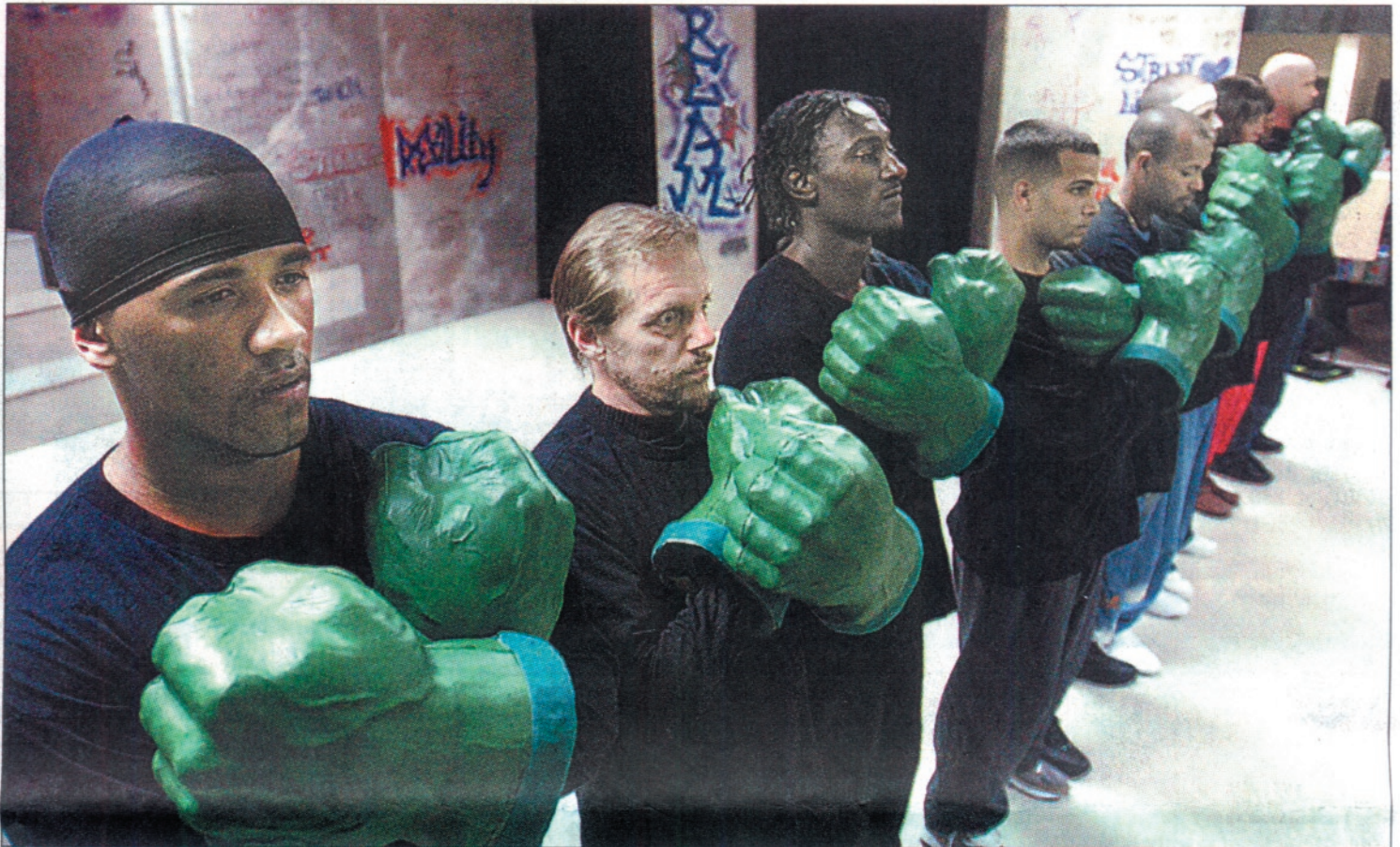


THE STRUGGLE WITHIN



Staff photo by CHRISTOPHER EVANS

Actors rehearse "Counting the Minutes" at the Hampshire County House of Correction earlier this week.

Incarceration struggle portrayed

By **DIANE LEDERMAN**
dlederman@repub.com

NORTHAMPTON - The visiting room at the Hampshire County Jail has again been turned into a black-box theater for the staging of the fourth Performance Project piece "counting the minutes."

The work is a collaboration involving inmates at the Hampshire County Jail and House of Correction, artists and actors from the community and others who had been in jail in other



Julie Lichtenberg

who created the Performance Project based on the inmates' lives.

places.

The work is also a collaboration between dancer and choreographer Amie Dowling and artist and director Julie Lichtenberg,

The play, a series of vignettes, is "about the struggles with addiction and what happens when you get out of jail," Lichtenberg said.

The performers hope to break down the stereotypes of people in prison so that the audience can see the whole person, she said.

Prisoners have "as many dreams and aspirations as the next person." And, they come from all kinds of backgrounds, she said.

The play, which opened last weekend, and is scheduled to be performed for the last time tonight, is intended to be funny with links to reality television and fantasy. There's a scene involving an agency that provides companies with temporary employees agency interviewing the cast members and then there's a "hood" temp agency, she said.

The play is more political than others in the past, "looking

Please see Play, Page B2

Play: Jail becomes a theater

Continued from Page B1

at how capitalism plays into this (incarceration)," Lichtenberg said.

The development of the play takes months. At first, she and Dowling went to the life-skills program and asked who might be interested and who might have time for the project in their schedules.

They then met twice a week, working with the inmates on understanding the identity of the artistic ensemble and "creating an environment where people feel free to bring in their ideas."

As the inmates tell their stories, themes emerge, she said.

"We take these stories and start to improvise in front of a video camera."

More than 15 hours of videotape was transcribed by Dowling and Lichtenberg and crafted into a script. They took the script back to the inmates and with their comments wrote a second draft. The words are those of the inmates, she said.

Then they go into rehearsals.

The production also involved other inmates who made the set and are part of the technical crew. The production is staged with the cooperation of Hampshire County Sheriff Robert J. Garvey and Melinda Cady, assistant deputy superintendent for treatment and programs, Lichtenberg said.

The goal of the project is to continue staging productions in the jail and on the outside with

former members, once they're let out of prison.

The purpose in part is to educate the community about how to keep people out of jail, Lichtenberg said.

Tonight's show is overbooked, Lichtenberg said. But anyone wishing to get on a mailing list for future productions can call (413) 586-4960 or write to the project at PO Box 173, Northampton, MA 01061.