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Dancing like it's all they've got — and for some of them, it is

Dancer teaches women inmates something they can be proud of.

By Joan Vos Mac Donald
Star Writer

The bare stage seemed devoid of promise. Indifferently pinned sheets of cloth hung across some of the windows, dancers waited slackly before dirt-mottled walls.

Then, as the music started, the mood changed. Perched on the corner of what's left of the lid of an upright piano, [redacted] began her bittersweet song.

"Life is a cabaret my friend, life is a cabaret."

When her song faded, the dance began and the stage thundered with dozens of feet tapping out the steps. The energy was intense, as if all the ugliness in the dancers' lives was being exorcised.

And there's a lot of ugliness. These performers are enrolled in the Comprehensive Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment Program at the Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford Hills, some for the second and third time.

In dance many of these women have found a legitimate high.

"This to me is like a dream that never came true until today. Mary's like a miracle to me. She taught me that there are things in life that I can do, that I'm good at and I love it."

Contributions needed

Mary Johnson is looking for contributions to help stage her dance production. She needs costumes, tap shoes, makeup, lighting equipment, sound equipment, curtains, scenery, volunteers to work on programs and props. Some things, like safety pins, are

inexpensive.

For details, call 736-5681 or 528-8798 and leave a message, or call 737-9514. Donations may be dropped off in the parking lot at Johnson's studio, or mailed to On Time Dance Studio, 2125 Crompond Road, Peekskill, N.Y. 10566.

said inmate [redacted]

She was talking about her dance teacher, Mary Johnson.

"For some of these women, putting on this show is the first thing they can be truly proud of in their lives," said Johnson, a Cortlandt resident who volunteers five to 15 hours each week teaching at the prison. Johnson staged a performance there with seven women in July and will stage an expanded performance with 25 women on Friday.

Some of the show's cast have danced before. Others haven't, but Johnson is amazed at what they have accomplished, and it's not all mastering choreography.

"They've learned they can do something instead of walking around fighting and bickering. To dance they have to learn discipline and how to get along with each other," said Johnson, who has danced with Olantunji and Gregory Hines.

Inmate [redacted] has to struggle with substance abuse problems and an AIDS diagno-

sis. Dancing has helped her learn to cope with her anger.

"When I dance, I feel good even though I feel really bad about being in prison," said. "The girls in the show help me, and they don't kick me to the curb, which is an expression we have here. Here in prison usually the girls don't care about anyone but themselves."

To keep things in line, Johnson is tough. Usually soft-spoken, the dancer shrilly barks out orders during rehearsals, she doesn't allow smoking or cursing, or not following through.

"It's almost like being home, hearing your mother yell," said [redacted]. "Sometimes you just need that extra person in your life."

"I tell my dancers that when they get out, they should get a job and take dance lessons, they should continue. When there's trouble, they should just go dance and not get involved," Johnson said.

Meanwhile, the show must go



Staff photos: Frank Becerra Jr

▲ Mary Johnson, center, donates her time teaching inmates at the Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford Hills how to dance. Here she practices a number with inmates for an upcoming performance at the prison on Sept. 30. ▼ Johnson gets ready to direct her dancers



on. Johnson borrows tap shoes for her dancers and uses the simplest of props to help them create the illusion of Broadway. She hopes she will have a grant next year for costumes and stage equipment. In the meantime, she will somehow be able to make the show something to remember.

"I'm not going to reach them all," Johnson said. "If I can just help one of them, it will be worth it. They have so little, and, you know, it could be us — any of us — in the wrong place at the wrong time, choosing the wrong person."