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THE POST-STANDARD

Artist digs for drama in daily life

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The job description of most city hall employees does not mention storytelling or playwriting. But Marty Pottenger, executive and artistic director of the Arts and Equity Initiative in Portland, Maine, would be the exception.

The performance artist, playwright and union activist will bring her brand of community performance projects to Syracuse when she lectures and performs at 7 p.m. Friday at The Warehouse. The free event, part of the Hyphenated Artist Series, is sponsored by Partners for Arts Education and Imagining America.

In Portland, Pottenger uses theater, media and oral histories to stimulate residents to think about issues and discuss them with fellow citizens.

On Friday, Pottenger will perform excerpts from her pieces "Abundance" and "home land security," which concern work and money in America and work that is worth risking your life for, Pottenger says.

"Theater and art offer a transformative possibility that is not present in most interactions," Pottenger says in a phone interview earlier this week. She says that people get excited about working together to solve problems.

Pottenger's visit to Syracuse also will include another artistic endeavor. She will conduct private story circles - where people tell stories in response to simple questions, such as "What is a day you'll never forget?" - with about 40 members of the Service Employees International Union.

"Human beings are hard-wired to tell and listen to stories as a way of connecting and understanding and coming up with good ideas," Pottenger says.

She will take these stories and write a reader's theater script that will be performed at Syracuse University in late April. Reader's theater is a "cross between performing and storytelling, (where) people are not acting, they are themselves," Pottenger says.

This later performance will feature music played on the tools of the laborers' trades, such as books for librarians or trays for cafeteria workers.

Pottenger hopes her talk on Friday and performance in April will fulfill her mission. That is, "to create opportunities for city employees to create art that is specifically focused on multicultural awareness, building relationships, shifting policies and practices toward inclusion."

After all, "people don't forget a good story," Pottenger says.