

‘Hart Island’ Gives Voice to Stories That Might Otherwise Be Lost

Tracy Weller’s new multimedia theater piece focuses on those buried in New York City’s potter’s field and the inmates who dug the graves there.



The director Kristjan Thor and the playwright Tracy Weller on the set of “Hart Island” at the Gym at Judson. Photo Credit, Timothy O’Connell for The New York Times

By Rachel Sherman

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What we know about Hart Island, one of the largest mass grave sites in the country, we know from fragments. Fragments of history, memory, testimony.

Since the 1800s, this potter’s field in Long Island Sound has been the final resting place for the marginalized, the unidentified and the sick. New York City’s homeless — with no next of kin, stillborn babies and victims of epidemics, including yellow fever, tuberculosis, AIDS and Covid-19, have all been buried at the 100-acre cemetery.

Until just a few years ago, the city’s Department of Correction used to send inmates from Rikers Island each week to dig trenches and heave pine boxes for [50 cents an hour](#) at the site, half a mile east of the Bronx. That all changed in 2019, after Mayor Bill de Blasio signed a bill to transfer jurisdiction to the Department of Parks and Recreation; penal control of Hart Island officially ended on July 1, 2021.



Inmates digging trenches for mass graves on Hart Island as correction officers keep watch. Photo Credit, Department of Correction

The story of Hart Island is the story of over one million lives anonymized by time and misfortune. How do you tell the stories of something unknowable, or of someone whose existence may no longer even be a memory?

Kristjan Thor and Tracy Weller have found a way in their multimedia production, “Hart Island.” Thor, the director, recounted the vision Weller shared for the play. She said, ““There are so many stories that need rescuing, and I thought it was such a beautiful way to think of it,” he explained. “There are so many stories that could be lost. The aim is to both rescue and revitalize and give voice to those stories,” he said.

Several years in the making, “Hart Island” was inspired by an [investigation](#) into the mass graves by The New York Times in 2016. After reading it, Weller said, she stood in her kitchen holding the paper in her hand, heart pounding. She said she felt “an imperative” to create a piece of theater that “meditates upon some aspect of this place and the experiences connected to it.”

The result, a collaboration with the immersive theater company [Mason Holdings](#), opened this week at [the Gym at Judson](#) in Manhattan. With mantra-like narration, distorted audio, flashing visuals and an earthy set, it explores the connections between humans and islands as it aims to animate the loved ones of the buried and the inmates who dug their graves.



Nora Cole, seated in the foreground, and Weller, as the narrator. Photo Credit, Maria Baranova

A mulch-filled lot scattered with memorabilia (a video game controller, a frayed yellow cooler, a tattered life vest) sits center stage, flanked by two ladders that seem to reach up and away from the cemetery, somewhere beyond the graves. A cast of seven tells the story: The narrator (Weller) presents cold, clinical facts (one plot can hold 150 adult corpses — or 1,000 infants), and six somber archetypes provide piecemeal anecdotes — including one about a Rikers correctional officer rallying his detainees for a day trip, another about the nurse of an elderly patient who passed away with no family to bury her and a third about a mother whose newborn died three days after birth.

Thor said he was struck that the island was relatively unknown, despite its proximity. “It’s a huge piece of humanity that’s sitting inside of our city that nobody knows about,” he said. “That feels like a tragedy to me.”

As the city continues to bury victims of Covid-19, the island’s history holds a mirror to pandemic quandaries of late. How do we isolate the diseased? How do we isolate ourselves *from* the diseased?

Above all, how do we go on?

In spring 2020, as Covid-19 overwhelmed morgues, interments on Hart Island [increased](#) about fivefold to 120 per week from 25. As many as one in 10 people who died from the virus in New York City may be buried in the mass graves, according to one [analysis](#).

Reflecting on the past two years, Weller said, “We know death in a way that we didn’t before; we know isolation in a way that we didn’t before.” She added, “We need to know death. The more we look at death, the more we understand life.”



David Samuel and Daniel Kublick digging trenches in the play. Photo Credit, Maria Baranova

It wasn’t until April 2020 that the city began hiring hazard-suit-clad contractors to replace the incarcerated workers. Until that point, inmates exposed to the virus at Rikers could have potentially been digging their own graves — a point that stuck with Weller.

The play poses a range of questions, about the dead and the living: among them, why is death an event so many cannot afford?

But the backbone of “Hart Island” is the narrator, an actress played by Weller who arrives at an audition for a voice-over job she knows nothing about. She puts on her best smooth jazz radio timbre and falteringly reads a script on the history of New York City’s islands with the precision of a PowerPoint presentation.

“In the East River tidal strait where New York Upper Bay, the Long Island Sound and the Harlem River meet, the turbulent convergence of tidal forces is responsible for thousands of shipwrecks and sailor ghosts.”

From a recording studio that looms over the set like a guard tower, she calls up dark accounts of Rikers Island (“a troubled place built on troubled land”); Roosevelt Island (“a place of sickness but not necessarily of healing”); Randalls and Wards Islands (“islands of undesirables”), and the accompanying histories of psychiatric compounds, smallpox outbreaks and juvenile correctional facilities. Images of hospitals and penitentiaries flash in succession behind the narration, each fact interspersed with the click of a camera shutter or the blare of a jail cell buzzing to release an inmate.

Both the narrator and the audience are left with information overload and a feeling of ““It’s just too much,”” Thor said.

The tale of survival, of coping with being alone, is all too familiar. A haunting line of the narration cuts to the core: “No matter how we might try to bury the past, it somehow always revisits us.”