

DANCEABILITY ARTISTIC DIRECTOR ALITO ALESSI
WITH DANCE PARTNER KAREN NELSON



Mr. Dance International

ALITO ALESSI HAS BEEN SHAPING THE DANCE WORLD FOR MORE THAN A QUARTER CENTURY by Alex Notman

There is perhaps no one better known in the local dance community than international dance visionary Alito Alessi. The Eugene-based dancer, teacher and artistic director for DanceAbility International created the Joint Forces Dance Company and DanceAbility — a globally renowned method that explores artistic expression between people with and without disabilities through movement — with his dance partner Karen Nelson in 1987. And, naturally for a dancer, he just can't stay in one place. This spring, he was chosen as an "arts envoy" by the U.S. State Department, a role that sent him to Indonesia, the Philippines and Mongolia to teach DanceAbility. *EW* caught up with Alessi digitally while he was in Greece before he headed to Austria, Italy and Spain to teach dance workshops.

Tell me about yourself outside of dancing.

I am a father of two boys (the second, soon to be born), and a husband. Family is the most important part of my life. I had an unstable family growing up and lived alone from when I was 12.

I have studied many forms of bodywork and practiced tai chi chuan and aikido. I love to travel and have worked in many countries. I also love being home. I love to run, and living in Eugene is a great place for that. I first came to Eugene to go to the UO to run, but I was swept in the ideologies of the early '70s, stopped believing in competition and soon joined the Eugene Dance Collective instead.

Why dancing?

I began dancing out of the need to keep movement alive in my life. I needed it for survival in a way — to keep the intelligence of my body ever present in my life.

What initially drew you to dancing?

I have always danced, even as a kid on the streets. We danced to James Brown. It got my attention and felt good, for my self-esteem and so on.

When did you start dancing?

Besides dancing as one of my main pastimes as a young teenager, in 1972, I began dancing with the Eugene Dance Collective. There were about 35 of us. Many of them went on to be influential in the world of contemporary dance. The forming of the WOW Hall was tied in closely with our group.

Who has been the most influential person to you in your dance career?

Steve Paxton. He initiated the dance form, contact improvisation. Contact improvisation grew out of the counterculture of the late '60s and reflected some of the new values — of each individual listening to one another and connecting with each other deeply, through our own direct experience, unmediated by traditional institutions or teachers that had all the answers.

I value a lot what Anna Halprin has done for the world community of dance, too. From the 1960s and onwards, she brought a lot of people together through dance — nonprofessionals — who weren't used to being together at all, let alone in an artistic context: people of European and African descent together, old and young, people grieving or sick, etc. And she made pieces with many dancers, outside of theaters, designed to touch, impact or heal the whole community.

I believe my dance work should have a purpose, a social impact. I believe all bodies speak, and society needs every voice involved in order to evolve fully.

Who is your favorite dancer?

Emery Blackwell, a local dancer with cerebral palsy. He makes the most of his abilities, and is the most inspiring presence I have worked with.

What is your favorite dance or piece of choreography?

The Hoop Dance, created with Karen Nelson [and I] in 1985. It was probably the first piece, worldwide, that took contact improvisation into choreography.

I'm really excited about my current project. It is an innovative, cross-disciplinary piece in collaboration with Frances Bronet, dean of the School of Architecture and Allied Arts (UO), who designed the interactive, mobile set. It will feature a large, all-star cast of DanceAbility company members, faculty from both LCC and University of Oregon Dance departments and other local professional dancers. Jeffrey Stolet, the director of Intermedia Music Technology at the UO, is composing the music. It will be held Nov. 1 at Lane Community College's Ragazzino Performance Hall.

Why DanceAbility?

My generation in contemporary dance believed dance was for everybody. I didn't see that actually happening around me, so I decided to see what that would be like: all people, of all abilities together, equally. After that first experiment, it made the most sense to me. I don't see it as "dance and disability," really. I see it as all people dancing. I feel the magic, again and again, of environments where everybody is learning and creating, equally.

What is your favorite place to dance in Eugene?

The WOW Hall because it holds so many memories for me. I began there and have done many things there over the past 40 years. It has a great floor.

What advice would you give to a beginning dancer?

Follow your own interest and desire. Learn to listen to yourself, others and your community, and never forget nature. ■

Turn to page 4 and meet more movers and shakers in the local dance community.