

ARTS NEWS

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PROFILE ON PRISION PROGRAM

The Inside Story...

by Rebecca A. Sayles

**... has been incarcerated for two and a half years. She says,
"I never thought that dancing could make me feel so free...but it does.
I give my thanks, love, and support to Mary Johnson, who has given her
time to come into a facility and teach us what we are about to share with you...
A memory to believe in."**

On July 22, 1994, seven female inmates put on an inspirational dance production, *The Cabaret*, in the stark and dirty auditorium of the Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford Hills, New York.

"Putting the show together was not an easy task," says Artistic Director Mary Johnson, a dancer with her own studio in Peekskill. "Many obstacles had to be overcome, from getting permission to have an ice bucket for the girls who were working every day in 100 degree heat without air conditioning, to making sure the girls stuck with the program." Lugging bags of tap shoes, costumes, and plastic garbage bags to hang as back drops and window coverings to keep the light out, Johnson, along with her production assistant ... and special effects coordinator ..., invested time, talent, and resources to stretch the potential of the participants beyond what anyone could have imagined.

Approximately 250 fellow inmates and staff gathered in the auditorium to watch the "Taconic Seven" present a tap dance production set to music from *Come to the Cabaret*. ..., who debuted at the Apollo Theater's Amateur Show at the age of seven, provided the piano accompaniment, having learned the score completely by ear. Part of a six month alcohol and substance abuse treatment program at the facility, ... performed before a live audience for the first time in years. Beaming with pride, her performance was solid and moving. One could literally see the hope and confidence this experience had given her. ... hopes to play professionally when she gets out of the Bedford Hills

facility.

The "lead" of the show, ..., is a 36 year old grandmother. For her, this was an opportunity to renew her interest in modern dance which began in 1973 at the Ethical Culture School. Tall, graceful, and confident, she showed us all that natural talent--even when suppressed and denied--is never lost. Her sense of pride in artistic expression overcame the demoralizing stigma ascribed to her present environment.

Despite strict staff regulations and often difficult and challenging behavioral problems, these seven women worked diligently for four weeks, five days a week for one hour a day, to produce *The Cabaret*. This, however, was no ordinary production. All who participated admit the program was one that profoundly influenced their lives.

Artist Mary Johnson is the shining force behind this unusual effort. A dancer, recently accepted onto the Westchester Arts Council's artist roster, Johnson had the vision to carry this program through from beginning to end. She brought the arts to the hearts, minds, and tapping feet of seven women who will not forget the experience she gave them.

* Westchester artist Mary Johnson is a member of the Westchester Arts Council's artist roster. All artists on the Council's roster are professionally trained to provide workshops and demonstrations for schools, community centers, and cultural organizations throughout Westchester County. For further information about the artist roster, call 428-4220.