

# Doing the time warp

Portland performer pushes boundaries with engaging new work  
BY JESSICA CITTI

"I am attracted to intensity in general," says lesbian experimental theater artist Heidi

Carlsen, whose new performance piece, *A Gradual Instant*, will open early this month at Conduit. A small woman with articulate limbs and dark, flashing eyes, she has been performing in Portland for the past five years.

*A Gradual Instant*, which Carlsen also wrote and directed, was created in collaboration with conceptual artist Nan B. Curtis. This new work reflects Carlsen's ability to translate intellectual ruminations into vividly three-dimensional form.

"I love to work with emotion, space and my body," Carlsen says. Her most recent performance art allows her to do just that, mixing elements—movement, voice, props and text—that challenge the audience and explore the emotional capacity of art.

Carlsen first encountered modern dance her senior year at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, and it turned her life around. She began dancing with Conduit, an organization offering



Heidi Carlsen makes a gradual leap



space for dance artists to perform and teach, appearing in *Intersections* and other pieces.

Over time, her performances evolved from modern dance to experimental theater. This change resulted in works such as her 1998 solo piece, *The Line Between*, a performance about society and mental illness.

Carlsen also has performed with Mary Oslund, Dawn Joella Jackson, Tahni M. Holt and Imago Theater, appearing in *Blood Wedding*, *Blood Wedding*. In addition to her studies in Portland, she received training at out-of-state workshops and at the prestigious Saratoga International Theater Institute in New York.

*A Gradual Instant* is based loosely on her investigations into history, war and memory. It is about something traumatic occurring in a

woman's life, an intense experience that can happen in an instant and change everything.

Carlsen likens a gradual instant to a slow death: The dying itself is gradual, but the death—the actual moment of ceasing to be—is instantaneous. Her piece explores the place where a person travels in her mind to find the will to go on after an intense event, whether it be war, the death of one's mother or sexual discrimination.

"It's about riding on history," Carlsen says, "and finding out who you really are."

Serious stuff, but Carlsen hopes her piece is universal and concentrated enough to interest a general audience. As she promises, "There's a lot going on to watch."

The performance will be animated by an equal measure of lighting and music. There are

also Curtis' sculptural elements to consider: Carlsen's character will move through an unsteady landscape of objects designed by this well-known installation artist. These objects constantly transform and assist Carlsen as she works her way through memory and history.

Although Carlsen identifies herself as a lesbian and says "sexuality is always about how I am in the world," the piece is not specifically about sexual identity. She says that she hasn't had any difficulty as a lesbian in the dance community and, in fact, that many powerful and artistic lesbians have acted as her mentors in Portland.

Audience members should have no problem identifying with the human struggle Carlsen undergoes on the stage. Like her character, we all sometimes find ourselves lost on thin ice, forced to confront history and all that lies beneath.

Ultimately, Carlsen's piece is about survival in the face of adversity. "It's about will and freedom," she says, "and not letting people take these things away from you." **J**

*A GRADUAL INSTANT* starts 8:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 7:30 p.m. Sundays through Dec. 10 at Conduit, 918 S.W. Yamhill St. Tickets cost \$10-\$12. Call 503-221-5857 for more information.

JESSICA CITTI is a Portland free-lance writer.

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