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

BY ANDREW ESSENSTEN | 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 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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Tags: dance, Bend the Arc, prison reform, Jewlia Eisenberg, aerial dance, Museum of the African Diaspora, mass incarceration, Prison Renaissance

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