

Sharing their Visions

■ Artists Salon performers delve into the multi-faceted world of artistic expression and sharing

By Sara Jarrett
Oregon Daily Emerald

The soothing trickle of a faux waterfall is the first thing to greet guests passing through the doors of the Conservatory of Classical Dance. Along the far wall, ivy drapes itself like a feather boa delicately hanging from the nape of a 1920s flapper. The ballet studio, which has been transformed into a performance space for the night, is dimly lit and plays host to an artists salon.

Holding an unrestrained salon at the Conservatory of Classical Dance, a venue that automatically conjures images of an art deeply rooted in history and tradition, seems like an oxymoron.

Yet, on the third Thursday of the past four months, performance artists have gathered here for sharing, experimentation, collaboration and discussion of their latest projects. The exchange is possible thanks to both the guidance of Margo VanUmmersen and a grant from the Lane Arts Council.

The event is part of a growing trend in Eugene and seems to be an effort to bring back the salons of the 1960s and 1970s. These contemporary versions, however, are different from the free form "happenings" of the past.

Thirty-odd years ago, in the midst of the free love movement and personal struggles for independence, artists gathered in living rooms, parks, gyms — wherever they could — to create art on the spot.

The gatherings of this new generation, though still process-oriented, are more formal than their predecessors, said VanUmmersen, artistic director of the VanUmmersen Dance Company.

"We are not [collectively] creating work on the spot," she explained, although there's nothing that would prohibit an artist from signing up to perform an improvisational piece.

The salon is open to all types of performers, even though 80 percent of the first four shows have consisted of dance-oriented themes. VanUmmersen guessed that's in part because she is a dancer, but as the originator, she stresses that anybody and everybody is welcome — from singers to musicians to poets.

The concept seems to be catching on around town mainly through word-of-mouth and fliers.

Attendance more than doubled from twenty audience members in October to fifty in November. The numbers haven't continued that climb, though. Around 30 people attended in December and approximately 40 showed in January.

VanUmmersen said she prefers to have at least four acts perform each meeting, but if less than that sign up, something is worked out. It usually isn't hard for her to find people willing to show their work to a group of art-literate observers ready to offer constructive criticism, she pointed out.

During January's salon, VanUmmersen performed a comic dance piece that she has been crafting for some time but hadn't actually finalized until the afternoon of the show.

Carrying a huge, green suitcase, she walked on stage wearing only pantyhose and a man's black suit jacket. She took off the jacket to reveal a camisole but quickly covered that up with a padded fencing outfit, which she then layered with various other quirky costumes found inside the suitcase.

During the post-performance discussion, she revealed that the piece was meant as something more than just comedy. To VanUmmersen, it was definitely a statement about the extremes women take to fit inside society's constraints.

This type of discussion, between artist and audience, is the biggest asset to the salon. After each performance, the audience is given three minutes to write down their thoughts, addressed to the performer, choreographer or composer of what they watched or heard.

A forum is then opened to discuss what was just experienced. Rarely do laymen get such a chance to hear what is inside the artists' head. Vice versa, the artists rarely have an opportunity to verbally share their concepts with the public.

In addition to this feedback-oriented format, artists often find they need a colloquy of their own. Douglas Beauchamp, the executive director of the Lane Arts Council, provides that environment.

Held at Tsunami Books, this particular "Artists Salon" has a much different style than VanUmmersen's. This second show is also forcing VanUmmersen to change her meeting's name to "Salon for Performance Artists," to eliminate confusion between the two.

Beauchamp said his salon "is a conversation jam session about what it is to be an artist — the ups and downs, and the beauties and the challenges. It's a spin-off of what the arts council does."

The free gathering, held on the first Monday of each month, is open to all creators, including writers and visual artists. Issues discussed during a typical evening include "who we are as artists and creators" and the role of artists in the world.

Some artists just come because they're lonely, Beauchamp added. The nature of the work tends to thrust many artists into isolation, and this forum provides a support group. The relationships formed could potentially spawn into other ventures, such as group shows or collaborative efforts, Beauchamp said.

This salon does not require signing up to attend and the atmosphere has maintained an intimate quality during the first two months of its existence, Beauchamp reported. There were 13 people at January's session, though he expects an increase in attendance through word-of-mouth.

This type of promotion is not uncommon among the various close-knit groups in the art community.

One such group, called "contact improvisers," holds a different sort of salon in Eugene. These Contact Improvisation Jams are more like the "happenings" of the past, organizer David Koteen said.

Contact is a modern dance form based on giving and receiving body weight and manipulating others through space. While some contact can be choreo-

nographed, this form of dance actually arose in the 1960s when dancers began experimenting with different ways of moving.

Koteen is the founder of Eugene's arts funding organization TAPRoOT, and he said the modern contact jam stays true to the idiom's roots by being improvisational based.

Everybody is welcome, whether they are experienced movers or not, he said.

"It's a space in which one can experience movement ... in a safe environment," Koteen said. The jams happen at Agate Auditorium every Wednesday and are free.

Performing Artists Salon

When: The third Thursday of each month

Where: The Conservatory of Classic Dance, located at 456 Charnelton St.

Price: \$1 donation

Artists Salon

When: The first Monday of each month

Where: Tsunami Books, located at 2585 Willamette St.

Price: Free to the public

Contact Improvisation Jam

When: Every Wednesday

Time: 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.

Where: Agate Hall, located on 15th Avenue across from Hayward Field

Price: Free to the public

