

Degenerate Art Ensemble Presents “Sonic Tales”

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Halloween is a time for fairy-tale characters, and Degenerate Art Ensemble will be weaving several together in their new piece “Sonic Tales” at the Moore Theatre.

Based upon an album of original songs, DAE artists Haruko Nishimura, Joshua Kohl, and Jeffrey Huston have spent a year developing this collection of short performance pieces and refining the components into an integrated whole.

In this work, Kohl has combined his emphasis on acoustic instruments with Huston’s interest in electronic sound. “We have been creating new instruments that interface electronically and process live sounds in real time and spew them out in amazing ways,” Kohl says.

To this music, Nishimura brings her own musical background as well as a long-time devotion to the 20th century Japanese dance form of butoh, to which she was introduced by her mentor Saiko Kobayashi. “She had this amazing book of butoh dance photographs and I was completely shaken by it,” says Nishimura.

This discovery propelled beyond her original focus as a musician. “I was going out to see every butoh show and film available to me at that time,” she says. “This led me to travel all over the world studying with great butoh teachers, and eventually I ended up dancing in some of their dance companies in Germany and in San Francisco.”

During the past sixteen years, dance instructor Nishimura has continued to incorporate butoh into her work with Degenerate Art Ensemble. “Butoh led me to so many aspects of art and life,” Nishimura says. “It is a way of life, and it took me way out of my realm as a musician and artist.”

Although butoh's popularity in Seattle has declined during the last decade, Nishimura continues to find richness in butoh: "It is still an art form that is evolving and it is constantly debated and I am just in love with it."

Into their new "Sonic Tales" dreamscape, Nishimura, Kohl, and Huston have brought in a number of other collaborators, some entirely new to Degenerate Art Ensemble. "We are looking for people who can bring new ideas, skills, perspectives, and a strong group energy to our work," Kohl says.

Dancers Marissa Niederhauser and Trinidad Martine were selected at public auditions to help meet this goal. "We collaborate extremely intimately on the choreography with this work," Kohl says. "We help each other be the outside eye as well as sharing our technical skills which are unique to each of our trainings."

The unavailability of their usual video artist led the trio to a new collaboration with Leo Mayberry. "For this show he has collaborated with us to create a Topsy Turvy effect where dancers on stage have multiple faces," Kohl says, including "two heads under their skirts and characters on their backs using amazingly precise video projection."

Along with this video, set designer Jennifer Zeyl augments the company's visual presentation. Kohl says, "Not only does she bring her sophistication as a scenic designer, but also brings with her an incredible team of technicians and theater professionals that can help make our entire process smoother and our work stronger."

As part of this team, costumer Mandy Greer created an elaborate dress for the "Slug Princess" character. "The costume weighs more than fifty pounds and is made entirely of knitted yellow yarn," says Kohl. "It took fifty people weeks to knit all of this beautifulness."

Stage Manager and Prop Designer Maridee Slater finds that these contributions bring their own rewards. "Working with DAE has fed a hunger I didn't realize could be satisfied," Slater says. "The disjointed realities they create and nurture are akin to dreamscapes on acid, yet everyday I find myself in the middle of a world that makes sense."

DAE's performers also engage with those who provide funding and support to the company. "Our board of directors also gives us great guidance," Kohl says. "Having mentors and advisors – and especially learning to let go of our old ways and actually listen to them – is key."

As long-time Seattle residents, both Kohl and Nishimura affirm their interest in interacting with local Puget Sound audiences and their appreciation for the support they've received from local agencies, including 4Culture and the Mayor's Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs.

DAE is taking this desire for collaboration even to the lengths of encouraging audience participation. "With this project we are also making the audience make sounds for the show, encouraging them to be part of the dreamscape, wanting to always find ways of viscerally connecting with them," Kohl says.

Kohl admits this will require some willingness on the audience's part. "Come with an open eye, open heart, open ears, and an open mind," he says.

"It may not look like something you have seen before," Kohl warns. "But maybe in a dream, or in your imagination. We are trying to bring those things to life on stage."

With these goals, it makes sense that DAE is already looking ahead to its next project, a site-specific performance work that will allow even more interaction with their audience.

"Sonic Tales" runs on October 30-31, 2009, at the Moore Theatre, 1932 Second Avenue, Seattle.