

DIALOGUE, from page 5

perhaps resulting in their deaths.

"One opportunity of prison is that it's a time out," Stallings said.

Scott Strickland, 60, said he needed to put the brakes on his life. He joined Stallings' group one month after he arrived at Two Rivers, in October 2010. He said it was the first time he had ever talked about his childhood, which he described as traumatic, or the way his life spiraled out of control due to undiagnosed depression, he said.

The mood problems he experienced, which he could not explain before, made him "develop this protective coating" around himself. Lying and deceiving those around him became normal.

"It was so icky," Strickland said.

He said that he's learned how to be vulnerable and honest with himself, together with "a good bunch of people repairing themselves."

Stallings found his way to Oregon's Prisons by happenstance.

He was living in a small cabin near Antelope, Ore., in the early 2000s, spending time "feeding the birds, drinking coffee and eating cookies" while he deepened his meditation practice, a practice he began while living and traveling throughout India during his 20s.

"I was on the full-tilt spiritual quest kind of thing," he said.

College had not suited him. He dropped out after half a year and never finished. Of his time in India, Stallings said, "it set a trajectory, maybe."

This was an understatement. His backpack has been filled with books on spirituality and philosophy ever since.

In 2004, the state announced that a new prison, Deer Ridge Correctional Institution, would be built east of Madras. A Jefferson County commissioner organized a tour of Two Rivers for people interested in learning what Deer Ridge would be like.

Stallings was curious, so he went. He later asked prison officials if he could perform a

solo version he wrote of William Shakespeare's "King Lear" for the inmates. He gave a second performance, then returned the following year to perform his one-man version of "Hamlet."

After each performance, he invited the prisoners to discuss the performance. Their questions and comments inspired him to start the dialogue group at Two Rivers in 2006. Shortly after, Stallings moved to Portland. He made the six-hour round trip to Two Rivers, along Interstate 84, every week. He formed Open Hearts Open Minds in 2007 and has since attracted dozens of volunteers, such as Crandall, Spencer and Patrick Walsh, who help facilitate the dialogue groups and the theater programs. The organization now runs similar groups at Portland's Columbia River Correctional Institution and Wilsonville's Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, which also has a theater program.

Since they started the plays in 2010, the Two Rivers inmates have performed "Hamlet," "A Winter's Tale" and other Shakespeare plays.

This year's performance of "Metamorphoses" was the first time Stallings did not direct the play. Crandall and Spencer alternate the weeks they drive to Umatilla to direct rehearsals. Walsh, a professional theater director, joins one of them most weeks.

It was also the first time the inmates picked the play. Previously, Stallings had always chosen the play and the play had always been Shakespeare.

The inmates selected "Metamorphoses" after reading a dozen plays, including Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide," Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" and Sam Shepard's "Curse of the Starving Class."

Over six months, the actors gathered once a week for three-hour rehearsals. Outside of rehearsal, they found time to practice lines and act out scenes with one another.

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PATRICK WALSH,
THEATER DIRECTOR AND
OPEN HEARTS OPEN MINDS
VOLUNTEER

"They work harder than some of the professional casts that I have had," Walsh said. "They are heavily invested in it."

Actors not only memorize lines when they learn a role; they assume the persona of their character and must figure out how that person thinks and feels and why they speak the words in the script and react as they do.

"You find yourself relating to the themes of the play, different situations of how people really are," Hutchinson said. He said he recognizes parts of himself in a character and thinks, "I've done things like that. I don't like what he's doing."

It might be strange to imagine prisoners, with big muscles and tattoos and tough-guy struts, playing women, crying on stage, or expressing the anguish of a parent who has lost a child. But many of the inmates relish taking on complicated roles or women's roles.

There are funny moments in "Metamorphoses," but much of the play is heartbreaking: characters die, are punished by the gods, lose loved ones.

One of the final scenes tells the story of Eros, the god of love, and Psyche, a mortal. They fall passionately in love with each other, and Psyche goes to Eros' palace to live with him. But she does not know what he looks like; Psyche cannot know that he is a god. Her jealous sisters tell her that he is a monster.

Psyche, played by Strickland, sneaks into the palace while Eros, played by Tim Hinkhouse, is asleep in the middle of the stage to see what he really looks like. The story is told in a question and answer format, with Hutchinson playing the questioner and Josh Friar answering his questions.

"She doesn't trust what she has felt herself?" Hutchinson asked, watching Psyche

approach Eros.

"Not with the radical trust we need," Friar responded.

The gods punish Psyche, subjecting her to labor, such as picking up thousands of tiny seeds. But then the gods put a stop to it and make Psyche immortal. The marriage between Eros, or Cupid, and Psyche lasts forever.

"So it has a happy ending?" the questioner asked.

"It has a very happy ending," the answerer responded.

"Almost none of these stories have completely happy endings."

"This is different."

"Why is that?"

"It's just inevitable. The soul wanders in the dark until it finds love. And so, wherever our love goes, there we find our soul."

The play culminates in the final act, when Baucis and Philemon, an elderly couple who, out of their entire village, are the only ones to treat a disguised Zeus and Hermes with the respect wanderers and guests deserve, are turned into trees so that their love lasts forever.

All the actors gathered on stage and sing a song authored by Casey Wood, the inmate who played Narcissus. Their deep voices fill the visiting room:

*Let me die the moment my love dies
Let me embrace my fate and join their ascent
to the skies*

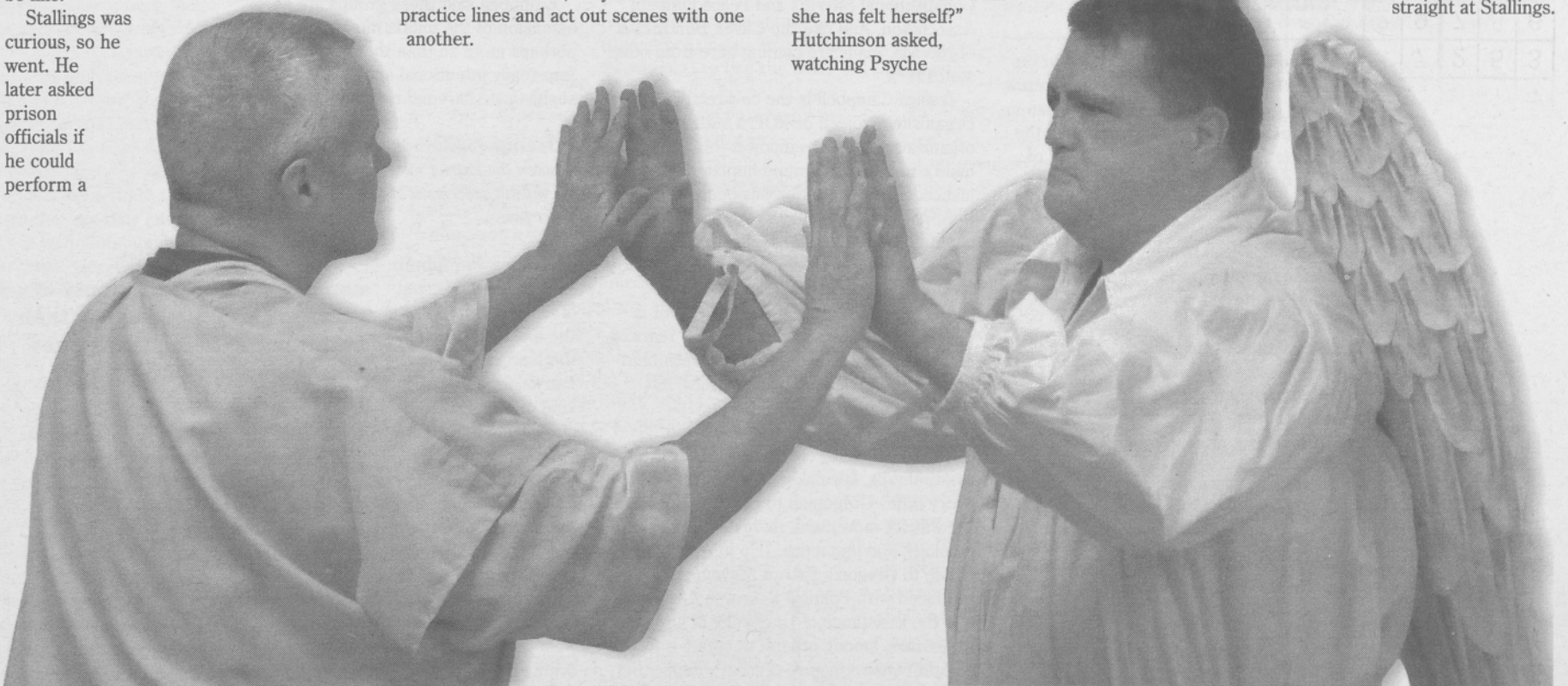
*Let me not stick around to cry
Let me die still loving, and so never die.*

Stallings is an emotional person. Whenever he "sees someone who never had anything get something," he inevitably begins crying.

As the inmates sing, tears drip down his face.

After the actors playing Baucis and Philemon sing two solo lines, all the actors repeated the chorus.

As they sing the final lines, many of them look straight at Stallings.



Scott Strickland plays Psyche and Tim Hinkhouse plays Eros, or Cupid, in the Two Rivers Correctional Institution production of "Metamorphoses."

PHOTO BY AMANDA WALDROUPE