



PHOTOS BY JOSEPH GLODE

Johnny Stallings, an actor and theater director, founded the Open Hearts Open Minds program at Two Rivers Correctional Institution. The program consists of an annual theatrical production, as well as weekly dialogues, where inmates talk about their lives and how they can improve them.

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE  
STAFF WRITER

It is Saturday, Sept. 24, and a dozen men imprisoned in Two Rivers Correctional Institution, a medium-security prison in Umatilla, wait in the prison's visiting room for their guests to arrive.

They are not dressed in their prison uniforms, the blue denim jeans and navy blue t-shirts with the red stamps that say "INMATE." Instead, they wear cream-colored tunics with ruffled sleeves and black tights. One inmate is dressed in a full tuxedo and plays Chopin on a piano that sits on top of a small stage bordered by Grecian columns.

Two inmates hand out a playbill at the door.

"Enjoy the show," one says, smiling broadly.

It is opening night, a night the men have looked forward to and worked toward for six months. Tonight, and for five subsequent shows, they perform Mary Zimmerman's "Metamorphoses," a Tony Award-winning play adapted from the classical Roman poet Ovid's epic work.

The play tells the tales of various Greek myths, such as the story of King Midas, a greedy king whose wish to turn everything around him into gold by touching those objects brings about ruin and heartbreak when he touches his daughter; of Echo, a mountain nymph who repels the advances of her would-be lover until her heart is broken by Narcissus, whose own beauty makes him so proud and vain that he falls in love with himself; of Erysichthon, who was cursed by the gods to be endlessly afflicted by hunger after he cut down a sacred grove of trees.

The stories are ultimately about love – how we find and lose love, and possibly regain it. The play is almost radical in how starkly its message – and the warnings

implied in it – is portrayed.

In many ways, the stories mirror the love and sense of self-discovery the inmates have found because of the man who originally brought theater to them: Johnny Stallings.

Stallings, 65, is an actor, a theater director and the founding executive director of Open Hearts Open Minds, a Portland-based nonprofit that seeks to transform the lives of Oregon's inmates through dialogue, music, theater and artistic expression.

He has never stopped thinking about the meaning of life – how we can be happier, more peaceful, freer, more loving. Since 2006, he has facilitated a weekly dialogue group at Two Rivers, where a group of self-selecting inmates gather in a circle and spend two hours talking about their lives and how they can be better.

In 2008, they asked him if he would direct them in a play, and since then, inmates at Two Rivers have performed an annual

# Opening hearts and minds

*Through dialogue and theater, Johnny Stallings helps inmates step back from their troubled lives and discover their potential*

production.

Through the work done in the dialogue group and as actors intersect, the inmates consider people's motivations, how anger or frustration or happiness is expressed, how a person's actions affect others – some of the most fundamental questions we face.

"I think all people are hungry for meaning and to think about and be asked, what's going on here? What does it mean? What is your life about?" Stallings said.

He calls the work of Open Hearts Open Minds "the nonstop love-in." He is not being facetious or expressing nostalgia for the late 1960s. He has met dozens of prisoners, many of whom have committed heinous crimes. What he found is that they all have a humanity and potential that is rarely expressed.

"At the core of everybody, everybody, without exception, there is something extremely beautiful, something perfect,

something good," Stallings said.

To the inmates, Stallings is part father figure and part guru who has helped them to completely change their lives and discover the good within themselves.

"Metamorphoses" begins with the *Mc*Cosmogony, the story of the creation of the universe.

The audience of 30 – family and friends of the inmates, as well as theatergoers who support Open Hearts Open Minds – took their seats arranged in a U-shape around a shallow pool built out of board and decorated with colorful fabric.

Minutes before the play began, a couple of inmates scurried throughout the room, placing props and organizing the costumes they and their fellow actors would change into. Two of their co-directors, Victoria Spencer and Anna Crandall, gave last-minute advice.

The piano had been removed from the stage, but the tuxedo-clad inmate, who was trained in classical piano since he was a child, had written an original score for the play and began playing, a signal that the play had begun.

Jack Baird, 52, an inmate with silky, swept-back hair, a trim goatee and prominent cheekbones, was perfect in the part of Zeus. He smoked a fake cigar as he looked down into the pool, what would be the universe. The rest of the actors surrounded the pool and gazed into it, as well.

Zeus creates order out of chaos – land and sea, air and fire. But he realizes something is missing: man. He creates man, played by the actors sitting around the pool. But something is still missing – words, so Zeus gives man the power to speak.

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