

Voices from Within: *Sentence: Flying in Place III*

Brian Zhang, staff writer

America has the most imprisoned people in the world, followed by China, Brazil, and India. Within the United States, Virginia has the highest incarceration rate. Inmates are paid less than a dollar an hour and pay up to a dollar to spend 5 minutes on the phone with their families. *Sentence: Flying in Place III* is a performance based on the creative writings of inmates in the PVCC Higher Education in Prison Program. It is the third installment in a series first conceived last spring under the leadership of Dean of Humanities, Fine Arts, and Social Sciences Leonda Keniston and English Professor Ben Sloan, who will be performing in the ensemble.

The show will consist of multiple episodes or “frames,” curated by Associate Professor of Theater Arts and Director Brad Stoller, Co-director LaTasha Strother, or one of the cast members. Together, the frames seek to share the experience of being incarcerated through a multi-disciplinary presentation.

I was invited to watch a rehearsal of an untitled frame curated and coordinated by PVCC student Azin Peymani, which is focused on the theme of self forgiveness. An essay written by an anonymous inmate was narrated by student Ava Peymani while Azin produced a stunning, if somber, vocal accompaniment. Other members of the cast complemented the essay’s inner conflict with freeform choreography, creating another layer of emotion.

Through this original presentation of essays and poems written by incarcerated students, Azin hopes the audience can take away an “empathy for individuals we can’t relate to, and use that ability in everyday life.” She described the artistic process as therapeutic, providing both a medium of empathy and an outlet for her negative emotions. The cast has spent many months planning and

rehearsing the various episodes, but Azin’s frame in particular will be a live performance wherein movements and vocals are freestyled.

The ensemble was clearly very talented. With the frames presented in sequence, they hope to capture experiences from dining to mail, transportation to visitation. As Stoller put it, “We’re following a progression of the experiences a prisoner goes through from being booked to the time they’re released.” By definition, the lives of inmates are hidden from those on the outside. The performers here hope to expand awareness and compassion for those incarcerated, many of whom are PVCC students like those going to campus or taking online classes.

Sentence: Flying in Place III will take place on the Dickinson Main Stage free to all on April 28 and 29 at 7:30 p.m., and April 30 at 2:30 p.m.



Photography by Brian Zhang