

# SURREALIST MOVEMENT

*Degenerate Art Ensemble brings electrifying dance theater to Corvallis*

It's like nothing else you have ever seen. Largely Butoh (Japanese avant garde) dance, other parts live music, animation, portraiture and stunning lighting techniques, Degenerate Art Ensemble (DAE) is an impressive display of props, visuals and music — and if any one element falls out of balance, the effect could be ruined or enhanced, depending on how you want to look at it.

"The group is extremely collaborative and the whole idea of there being different artistic mediums (painting, classical music, jazz, sculpture, dance, theater, etc.) is completely irrelevant to our way of thinking," DAE Co-Director Joshua Kohl says. "We have a common desire to tell stories in some way, in a similar way that you might share your dreams with someone when you awake." DAE rose out of the ashes of a huge performance art orchestra in 1999, Kohl says. "We had a 17-piece orchestra that was playing in rock clubs and presenting performance art, new music compositions and all manner of madness. The formation of Degenerate Art Ensemble was a refocusing of our vision."

Today, Kohl and the other members of DAE perform their brand of electrifying surrealist dance theater all over the world. Generally, the initial seed of a DAE piece comes from the group's choreographer Haruko Nishimura. "She will be playing with a series of images, a research topic, an obsession of some kind — and she will perhaps make sketches of some visual ideas or characters or stories," Kohl says. "Usually in this early stage they are fairly mysterious and difficult to 'understand.'"

What follows is an explosion of ideas from the group members. "It is a very non-linear process," Kohl says. "No script to begin with." Eventually, after collaborating with the other group members, Nishimura begins to develop a script or narrative. "We seem to always be in a constant state of discovery with the work and in a constant state of gradually understanding what it is that we are doing," Kohl says.

DAE's latest project, *UNDERBELLY*, celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Seattle World's Fair. After initializing collaboration with architecture firm Olson Kundig Architects, they began to explore the Seattle Center (where *UNDERBELLY*'s premiere will take place), including its history, characters and the world around it. "We were fascinated to discover a woman named Gracie Hanson who had a row of topless cabaret clubs in the Seattle Center," Kohl says. "It became quite a scandal, but in the beginning it was wildly successful."

According to Kohl, Hanson had relevance in Oregon as well — operating a 1920s revival cabaret in Portland for some years, and she even ran for governor at one point. "So we explored Gracie in this piece and are trying to sort of bring her spirit back for a visit," says Kohl, who in the research process also discovered that in 1962 — the year of the Seattle World's Fair — the federal government offered the Duwamish tribe a settlement for their land, which is now Seattle. The settlement amounted to \$60 per person. "They have been fighting this settlement ever since," Kohl says. "So we have these painful legacies all along the Pacific Northwest." To convey these pieces of our history, Nishimura, imagined a Joan of Arc-like character — an indigenous warrior woman who would attempt to take back the city. "A re-imagining of our history," as Kohl calls it.

There is an indescribable quality to DAE's work. It may scare you, make you laugh or make you ask questions. It may even take you on a self-reflective journey. DAE's production quality is stellar, and Nishimura's dancing is captivating. Following *UNDERBELLY*'s elements of live music, Butoh dance, massive video portraits, stop action animation and architectural diorama, will also be a solo performance by Nishimura, who recently received a 2012 Guggenheim fellowship for her dancing. Her performance will be supported by a string section of local violin, viola and cello players. — Amanda Bedortha

Don't pass up the opportunity to engage in DAE's masterful artistry Oct. 19-21 at The Majestic Theatre in Corvallis. For tickets, call 738-7469 or purchase online at [www.majestic.org](http://www.majestic.org)



HARUKO NISHIMURA IN *UNDERBELLY*

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