



Megan Lowe in "Meet Us Quickly With Your Mercy." (Photo/RJ Muna)

CULTURE > DANCE

After setbacks, aerial dance on mass incarceration to premiere in S.F.

BY **ANDREW ESENSTEN** | OCTOBER 5, 2021

Choreographer Jo Kreiter faced numerous challenges in her quest to stage the second installment of her "Decarceration Trilogy," an aerial dance series that addresses the effects of mass incarceration. To start, her main collaborator, writer Rahsaan Thomas, lives at San Quentin State Prison. The two communicated about the show by phone and letter, as face-to-face and Zoom meetings were not options.

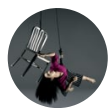
Then the late musician Jewlia Eisenberg, who worked on the score, was forced to step away from the production due to illness; she **died** last March at age 50. The pandemic also proved to be a major disruption, with one dancer dropping out over health concerns. And, on top of that, smoke from the wildfires last year made rehearsing at a Mission studio with the doors open as a Covid precaution untenable.

"We created this piece amidst a triumvirate of obstacles that I don't wish on any artist," Kreiter, a 2019 Guggenheim Fellow, told J. "I'm so grateful to my cast and crew for hanging in there and persisting in their creativity despite so much discomfort and fear."

"Meet Us Quickly With Your Mercy" will finally be staged outdoors in downtown San Francisco this month, a year later than planned. Dancers will perform in and around cages suspended from the facades of the CounterPulse art center and the Dahlia Hotel, while audience members watch from across the street. The location was chosen because of its proximity to a halfway house for formerly incarcerated people on Turk Street.

The show is presented in partnership with Bend the Arc Jewish Action, the Museum of the African Diaspora and [Prison Renaissance](#). There will be eight performances from Oct. 14 to 17, and [tickets](#) are free.

The first installment in Kreiter’s trilogy, “[The Wait Room](#),” focused on the struggles of women with loved ones in prison. (Kreiter’s husband served six years in federal prison for “committing harm” after experiencing a mental health crisis, and he is now a “returned citizen,” she said.) The second attempts to link Black and Jewish histories of oppression by presenting personal narratives of being caged or trapped.



The Wait Room - Flyaway 2019 - Excerpts

from [FlyawayProductions](#)

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Thomas, a co-host of the popular “[Ear Hustle](#)” podcast, opens up about his life at San Quentin in a recording that plays during the show. (His sentence was recently commuted, Kreiter said, but he is still waiting to be released.) The sound score also includes two Yiddish songs selected and performed by Eisenberg, one of which is about non-Jewish Europeans who hid Jewish children in their homes during the Holocaust. Kreiter said Eisenberg may have chosen that song because it speaks to the plight of migrants at the southern U.S. border. “That’s a choice that Jewlia made, and I wish she was around to talk about it,” she said.

Kreiter is quick to point out that she is not comparing Black and Jewish suffering in “Meet Us Quickly With Your Mercy.” Instead, she said she is trying to tease out different historical “resonances” in order to “pull everyone into alignment to resist” the American prison system. “I think that there are Jews who don’t necessarily think about mass incarceration in America as connected to their own experience,” she said. “If there’s anything this piece does, I want it to bring that connection forward.”

Asked about the title, she said it is an interpretation of [Psalm 79:8](#): “Don’t hold the iniquities of our forefathers against us. Let your tender mercies speedily meet us, for we are in desperate need.”

During the show’s run, an exhibition of artwork created by incarcerated men at San Quentin will be on display at CounterPulse.

The third and final installment in Kreiter’s trilogy — the full title of which is “The Decarceration Trilogy: Dismantling the Prison Industrial Complex One Dance at a Time” — is set to premiere in 2022, barring any major setbacks.

“Meet Us Quickly With Your Mercy”

Oct. 14-16 at 7 p.m. and 8:30 p.m., with an additional showing on Oct. 16 at 5 p.m., and Oct. 17 at 7 p.m. only. At CounterPulse, 80 Turk St., S.F. Free. [flyawayproductions.com](#)

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