

Society's ills aired in 'Walk With Me'

By PAT CAHILL

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An English writer once called his country "the two nations." By that he meant the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots.

Most people who live comfortably would rather not know too much about the other "nation." After all, they might find that its residents have the same feelings and sensibilities as themselves.

But here's an invitation to enter their world. A Northampton-based ensemble called the Performance Project will present a show called "Walk With Me" tomorrow through Sunday at the Fuller Arts Center at Springfield College. "Walk With Me" was created from the poems and stories of former inmates, and six of its eight performers were previously incarcerated.

Performances tomorrow and Sunday begin at 7:30 p.m. The Saturday matinee is at 2 p.m. The suggested donation is \$10. Proceeds support the work of the Performance Project.

The project was founded in 2000 by artist Julie Lichtenberg and dancer-choreographer Amie Dowling in collaboration with eight inmates at the Hampshire County Jail and House of Correction in Northampton.

That facility had invited the two women to conduct a theater workshop there. "I had co-directed a project called 'Boom! Theater' in a Connecticut prison from 1994 to 1998," explains Lichtenberg.

Dowling was known at the jail for bringing in Mount Holyoke College students to teach a dance class.

Some of the men who joined the Performance Project had already been writing about their lives. The task was to shape their words into artistic presentations for other inmates.

The troupe's founders also worked with women at the Hampden County Jail in Ludlow, although they wound up getting most of their female performers from the "outside" by word of mouth.

This year the Performance Project reached a new stage of proficiency when it took its fifth show, "Walk With Me," outside prison walls. It was performed in January at the Northampton Center for the Arts. And more excitement lay ahead.

"We left the next day for Al-

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buquerque," says Lichtenberg. The company had been invited to perform at the Revolutions International Theatre Festival in New Mexico. Festival organizers paid their way.

What can audiences expect from the show? "You can expect a lot about the social ills going on in society," says cast member Richard Carden of West Haven, Conn., 54.

The show consists of sketches, sometimes accompanied by drumbeats, music, and stylized, energetic movement around a graffiti-spattered set.

In one segment, a performer recites a poem about a hooker who was hit by a truck and died slowly because the 911 call didn't bring help fast enough.

Another performer tells of pushing a dresser against the door to keep out a mother "drenched in bourbon and cigarettes."

A performer born in a refugee camp describes the silence of his Cambodian parents. It took him years to learn that a brother he never knew was shot to death by the Khmer Rouge in front of his mother.

And there are moments of grim humor. A man newly released from jail is confronted by a TV "reality show" host, who offers him \$50,000 if he can negotiate a gauntlet of temptations



The Performance Project, which focuses on the theme of incarceration, will perform at Springfield College this weekend.

in his old neighborhood.

"Awww," says the TV huckster after the man succumbs. "You lose. You go back to jail."

Lichtenberg says she hopes audiences will recognize that there are many forms of imprisonment. "It doesn't matter where you come from – a wealthy suburban neighborhood, the killing fields of Cambodia, an economically depressed neighborhood in Holyoke. There are connections."

"All of it is my story," says cast member Thea Som of Northampton, 24, "and all of it is their story."

Cast and co-authors also include Pam Bardsley and Ivan Schmidt of Northampton, Court Dorsey of Wendell, and Tony Vega, Hershe Mackey and Justice Mackey of Springfield.

Danny Ventura of Holyoke will introduce the show with a song. Felix Vasquez of Holyoke is among many others, some still incarcerated, who created the show.

"We've formed a community," says Lichtenberg.

One of the functions of the

If You Go

Event: "Walk With Me"

When: Friday and Saturday,

7:30 p.m.; and Sunday, 2 p.m.

Where: Fuller Arts Center, Springfield College

Cost: \$10 donation suggested

For more info: Call (413) 586-4960

Performance Project is to help its members make a go of it on the outside, a fragile process they call "re-integration."

"Walk With Me" has benefited from the participation of artists well known in their fields, including choreographers Martha Bowers of New York and Leslie Farlow and Molly Maxner of Northampton. The composer and sound designer is Tony Silva of Northampton.

Also, "local businesses have been supporting us tremendously," says Lichtenberg, who was elated over a recent donation of PVC pipe from Flynn-Mar in Holyoke for the stage set.

Fuller Arts Center is on Hickory Street in Springfield. Call 589-4960 for more information or reservations.

The Performance project has another fund-raiser Oct. 21 at the Waterfront Tavern in Holyoke. Visit www.performance-project.org for information.