



DANCE

Flyaway Productions’ explores the complexities of the prison system in latest aerial work

Rachel Howard | October 15, 2021 Updated: October 15, 2021, 1:25 pm



Laura Elaine Ellis (left), Bianca Cabrera and Helen Wicks in “Meet Us Quickly With Your Mercy.”
Photo: Brechin Flournoy



few people sleeping on sidewalk mattresses, fire trucks flashing past. If you took your gaze up the purple brick walls of 80 Turk, though, a surreal element entered the scene. There, high on the sides of CounterPulse, women suspended from ropes bounded through the air, propelling themselves into soaring somersaults as their larger-than-life shadows also swung and spun.

It was a spectacle with a purpose. More than two years in the making because of COVID-19 setbacks, “Meet Us Quickly With Your Mercy” finally made its debut on Thursday, Oct. 14. It’s the second installment in a trilogy addressing mass incarceration by Jo Kreiter, an aerial dancer with a background in political science who started her company, Flyaway Productions, in 1996. The dance is so highly anticipated that it sold out its run, which continues through Sunday, Oct. 17. But it is still accessible: Flyaway added an extra performance, and anyone can view the dance without a ticket just by standing on the street.

As site-specific performance, “Mercy” is seamlessly effective, drawing the viewer into a heightened reality that makes every booming car stereo, every chaotic contingency of passersby part of a heightened immersion. As a conversational fulcrum, the work is even more effective, and it is born of deep conversation.

“Mercy” began in 2018 when Kreiter put out a call “for a Black change-maker” interested in collaborating with a Jewish artist on a work about racial justice and prison abolition. She eventually connected with Rahsaan Thomas, a writer and co-host/co-producer of the Pulitzer Prize-nominated and DuPont Award-winning podcast “Ear Hustle,” serving a life sentence for murder at San Quentin.

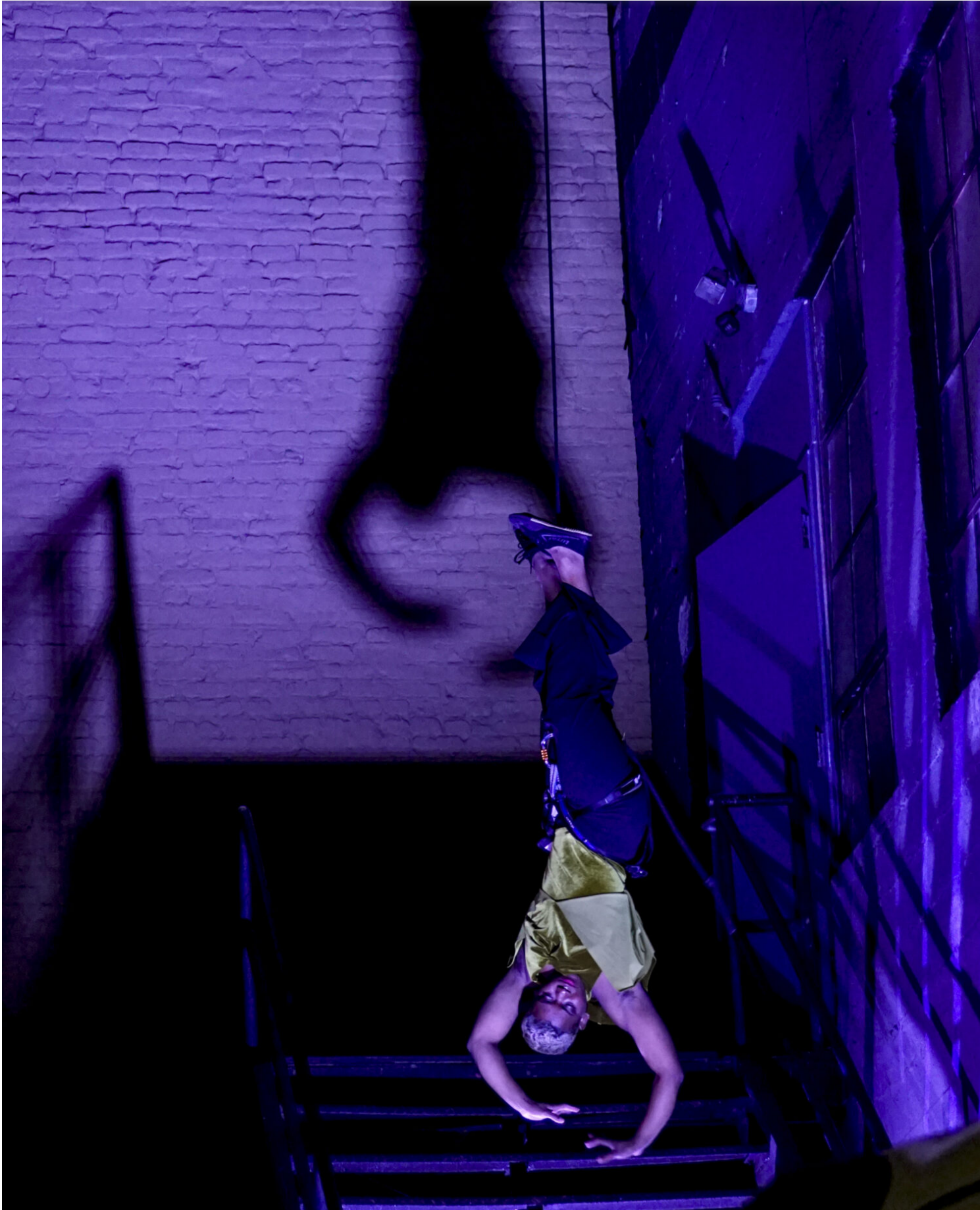
“I’m up to having written about 64 letters, and I think we read about 10 books together,” Kreiter said of her exchanges with Thomas before the show.





DATEBOOK

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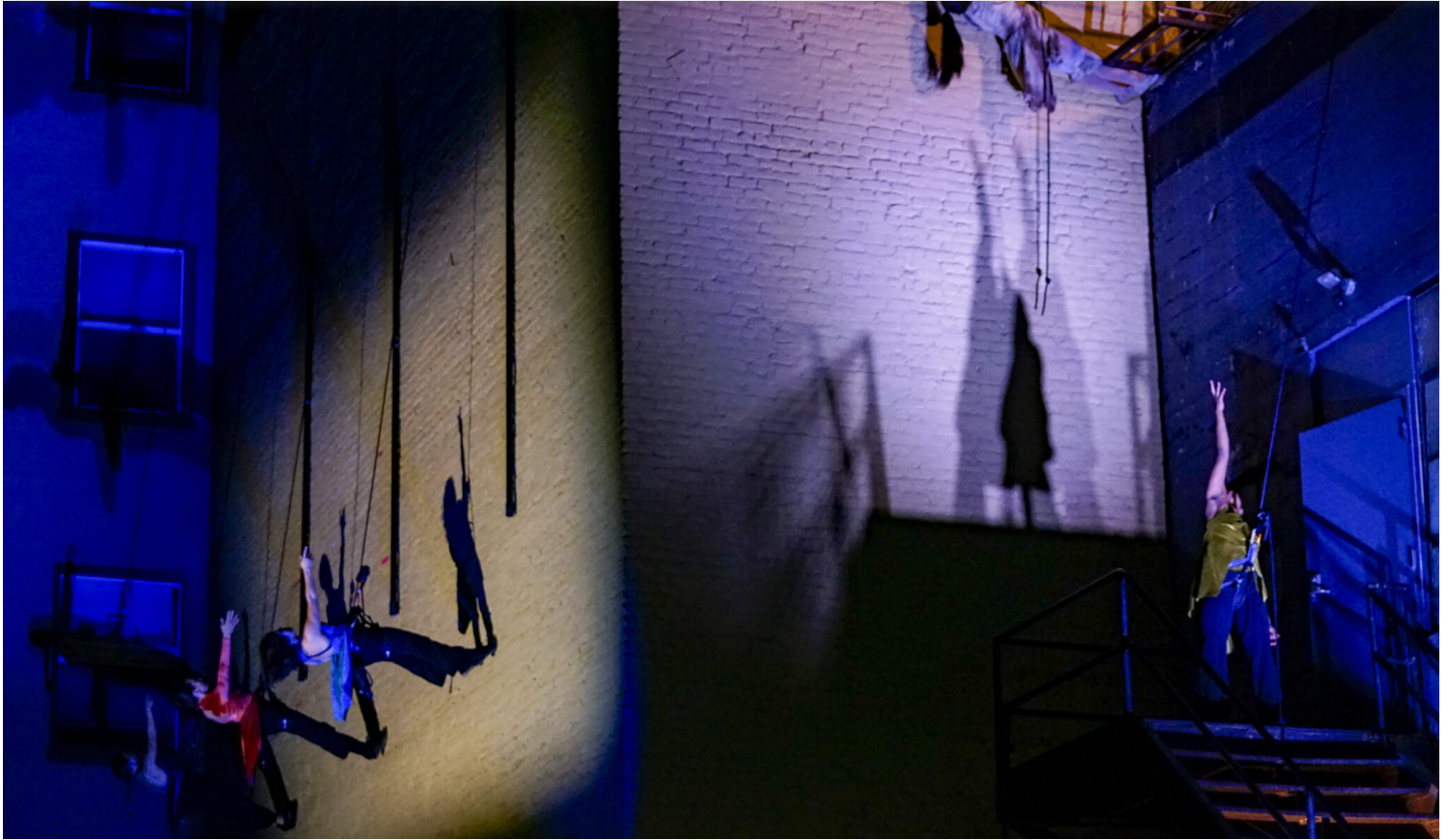




“Mercy” unfolds in three sections, each inviting the viewer to further research and reflection. “Pushed and Shoved” integrates Thomas’ poem “Why I Run in Prison” as read over the phone into the evocative score by Jewlia Eisenberg. Inside a metal cage suspended from CounterPulse’s roof, Clarissa Dyas writhes and levitates, as Laura Elaine Ellis above seems to taunt.

The next section, “Trog (Carrying),” incorporates two Yiddish songs. Here Kreiter finds complex emotional common ground with Thomas (though not equivalency) through what she calls “the ancestral memory” of Holocaust capture. Helen Wicks and Ellis portray historical characters who resisted dehumanization.

The final section, “Chasing Freedom,” contains the most athletic aerial work. Maddy Lawder, Sandia Sexton and Megan Lowe propel themselves in unison while holding long black sticks, enhanced by Sean Riley’s set design and Jack Beuttler’s dramatic lighting. Quotes from Bay Area activist and scholar Angela Davis and social justice advocate Eric Ward are featured over the music, urging listeners to “be a partner in the struggle for civil rights” and linking antisemitism with “violence that targets people of color.”



From left, Maddy Lawder, Sandia Sexton, Megan Lowe, Bianca Cabrera and Clarissa Dyas in “Meet Us Quickly With Your Mercy.”

Photo: Photo by Brechin Flournoy

It's only a springboard to deeper reading needed to understand the complex realities of the prison system, but to attendees like Carol Jean Wisnieski, it served a need.

“I come because it's inspirational,” said Wisnieski, a former English as a second language instructor who has lived in San Francisco for 50 years. The subject of reforming mass incarceration particularly spoke to her, she said, because she had taught ESL in the city jail and has seen firsthand that students behind bars were hungry to learn.

“This is a great approach to connect people to a topic that should be on the agenda because dance is an under-the-skin kind of experience,” she continued. “Maybe someone doesn't take in the information through books, but this can be their entry.”

The Museum of the African American Diaspora co-presented this production, and Kreiter is already at work on the final trilogy installment. Planned for 2022, it is a collaboration

Now that we've looked at the experience and the issues, Kreter said, we want to explore the solutions.”

“Meet Us Quickly With Your Mercy”: Flyaway Productions. 7 and 8:30 p.m. Friday-Sunday, Oct. 15-17; 5 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 16. CounterPulse, 80 Turk St., S.F. Free. 415-626-2060. counterpulse.org/event/mercy

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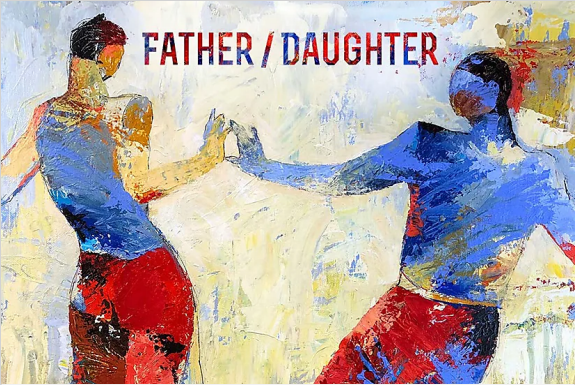
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Rachel Howard

Rachel Howard is a Bay Area freelance writer


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