

SHATTERING stereotypes

A unique community dance festival shows that dancing isn't limited to the able-bodied while encouraging people to express themselves artistically



Photos courtesy Alito Alessi

(Above) Dancers Alito Alessi (left) and Emery Blackwell perform one of their works, challenging audiences to rethink their stereotypes of both the disabled and dancing as a form of artistic expression. The first Eugene Community Dance Festival will feature a performance by the pair. (Below) Previous workshops have helped participants discover the joy of dance.



By Jessica Blanchard
Oregon Daily Emerald

A new local dance festival aims to break down stereotypes about the disabled, while exposing more people to the joy of dance.

The Van Ummersen Dance company, headed by Margo Van Ummersen, and Joint Forces Dance Company, led by Alito Alessi, will be the featured acts at opening of the Eugene Community Dance Festival tonight.

The festival will include performances on the University campus at 8:30 p.m. today and Friday, and three free workshops this weekend that are open to everyone, regardless of skill or physical ability.

Alessi said the idea for the community festival came after he and Van Ummersen brainstormed ways to open up dance to a greater number of people.

"I think it's a great idea," Alessi said of the festival.

Alessi, who has worked in the Eugene area since 1973, formed his own company in 1979 and has been performing ever since.

This year, he's teamed up with longtime friend and fellow dancer Margo Van Ummersen to produce the first Eugene Community Dance Festival. The festival kicks off with live dance performances at 8:30 p.m. today and Friday.

Alessi and dance partner Emery Blackwell will use skates and a wheelchair to perform "Emerald City: The Wizard of Odds," which Alessi said is thematically based on "The Wizard of Oz." In that film, the Cowardly Lion already had courage, the Tin Man already had a heart, and the Scarecrow already had a brain — the Wizard just helped them discover it. Alessi said the "Emerald City" dance plot line is similar.

"It's really about people finding something they already had," Alessi said. "If they'd look a little closer to home, they'd be able to see it."

Alessi said he and Blackwell are leaving May 28 to take their "Emerald City" performance on a tour through Europe. Alessi added that he was excited to be able to premiere the dance in Eugene before leaving for the tour.

Van Ummersen's dance company, a contemporary dance performance group, will present a newly commissioned work, "Low Road," which was choreographed

by Eric Handman. There will also be collaborative improvisational dances by Alessi, Van Ummersen, Handman and Pamela Geber.

Another part of the live festival performance will be a duet, "Mo-Bility," between Lynne Braverman-McKinney and Caitlin McKenney. The pair choreographed the piece themselves and have performed it in Portland and Salem, where Alessi said it was well-received.

"People are generally really quite inspired by it," he said. "It really changes their perceptions about the disabled."

McKinney said the performance is about liberation and the freedom that a wheelchair can give a disabled person.

"It's kind of the story of my life," McKinney said. "Even someone who has a disability can still deliver a message and do it in a way that's entertaining. That's the whole point — that people with disabilities can also contribute to the arts."

McKinney added that every time the pair have performed "Mo-Bility" or done a workshop, there are always people in the audience who are moved by it — sometimes even to tears.

"It shatters every stereotype of people with disabilities," McKinney said. "Even for people with disabilities."

Weekend Events

The workshops will run Saturday and Sunday. Van Ummersen will teach the first workshop, "Contact Improvisation," from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday at the Lane Community College Dance Studio.

Van Ummersen said her goal with the workshop and the festival overall is to present new choreography and new forms of dance, such as improvisation. "It's beautiful work," she said.

A second workshop, titled "Sounds of Celebration," will focus on ways to make music, using voice, percussion, tonal instruments and simple movement. The workshop will be taught by Rich Glauber, and will be held at the Eugene School of Ballet, 436 Charnelton St.

The festival will wrap up with the DanceAbility workshop from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday in the Gerlinger Annex in Room 350.

T.H.I.N.K Trivia

\$ O'Donnell's \$

IRISH PUB

295 Hwy. 99 North

Starts Thursdays 8:00 pm

- Win Prizes
- Win Irish Bucks

\$ '1 off any item at O'Donnell's \$

1 coupon per person

1 Irish Buck

1 Irish Buck

John Henry's Dance Nights

no cover for women!!

136 E. 11th, Eugene

342-3358

Tuesdays: Justice League of America presents Tuesday Nite at the House

Wednesdays: 10 pm Justice League of America presents Dance Hall House Tunes

Mondays: 9 pm Mixology 101 — energetic house, techno, jungle, hip-hop ... bring yo' dancin' shoes

Thursdays: 10 pm 80's Dance Night — a time capsule of 80's vinyl

21 and over



DELPHINA

With the weather & the night life heating up, get some hot new looks from Delphina.

Light up your mouth with a **free glowstick** with purchase over \$15

Clothing for **Rock Stars**

445 E. 13th (next to Bijou) 343-3225
www.findcoolclothes.com
exp. 5/25/00