



3-30-2011

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Rachel Hatch

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel, "Dance Concert Explores Homelessness" (2011). *News and Events*. 1778.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1778>

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Dance Concert Explores Homelessness

March 30, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – A new dance concert at Illinois Wesleyan University strives to capture the struggles and emotions of being homeless, transforming an IWU faculty member's interviews of homeless men into expressive dance.

The concert, titled *The Monkey Trail*, will run from Tuesday, April 5 to Sunday, April 10 in the McPherson Theatre (2 Ames Plaza East, Bloomington). Performances will be at 8 p.m. April 5-9, and 2 p.m. April 10. Tickets for the weekday and Sunday concerts are \$10 for the general public, \$9 for seniors and \$2 for Illinois Wesleyan students, faculty and staff. Tickets for the Friday and Saturday performances are \$12 for the general public, \$11 for seniors and \$2 for student, faculty and staff. Contact the McPherson Box Office at (309) 556-3232 or online at www.iwu.edu/theatre. Canned food goods and donations will be collected at the door to benefit the local Home Sweet Home Mission.



Students perform in The Monkey Trail

The idea for the concert began several years ago, and culminated when Illinois Wesleyan Associate Professor of Theatre Arts and Coordinator of Dance Program Jean Kerr spent last summer interviewing homeless people at two shelters in St. Louis. Working with a transitional housing program, Kerr also led the men in workshops of dance and movement as part of the *community collabARTive* project. "After recovering from a feeling of 'Who me? Dance?,' these men experienced the constructs and confounds of dance and movement," said Kerr, who videotaped the workshops and interviews, pieces of which will appear in the dance performance. "It allows real life to overlap what is on stage."

Returning to Illinois Wesleyan after the interviews, Kerr utilized the tapes in her classroom, challenging students to create choreography based on what they saw and heard. "I wanted students to incorporate new insights and understanding about homelessness into their choreography," she said, noting the face of homelessness has changed over the last several decades. Today it is parents picking up children at school before returning to the family car where they live. It is people who work two or three minimum-wage jobs, but cannot make rent. It is the middle class, caught up in the economic crisis. "You might walk down the street and not recognize someone as homeless," said Kerr.

For the April concert, Kerr combined the work of the students, guest choreographers, and her own responses to the interviews and workshops, weaving the themes that emerged, from the struggle for shelter to love, relationships and the hope for escape. She also worked with IWU Associate Professor of Theatre Dani Snyder-Young, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork and interviews for an article on homeless artists creating theatre in Minneapolis in 2009. "We worked together and established themes for each chapter of the performance," said Kerr, who directed the concert while Snyder-Young took on the task of dramaturg.

Kerr said she hopes the project will open the eyes of audience members, and humanize those battling homelessness. The title "Monkey Trail," refers to the daily trek homeless people must make each day when the overnight shelters close at 6 a.m. Gathering up all of their earthly belongings, the men and women and families trek throughout the day to find services, shelter and avoid harassment. "Homelessness is a condition, not an identity," said Kerr. "It is a changeable condition."

For additional information on the concert, contact Kerr at (309) 556-3755. For tickets, contact the McPherson Box Office at McPherson Box Office at (309) 556-3232 or online at www.iwu.edu/theatre.

Dancers: Amy Bannon '11, Caitlin Borek '12, Blake Brauer '12, Josh Conrad '12, Ian Coulter-Buford '12, Vince Gargo '11, Miranda Kiefer '11, Erika Lecaj '11, Laura Martino '12, Sarah Pierpoint '12, Melina Rey '11, Abby Root '12, Annie Simpson '13, Peter Studlo '12, Julie Tucker '11

Production Team: Associate Professor of Theatre Arts Jean MacFarland Kerr (director and choreographer), Michelle Kranicke (choreographer), Adjunct Professor in Theatre Arts Sheri Marley (choreographer), Dance Instructor Greg Merriman (choreographer), Jessica Riss-Waltrip (choreographer), Theatre Arts Recruiting Coordinator Bernadette Brennan (scenic design), Associate Professor of Theatre Arts Marcia McDonald (costume designer), Mike Oesch (lighting director), Zach Mahler '13 (sound designer), Ally Moravec '11 (video designer), Charlene Ifenso-Okpala '13 (properties master), Michelle Milham '11 (stage manager), Assistant Professor of Theatre Arts Dani Snyder-Young (dramaturg)

Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960