NEWS > CONNECTICUT NEWS

Dworin's dance 'Emergence,' about the end of incarceration, gets encore performances



By CHRISTOPHER ARNOTT | carnott@courant.com | Hartford Courant
PUBLISHED: February 6, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. | UPDATED: February 6, 2022 at 11:00 a.m.

Last year the Judy Dworin Performance Project was invited to create a performance dance piece to complement an outdoor installation in the gardens at the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center. The event was outside, but the theme was "inside," as in prison life, and led to the concept of "Emergence," the end of incarceration.

The project ended up inspiring two different programs, incorporating dance, song and spoken works, which were performed in the garden Oct. 9 and 10, 2021.

Video versions of "Emergence 1? and "Emergence 2? are airing this month, first on Feb. 17 on Zoom, with a live talkback with Dworin and her collaborators, then starting Feb. 18 at 7 p.m. on YouTube.

Robin Cullen, a formerly incarcerated spoken-word artist who performs in both sections of "Emergence," has been involved with the Dworin company for 17 years.

For her, the Stowe garden "was a beautiful space to talk about the idea of freedom. The pieces speak a lot about coming back into society. It's

The installation that forms the background of "Emergence" was a temporary exhibition and is no longer viewable at the Stowe Center. It was created by jackie summell (who uses only lower case letters to spell her name), a Louisiana-based artist and activist who specializes in art that questions the criminal justice system.



A prison cell-sized installation by artist/activist jackie sumell formed the backdrop of "Emergence."

"Her installation was the size and space of an actual solitary cell," Cullen says. "It has its own story, which we incorporated into our piece. The cell has plants within it, so it became a beautiful garden. It's quite a different take, that's for sure. It reminds you of what we need to grow. We are putting human beings in these small spaces in the darkness. In a cell, people still manage to find a way to grow. We need the light and the nourishment, the sun on our faces. Treatment and programs can help people to heal."

The Hartford-based Judy Dworin Performance Project, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2019, has led dance workshops for more than 15 years at the women-only York Correctional Institution in Niantic. Recently, the troupe has also begun working with men at the Willard-Cybulski Correctional Institution in Enfield and in 2016 started a "Dads and Kids" program.

As teaching artists, Dworin and members of her company help the incarcerated share their experiences through writing. "Then we add dance and songs to it," Dworin says.

The incarceration theme initially came from the awarding of the 2020 Harriet Beecher Stowe Prize to "Solitary" by Albert Woodfox, a memoir of the decades he spent in solitary confinement for a murder he did not commit. Excerpts from "Solitary" are included in "Emergence," as are writings by Stowe.

The "Emergence" title was chosen, Dworin says, because "everything we do in the prison system is a statement of hope. What has been so significant to all of us who teach there is the resilience of those who are there. Otherwise, why bother? Within despair, there is a sense of hope. We show the need for change. We see things from a human lens."

The style of the show, with many short, unadorned pieces, "is the style we work with at prisons," Dworin says, though the company has not actually been allowed inside the correctional institutions since the COVID-19 pandemic started and does most of its visiting-artist work online these days.

"Emergence" makes its video premiere Feb. 17, followed by a live virtual talkback with its creators.

Cullen started working with Dworin in 2005 after she had been recently released from York and heard the choreographer "was looking for someone who'd been incarcerated but was out" for a new piece.

The writer had been a part of the anthology "Couldn't Keep It to Myself" compiled by novelist Wally Lamb and women at the York Correctional

Cullen describes one of the pieces she performs as being "about the day I realized I would be [in prison] the whole amount I was sentenced to, that I would be there for the entire three years. The second piece I wrote more recently, on what stays with me about my experience of my particular crime, kind of a reflection."

"Emergence" was filmed before a live audience at the Stowe Center. "It's the documentation of a performance, because we knew the live performance, outdoors in October would have a limited audience," Dworin explains.

Beyond the video screenings, the Stowe Center is holding a "Salons at Stowe" virtual event titled "Two Artists on the Creative Endeavor and Positive Social Change" on Feb. 20 at 7 p.m., when sumell and Dworin will discuss how the arts can effect meaningful changes in culture and society.

"Emergence Part 1? is an informal 45 minutes long, with five performers standing in a semicircle, offering mostly solo performances of a cappella songs, poems and firsthand memories of incarceration. Occasionally some performers offer harmony or percussion for each other's presentations. Four of the performers were once incarcerated and continue to work with Dworin now they are no longer in prison.

Part 2 is an hourlong presentation that opens with dancers in prison-style uniforms interacting with boxes of bright yellow flowers on the Stowe lawn. Writings about gardening, including from those who tended prison gardens, are recited while the dancers commune with nature. As with Part 1, there are also songs and readings. This time, six of the 10 performers were previously incarcerated.

The screenings of "Emergence" are free. Registration, at *give.judydworin.org/EmergenceFilmPremiere*, is required to view the premiere screening and live virtual talkback on Zoom on Feb. 17 at 6 p.m. with moderator Amy Hufnagel. The performances are on YouTube starting Feb. 18 at 7 p.m. More information on the "Emergence" project is at jdpp.org.

Christopher Arnott can be reached at carnott@courant.com.