

Local dance company exercises new form



As her petite form moves in precise and harmonious contact with his only slightly larger frame, she transfers her entire weight onto him.

Their backs meet, touching at one shoulder and rolling across to the other. Very slowly, they seem to be cementing themselves together.

This is Contact Improvisation, a dance form that involves an interplay of shared weight and balance between dancers. It is relatively new, but is fast catching on in Eugene.

The dancers are Karen Nelson, 28, and Alito Alessi, 31, who make up the core of Joint Forces, a dance company that will, together with the Community Center for the Performing Arts, host the upcoming "New Dance," a collaborative performance featuring dance and movement artists from across the United States.

The two New York-born dancers have been dancing together since forming Joint Forces in 1979, and have taught Contact Improvisation classes at both the University and the Eugene Center for the Healing Arts.

"In order to do the (Contact Improvisation) dance, you have to give over your whole weight. . . it's a good workout after which you feel warm from head to toe," said Nelson, who has been dancing for 10 years.

Both Nelson and Alessi say that Contact Improvisation has "gotten refined over the years."

Steve Paxton, the originator of Contact Improvisation, had been interested in a kind of therapy where he had "men falling a lot and jumping on each other" Nelson said.

She said that getting in touch with body movement, which is what happens in Contact Improvisation, is a healing tool in terms of awareness and self-expression.

Now, according to Alessi, Contact Improvisation is a growing dance form and is being recognized and integrated into other movements by modern dance companies in the country.

"It teaches you the anatomical basics of your body in healthy ways," he said,

adding that Contact Improvisation is a "fitness program with a holistic approach," where you learn your psychological and physical limits.

As the dancers transfer their weights from one to the other, there has to be a great deal of trust, especially when at times one's whole body is supported by the other. Peace and relaxation seem to flow through them as they move to the music and glide across the room.

Later, as Nelson playfully ruffles Alessi's wavy hair, one senses the rapport they have developed over five years of partnership — important for dancers who practice Contact Improvisation where reliance is essential.

Nelson grew up in Long Island, New York, attended Naropa Institute, a Buddhist "contemplative college," and has worked as a "street performer, a clown, a juggler," in Boulder, Colo. She also has some background in martial arts.

Alessi, who also grew up in New York, was formerly a student at the University, where he majored in elementary education and community service-public administration. From 1972 through 1975 he worked at the EMU Childcare Center. He is now on the board of the Eugene Center for the

Healing Arts, a therapy and counseling center, where both he and Nelson work one-on-one with individuals.

As far as dance itself, the two miss not doing more "New York City material." In fact, that is what they miss most being away from New York, although Nelson does miss her family and Alessi, his friends.

"There's more activity there," Nelson said.

"But Eugene is where we live and this is what we have," Alessi added.

And that is the reason the two are bringing several big-city, big-name performers to Eugene for the March jam.

New Dance begins at 8 p.m. on March 23, at the W.O.W. Hall. In this Eugene appearance, Nancy Stark Smith, an internationally known dance artist and originator of Contact Improvisation, will join Nelson and Alessi of Joint Forces and others from Seattle,

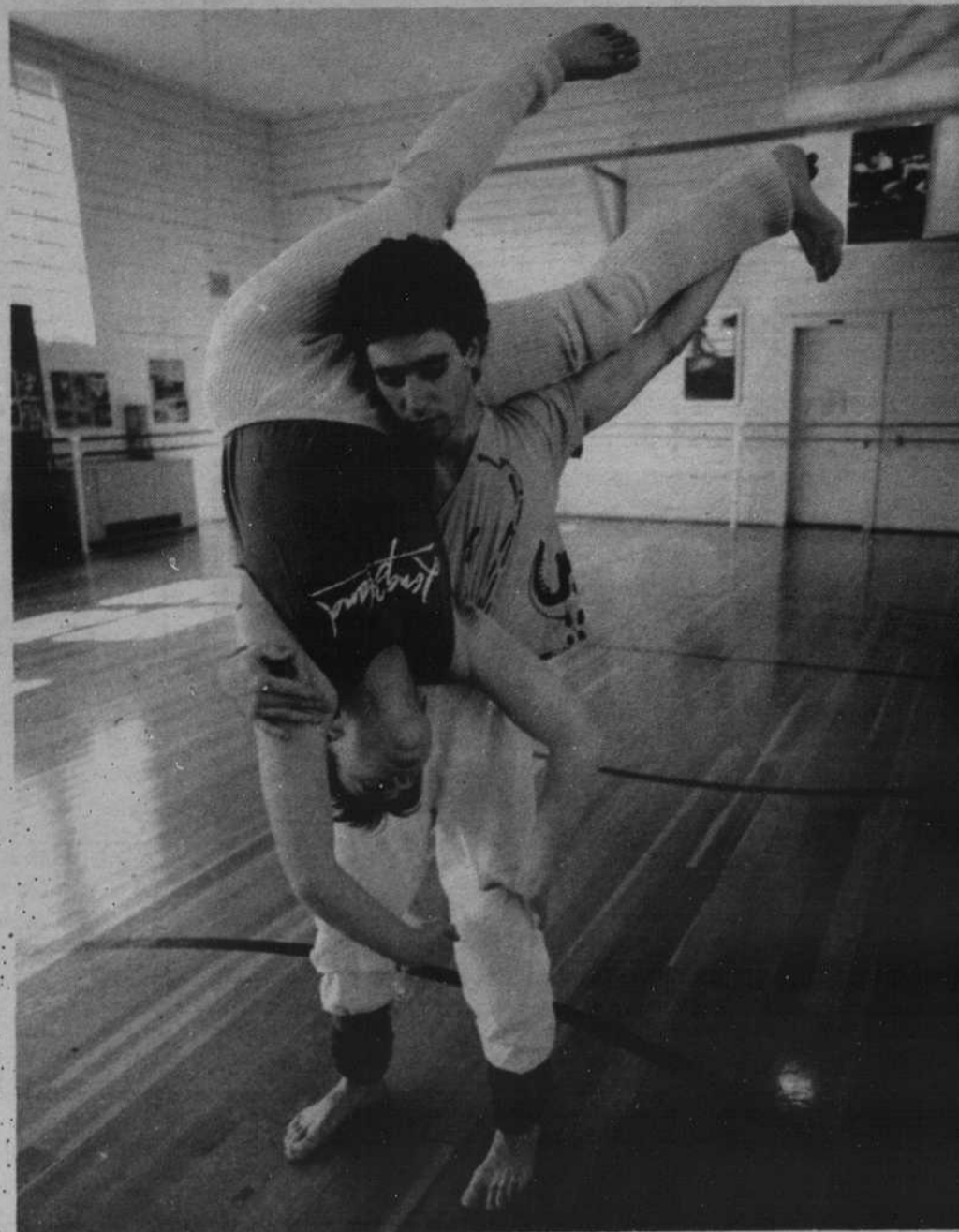


Photo by Steven Wall

Karen Nelson and Alito Alessi, members of Joint Forces, a local dance company, demonstrate Contact Improvisation.

The evening's events will also include a rare showing of Steve Christiansen's dance video tapes, "Chute" and "Soft Pallet." Christiansen, a Eugene videographer, created these two historical edits of Contact Improvisation which document the first performance in New York City, Los Angeles,

Washington, D.C., San Francisco and Eugene.

manes held in 1972. The tapes feature the originators of Contact Improvisation, including Nancy Stark Smith and Steve Paxton.

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