

## TIMES INSIDER

# A Dance Critic Visits an Extraordinary Stage

Performing rudimentary moves, inmates in the California state prison system were uncommonly open with their stories.



By **Brian Seibert**

Brian Seibert is a dance critic for The New York Times.

June 23, 2023

I usually write about art, mainly dance, by reporting from theaters or studios. So it was strange when dance drew me inside a penitentiary in March 2020.

I was at the California State Prison, Los Angeles County, an all-male, maximum-security facility, to attend a dance rehearsal. In 2019, Dimitri Chamblas, a prestigious French choreographer, met with prisoners there; he was so taken with the men and their stories that he created a long-term dance program that would conclude in April 2020 with a public performance. I was there to watch a rehearsal and to interview the participants of the program.

Gaining access to the rehearsal was tricky. I first had to acquire clearances and permissions. Certain clothing was banned. When I entered the prison, a stray cloud of pepper spray burned my eyes and throat.

Chamblas had also warned me that rehearsals could be canceled at the last minute if a disturbance in the prison prompted a lockdown. But other than that hint of pepper spray, I entered smoothly and encountered a surprisingly familiar situation.

Chamblas and I sat in a classroom with seven or eight of the participants. The men — convicted felons, most of them serving sentences for gang-related murders — were exceptionally open in their interviews. They were thoughtful and eager to share their experiences in life and in the dance program.

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Much of what Chamblas had them doing was the kind of postmodern dance that's often called pedestrian: mostly walking, running and weight-sharing. There were trust exercises like those done at a corporate retreat. I had seen all of the moves many times before.

But I remembered something Chamblas had previously told me about his own experiences as a dancer, about how basic gestures could change in meaning depending on the context. Inside a prison, where motion is so controlled and regulated, even clichés of postmodern dance resonate differently. And the meanings shifted again as I considered what the men told me about how radical and defiant they felt moving this way — being vulnerable, touching one another, expressing their creativity.

The men told me how dance was changing how they saw themselves. I could see that. I could also see how dance might change how they were seen by someone from the outside, someone like me. This insight would be key to the article I eventually wrote. But that reporting took a very long time because, soon after I visited, the coronavirus pandemic shut down most of the world.

At the prison, rehearsals and the performance were postponed, and no one knew for how long. Over the coming months, which extended into years, I kept in touch over the phone with Chamblas and several of the class participants, learning how they were faring under pandemic conditions. I kept track as those conditions shifted — the variants, the surges — and rehearsals were rescheduled and then canceled many times.

During that time, most of the participants I met in 2020 were transferred to other prisons or released on parole. One still incarcerated was Kenneth W. Webb, who had helped start the prison dance class. He had been transferred to the California Institution for Men, in Chino, and asked Chamblas to start a new version of the dance class there. Webb wanted to continue the process and expose more incarcerated men to the transformative power of dance.

In September 2022, I was able to visit the new class at the California Institution for Men and meet with five of the participants. That November, the group was finally able to put on a public performance, which I attended alongside students from colleges affiliated with the program, potential donors and a few former participants in the class who were out on parole. It was a kind of graduation ceremony, with certificates, followed by discussion circles. But the dance portion had the same effect on me as it did during the first rehearsal: Performed by those men in that place, the simple motions were incredibly moving.

The performance gave me an ending to the article I was writing. But the pandemic-forced delay had affected its shape — and expanded it. The new class had introduced me to the stories of more incarcerated men, very few of whom I could include in the story, but it also sharpened its focus. The class, like the one before it, was a volunteer effort that struggled in many ways against the grain of prison culture and the systems and priorities of prison administration. The extra time helped me see the resilience required to keep the program going.

After the performance, Chamblas talked to me about the importance of long-term relationships and patience. And after nearly three years of reporting, I understood what he meant.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 2 of the New York edition with the headline: A Dance Critic Before an Unlikely Stage