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ARTIST HIGHLIGHT

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by Rebecca A. Sayles

Taconic Tap Dancers

_____ has been incarcerated for two and a half years. "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 of the Taconic Correctional Facility 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 who has 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 110 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 over windows to keep the light out, Ms. Johnson, along with her production assistant _____ and special effects coordinator _____, invested their time, talent, and resources to stretch the artistic and mental 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. She is part of a six-month alcohol and substance abuse treatment program at the facility who hopes to play professionally when she gets out. This was _____'s first time in many years to play before a live audience. She was beaming with pride, and her performance was solid and moving. One could literally see the hope and confidence this experience had given her.

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 visible 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--a project that all of them admit has profoundly influenced their lives. The performance will be repeated at the facility on September 30 and will include an African dance component.

The shining force behind this whole effort is Mary Johnson, a dancer who was recently accepted onto the artist roster of the Westchester Arts Council after an extensive interview and panel review process. Artists on the roster are professionally trained to provide workshops and demonstrations for schools, community centers, and cultural organizations throughout Westchester County.