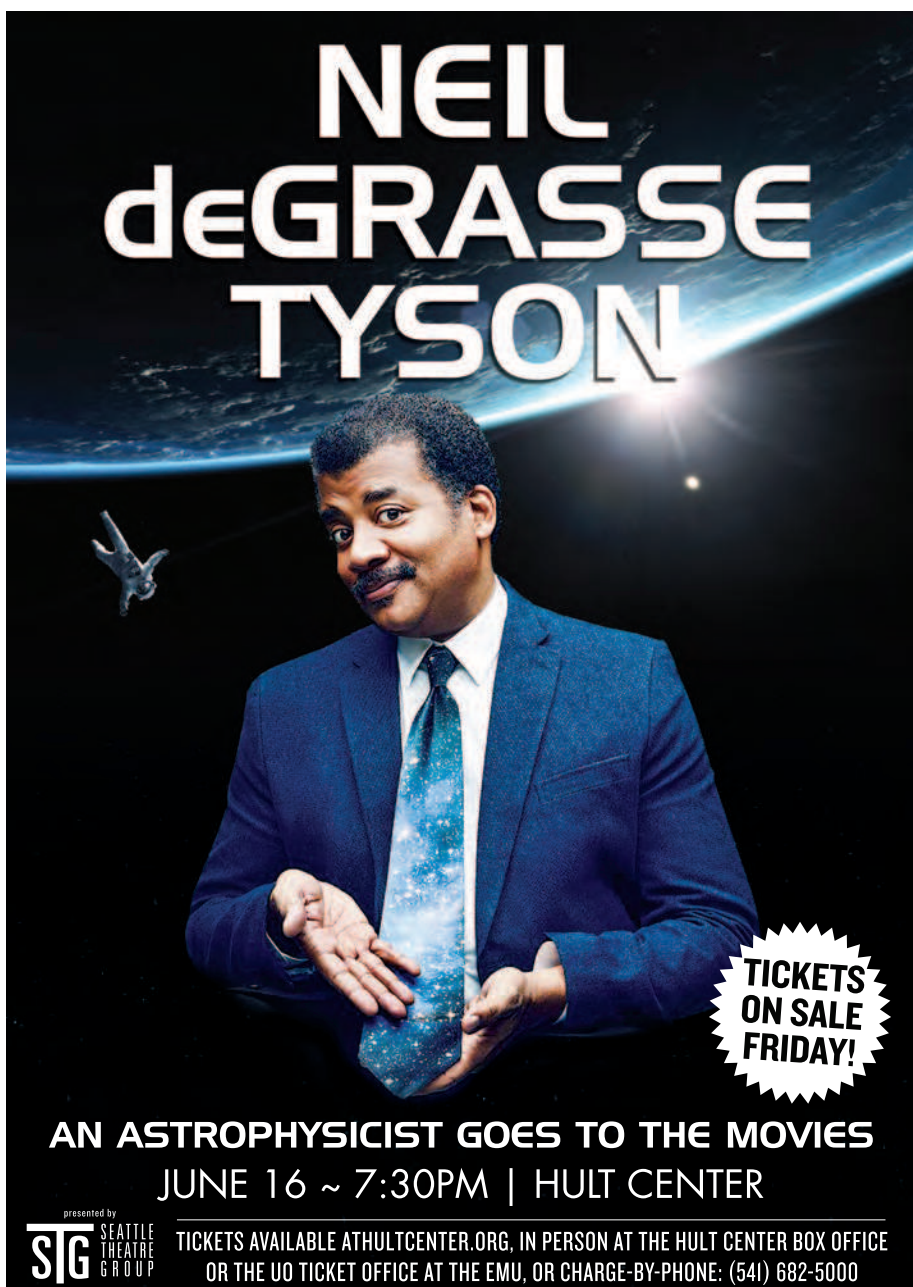


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## MEMORY AND LOSS

World premieres of *Shadow & Light* and *Blackberry Winter* give voice to Alzheimer's and dementia



EUGENE CONCERT CHOIR  
 DIRECTOR DIANE RETALLACK

“It’s been some time that I’ve been wanting to have music that gives voice to those who’ve gone through Alzheimer’s disease and dementia,” says Diane Retallack, Eugene Concert Choir artistic director and conductor, who has poured her energies into making the world premiere of composer Joan Szymko’s *Shadow & Light* a reality.

Alzheimer’s disease is an irreversible, progressive brain disorder that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills, and eventually the ability to carry out the simplest tasks. Both Retallack’s mother and grandmother died of the disease, she says.

Though she wanted to create something artistic from her experience, “after my mother’s death, I was too raw for several years to approach this subject matter,” Retallack says. “But then an amazing new grant opportunity came up.”

Two years ago, the Oregon Community Foundation announced an award called the “Creative Heights Initiative,” which would go to an organization “taking big risks and going well beyond anything they’d done before,” Retallack explains.

“I was inspired to dream big,” she says, envisioning a full-length choral work about an often private, often painful part of so many lives.

Eugene Concert Choir got the \$125,000 grant and commissioned the Portland-based Szymko to write the piece. “I connected with Joan and I thought, if anyone could compose music in a healing or cathartic way, it would be her,” Retallack says.

Szymko, who had no prior experience with Alzheimer’s or dementia, began interviewing people affected by the diseases, both patients and their caregivers.

“In creating an orchestral work, it’s abstract, but this is a choral work,” Retallack says. One of their first questions was: What would they say?

Retallack quotes a line from the libretto:

*You know you love me,  
 But you can’t recall my name.  
 So we just hold hands.*

Though the subject matter may be difficult, the work promises to be uplifting:

“The piece is compelling, hopeful and comforting,” Retallack says. “The music is singable, lovely, healing and luscious.”

The premiere performance features the 42-member Eugene Vocal Arts Ensemble, the newly minted Eugene Concert Orchestra and extraordinary soloists Sarah Davis, Marietta Simpson and Brendan Tuohy.

And, in a happy coincidence, Oregon Contemporary Theatre’s new play, *Blackberry Winter* by Steve Yockey, also delves into themes around Alzheimer’s disease.

Prevalent themes arise as someone faces Alzheimer’s or dementia, either in himself or herself or a loved one. Artists like Szymko and Yockey have tapped into that power.

“*Blackberry Winter* is a humane story,” Oregon Contemporary Theatre artistic director Craig Willis says. “It’s funny at times. It’s about the grief, the sorrow and the humor that can be found.”

The play delves into one woman’s attempt to come to terms with her mother’s dementia “by creating her own approach to explain where Alzheimer’s comes from,” Willis explains.

As our population ages, diseases like Alzheimer’s and dementia will touch an increasing number of lives. So we look to art, theater and music to reflect on unanswerable questions:

“We rarely laugh or cry while we’re reading a medical journal,” Willis says. “Theater and music both can do that.”

Retallack elaborates. “As a society, we document, experience and express through art what we’re living,” she says. “You can read articles, but what does it feel like? What kind of cathartic experience can you have?”

“In *Shadow & Light* we wanted to create something that says, ‘I am heard,’” Retallack adds. “Something that says, ‘My experience has been expressed.’”

*“Remembrances,”* featuring *Shadow & Light*, will be performed 7:30 pm Friday, April 8, and 2:30 pm Sunday, April 10, at UO’s Beall Hall, tickets (\$26.50-\$31) at [eugeneconcertchoir.org](http://eugeneconcertchoir.org); *Blackberry Winter* runs April 15-May 7 at OCT, tickets (\$15-\$35) at [octtheatre.org](http://octtheatre.org).