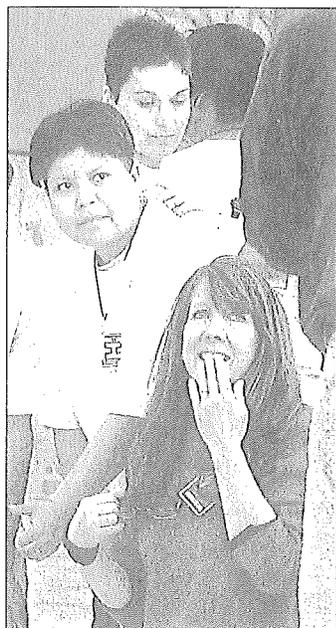




PHOTOS BY BRUCE KELLMAN | THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Mary Grace Fajarillo, an inmate at the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Purdy, acts out her role "seeing no way out of sorrow" during a rehearsal Sunday for a play the inmates are staging at the prison. The women wrote their stories and are performing them with the help of a Seattle theater group, Freehold Studio Theatre Lab.



Director Robin Lynn Smith, front, of Freehold Studio helps block a scene from the play, "Common Threads - A Journey Home," with inmates including Leona Minthorn, center, and Melissa Bales, top.

A journey to redemption

Prison: For these women, writing and performing their stories is more than a way to pass the time

BY ADAM LYNN | The News Tribune

This is a story of despair. Of murder, attempted suicide, abandonment, abuse, imprisonment. A story of women who have screwed up their lives so badly it boggles the mind.

But it's also a story of hope, of these same women seeking healing, solace and a better life through creative expression.

It is not based on a true story. It is one.

Scene 1

Sunday.

The curtain opens on a gymnasium at the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Purdy, near Gig Harbor.

Under the basketball hoop, among several colorful tapestries hung from volleyball net stanchions, six women incarcerated at the prison mingle

with a handful of thespians from Seattle. They all wear T-shirts. There are smiles.

It is spring, and sunlight is glinting off the razor wire ringing the huge chain-link fence outside.

The group is rehearsing its play - "Common Threads: A Journey Home." The play opened Monday. There is a repeat performance today. Outside of the prison population -

more than 900 as of last count - few will see the play. It's too hard to get the general public through security.

The inmate actors, from Republic, Portland and points in between, wrote "Common Threads" themselves. It is based on scenes from their lives and their dreams. They also are the main actors.

Amy Wheeler is a playwright with Freehold Studio Theatre Lab in Seattle, which has shepherded the play along since October and provided artistic guidance to the women, including acting workshops and writing tips.

Wheeler: "This play is about someone who left home and now is on her journey back. It is transformational to watch them tell their stories and put themselves out there. They want to be better when they leave here."

The play has practical applications for prison officials.

Such projects help occupy the time and energy of the inmates.

Please see **Prison**, B2

Prison

Continued from B1

keeping them out of trouble, they said. Inmates who rack up infractions can't participate, can't tell their stories.

Scene 2

Enter Melissa Bales, a tall, thin woman from Republic. Married at 15, she was convicted of burglary at 19 and came here seven years ago. She is scheduled for release in 2009, when she'll be 31.

She is clearly excited about being able to perform in the play.

Bales: "Wherever there's drama, there's me. Really, though, I can take out my aggression here and my energy and be productive."

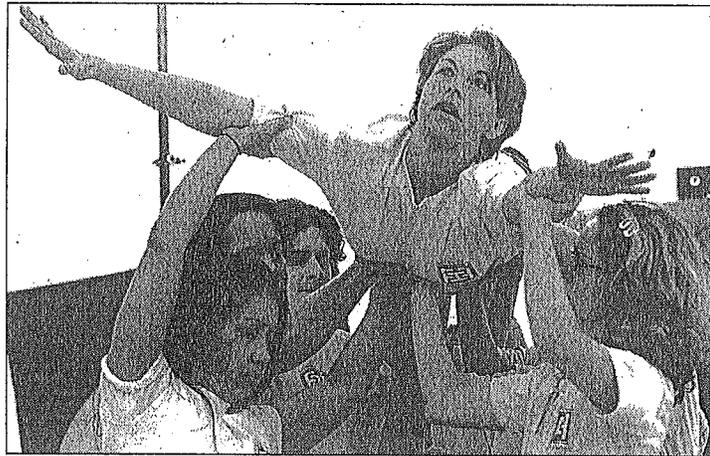
Forward to sequence where the players act out the day one of the inmates was first admitted to prison. The players shuffle along in a line, looking downtrodden.

Bales, in soliloquy: "So what if you have to fight on your first day? Joe used to beat you for years. Damn, these chains hurt. Am I crying? Yes, I am. Damn, stop crying. Hold yourself together: Mom, Dad, I'm sorry. Am I crying? Yes. So this is my life."

Scene 3

Enter Simon Hamlin, Freehold player.

Hamlin studies lines during a break in the rehearsal.



BRUCE KELLMAN | THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Inmates and Seattle theater volunteers join together during a rehearsal Sunday to support inmate Betty Donley as she portrays a low, uncertain point in life as though she's inside the belly of a whale. Helping Donley are, from left, inmates Mary Grace Fajarillo and Cherie Burch, and volunteers Simon Hamlin and Shana Cordon.

He smiles as he explains what he gets out of coming inside the wire to perform theater with felons.

Hamlin: "The most interesting part is being exposed to groups of people and individuals I wouldn't normally be around and finding out how alike we are. To me, they're not inmates. They're friends. They're collaborators."

Two also are murderers.

Scene 4

Flash to Mary Grace Fajarillo.

She is 26 and shot a man in the head in 1999. Convicted in Snohomish County Superior Court of second-degree murder, she is

scheduled for release in 2014.

Fajarillo, on taking part in "Common Threads": "I made a change for myself. It's a positive experience for me. It's very growing. I want to make myself mentally, physically and spiritually fit."

Forward to Fajarillo, wearing a ball cap backward and rapping a song she wrote herself for the play.

She concentrates intently and sways to the bass-heavy music.

Fajarillo, rapping: "Don't dig rhymes from any mad hatter."

Scene 5

Enter Cherie Burch, mother of

four and convicted armed robber. She is tall and wears bright red shoes.

Her voice projects well during her scenes.

Cut to dream sequence. A woman reunites with her three children after her release from prison. They have grown big. She hopes she has grown wiser.

The kids are resentful.

Burch tries to win them over by admitting her mistakes and promising never to forsake their love again.

Burch, hauntingly: "I have lost a lot in my life. I have lost life in my life."

Denouement

Flash to scene of cast members entwining their bodies to form what is meant to symbolize a mountain.

Fajarillo, hitching a red backpack onto her shoulders, climbs atop the mountain and sits facing the audience. Her fellow players support her.

Offstage, inmate Betty Donley speaks into a microphone: "As this journey has ended, so shall another begin."

Cast walks to center of room and chants a South African prayer of empowerment. They raise their fists in the air.

Curtain.

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