-enter.

Coming from a middle-class background, Wyatt touches upon the way in which prison stamps your identity.

"I have to remember where I came from. This is who I am today, and most importantly — after myself, society needs to hear who's in prison. ... It's your neighbor, sister, someone like you who have made a bad choice."

This societal theme is the spine of Dworin's work, and one she unfolds with the powerful stories of her performers.

"We happen to incarcerate more people than anywhere else in the world, and they have long sentences, and we have to consider what that all means," said Dworin. "We cannot discount these are people who made a mistake and how do you handle that in the best way to healing everyone involved in that mistake."

JUDY DWORIN PERFORMANCE PROJECT'S, "*Brave in a New World*" will premiere 7:30 p.m., Sept. 15, at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, Theater of the Performing Arts, 359 Washington St., Hartford. Tickets are \$25, \$20 for Let's Go Arts members and seniors, \$10 for students. Premium reserved seating is \$50. For tickets, call 860-527-9800 or visit judydworin.org.

Editor's Note: This story has been changed from an earlier version to correct the spelling of Blu, Judy Dworin's husband and lighting designer and the address of the Academy's Theater where the performance will be held.

Copyright © 2017, Hartford Courant

This article is related to: [Art](#)

Bulletin Board

Premiere of “Brave in a New World” by Judy Dworin Performance Project, Thursday, September 15 at 7:30 p.m.

Performance presents authentic experiences of women who successfully re-entered society from York Correctional Institution.

0

By [Susan Hood \(Patch Poster\)](#) - Updated August 22, 2016 1:54 pm ET

“Brave in a New World” by the Judy Dworin Performance Project will have its premiere at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, Theater of the Performing Arts, 359 Washington Street, on Thursday, September 15 at 7:30 p.m.

“Brave in a New World” presents the authentic experiences of women who successfully re-entered society from York Correctional Institution (the only institution for female offenders operated by the State of Connecticut), four of whom are performing with the professional Ensemble of the Judy Dworin Performance Project.

Integrating dance, narrative, and song with scenic, visual, and sound design, “Brave in a New World” evokes images of confinement and separation, scary transitions from “inside” to “out,” and childhood memories of secret haunts and carefree days while shadows of the past loom over present day challenges. In counterpoint, taped voices of

children affected by incarceration express their courage, love, and optimism for permanent reunions with absent parents.

“Brave in a New World” marks the 19th large-scale work created by the Judy Dworin Performance Project and is the sequel to “In My Shoes.” Both are ambitious outgrowths of the residency work the Judy Dworin Performance Project began in 2005 and still continues at York Correctional Institution, and recently began at the Cybulski Community Reintegration Center for men. “In My Shoes” was met by standing-room-only at the 484-seat Hartford Stage in December 2014, and more than 2,500 people have attended performances in the tri-state area since then.

The Judy Dworin Performance Project was founded in 1989 and is the home for three distinct programs. The Ensemble examines social contemporary issues through movement-based, multimedia works, and has performed at La MaMa E.T.C. and Dia Center for the Arts (Joyce Soho), New York City; the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.; Baltimore Theatre Project; the Theater in a Suitcase Festival in Sofia, Bulgaria; Broward Performing Arts Center, Fort Lauderdale; Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center and Mobius, Boston; Cleveland Arts Center; the KO Festival in Amherst, Massachusetts; and throughout New England. The Moving Matters! residency program, now in its 20th year, brings the creative arts into public schools as tools for learning and personal growth. Bridging Boundaries couples arts intervention with social work to bridge the forced separations of populations affected by incarceration.

The Ultimate End-of-Summer Home Repair List

From the porch to the sprinklers, tackle these to-dos so your home is ready for fall.
[SPONSORED]

General admission tickets to “Brave in a New World” are \$25, \$20 for Let’s Go Arts members and seniors, \$10 for students with valid I.D. Premium reserved seating is \$50. For tickets, visit judydworin.org or call (860) 527-9800.