

DESCENT

BY KINETIC LIGHT

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**ALICE SHEPPARD AND KINETIC LIGHT PRESENT
NEW YORK PREMIERE OF *DESCENT***

***A new work exploring the potent intersection of disability, dance, design, and technology
at New York Live Arts March 22, 23, 24***

February 8, 2018 (New York, New York) – Choreographer and disability arts innovator Alice Sheppard, along with the Kinetic Light collaborative, announces the New York Premiere of *DESCENT*. Performed on a custom-designed architectural ramp installation with hills, curves, and peaks, *DESCENT* explores the pleasures of wheeled movement and reckless abandon. This new evening-length duet takes audiences on a transformative ride and obliterates cultural assumptions of what disability, dance, and beauty can be. Carla Peterson, Director of Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC) and former Artistic Director of New York Live Arts, calls *DESCENT* a “beautiful, intelligently wrought experience for audiences.” This limited engagement spans three performances March 22, 23, and 24 at New York Live Arts.

Inspired by the sensual writings and art of French sculptor Auguste Rodin, Alice Sheppard gives the mythological characters of Venus and Andromeda new life as interracial lovers in *DESCENT*. Sheppard and fellow dancer Laurel Lawson perform in and out of the wheelchairs they use in life and performance, showing an entire spectrum of beauty and opening up new movement possibilities. Sheppard and Lawson employ, manipulate, lift, and bend their bodies in a signature choreographic language. The sensuality of this work is palpable, and risk is interwoven throughout as wheels fly precariously at the edge of the ramp.

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The ramp installation is nearly six feet tall and spans 24 by 15 feet of stage space. It is more than a set piece: it offers an entire alternate universe for Venus and Andromeda to explore and inhabit. The ramp was designed by Sara Hendren, a Massachusetts-based artist, design researcher, and writer, along with physics professor Yevgeniya Zastavker and a team of first-year engineering students from Olin College. Hendren pushed to make the ramp a work of art by designing for beauty and wheeled movement potential, not simply for ADA (Americans for Disabilities Act) compliance and essential mobility needs. Dance critic Eva Yaa Asantewaa commented “one could argue that, with Hendren’s architectural ramp, it is actually a trio—poetic, passionate and, frankly, haaaaawwt.”

“*DESCENT* is about movement pleasure: the joy of flying freely downhill, and the pleasure of pushing uphill,” stated Alice Sheppard. “I’ve been wanting something as risky, challenging, and beautiful as this for years. Finally, I knew that no one was going to make a dance like this for me, so I gathered a team and over the course of the past few years, we have thrown ourselves into a complicated creative process. We’ve created *DESCENT* specifically to celebrate disability arts and culture and to demonstrate how disability is an artistic and creative force.”

The team behind *DESCENT* is a uniquely-specialized ensemble of professionals, making Kinetic Light the first collective led entirely by professional disabled artists. Sheppard has been traveling the world dancing professionally for over a decade, performing with such companies as AXIS Dance Company from Oakland, CA, and Marc Brew Company in the UK. She started making her own work in 2012, and *DESCENT* is her most ambitious project to date. Laurel Lawson, Sheppard’s collaborator and fellow dancer in *DESCENT*, is a dancer with Full Radius Dance, a sled hockey athlete, and a software engineer. She has trained extensively with Full Radius Dance since 2004 and is one of the only performers capable of partnering Sheppard in the adventurous athleticism demanded by the *DESCENT* ramp. Michael Maag, an accomplished lighting designer and disabled artist, has served as Resident Lighting Designer at The Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) for over 15 years; he was also pivotal in the building

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of OSF's new accessible outdoor stage. In *DESCENT*, he performs more than 300 responsive light and video cues.

Access to dance for non-visual audiences has historically been in the form of audio description, commentary and narration which guides the listener through the movement occurring onstage with concise, objective descriptions of choreography, projections, and costumes, transmitted through a small receiver and earphones. Motivated by audience members' desire to supplement this practice by expanding to a more encompassing aesthetic experience, Kinetic Light is pushing beyond the traditional practice of audio description. They are developing a custom mobile/web app, titled AUDIMANCE, which will offer a multiplex sound experience of *DESCENT* for non-visual and visual audience members alike. Led by people who are blind, visually-impaired, and sighted, audio content is created by sonifying dancers' bodies and by rendering the dance itself in sound. This innovation is in-progress, and aspects will be tested during the NYC premiere performances.

ACCESS INFORMATION

While many theaters in the U.S. comply with the minimum accessible seats required by ADA standards (ex: six seats are required for houses of 300-500 seats), Kinetic Light works with presenting partners to make available at least 20% of seating for disabled audience members. Kinetic Light offers an audio version of the in-house program for those who have a visual impairment, American Sign Language interpreters are present at every show, and the collective works with presenters to employ accessible marketing strategies such as captioned videos and photos. A tactile 3D lobby exhibit offers audience members an entry point into understanding the ramp installation as a landscape of physics and can be experienced through sight and also through touch. The artists also offer access training and engagement programming for theater staff as part of learning curve to welcoming *DESCENT* fans.

New York Live Arts is an accessible venue. The lobby is accessible via the double doors to the left of the revolving door at 219 W 19th Street. All-gender wheelchair accessible restrooms are available in the lobby. The front row wheelchair seating dedicated for these performances can

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be accessed by elevator. Questions about access should be directed to NYLA's Client Services Coordinator via email at shodges@newyorklivearts.org or phone at 212.691.6500 (voice only).

DESCENT has received notable creation support including a choreographic residency at MANCC, an arts entrepreneur incubator membership at NEW INC, a design/engineering residency at Georgia Institute of Technology, and a residency at Gibney Dance Center, as part of its Dance in Progress (DiP) program. Kinetic Light is supported, in part, by Dance/NYC's Disability. Dance. Artistry. Fund, made possible by the Ford Foundation with additional support from the Mertz Gilmore Foundation. Alice Sheppard/Kinetic Light researched, developed, and honed *DESCENT* with financial, administrative, and residency support from the Dance in Process program at Gibney Dance, with funds provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Kinetic Light is in the process of booking a 2018-2020 national tour of *DESCENT*, with support from NEFA's National Dance Project, beginning with a Fall 2018 engagement at EMPAC, The Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, in Troy, NY.

TICKET DETAILS

DESCENT will be performed at New York Live Arts (NYLA) Thursday, March 22, Friday, March 23, and Saturday, March 24 at 7:30pm.

Tickets are now on sale via New York Live Arts in person at the box office, via phone at 212.691.6500, and online at <https://newyorklivearts.org/event/descent/>. Kinetic Light embraces an equitable approach to ticket pricing and strives to challenge the traditional of hierarchy that can come with tiered pricing structures and assigned seating. Therefore, tickets for the NYLA performances are available in a choose-your-own-price model.

Tickets for *DESCENT* are \$20; all tickets are general admission and at least 20% of theater seating is reserved for people with disabilities. The actual cost of producing and performing *DESCENT* at NYLA is \$65 per seat and a \$65 ticket is available for those who wish to support

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Kinetic Light at this level; these tickets are also general admission. If cost is a barrier, audience members are welcome to take advantage of \$10 tickets. According to Sheppard, “Maybe you're dealing with financial challenges; are a student or artist; or maybe you're just not sure if dance is your ‘thing’. Whatever the reason, we welcome you. No questions asked.”

ABOUT ALICE SHEPPARD

Kinetic Light’s founder and artist lead, Alice Sheppard, saw Homer Avila, a disabled dancer, perform in 2004. Avila dared her to take a dance class; she did, and she loved moving so much that she resigned her academic professorship at Pennsylvania State University in order to begin a career in dance. She studied ballet and modern dance with Kitty Lunn and made her debut with Infinity Dance Theater. After an apprenticeship, Sheppard joined AXIS Dance Company, an Oakland-based company where she toured nationally and taught in the company’s education and outreach programs. Since becoming an independent artist, Sheppard has danced in projects with Ballet Cymru, GDance, and Marc Brew Company in the United Kingdom and Full Radius Dance, Marjani Forté, MBDance, Infinity Dance Theater, and Steve Paxton in the United States.

As an emerging, award-winning choreographer, Sheppard creates movement that challenges conventional understandings of disabled and dancing bodies. Engaging with disability arts, culture, and history, she attends to the complex intersections of disability, gender, and race by exploring the societal and cultural significance of difference. In addition to performance and choreography, Sheppard is a sought-after speaker and has lectured on topics related to disability arts, race, and dance. For more information visit alicesheppard.com.

ABOUT KINETIC LIGHT

Working in the disciplines of art, design, architecture, and social justice, Kinetic Light creates, performs, and teaches at the intersections of disability, dance, and race. Through rigorous investment in the histories, cultures, and artistic work of people with disabilities and people of color, Kinetic Light transforms understandings of the dancing body thereby enabling new, powerful understandings of the moving world. The collective seeks to showcase freedom of movement as a pathway for others to understand how mobility—literal, physical, and conceptual—is fundamental to participation in civic life and to our understanding of American identity. For more information visit kineticlight.org.

ABOUT NEW YORK LIVE ARTS

Located in the heart of Chelsea in New York City, New York Live Arts is an internationally recognized destination for innovative movement-based artistry offering audiences access to art and artists notable for their conceptual rigor, formal experimentation and active engagement with the social, political and cultural currents of today. At the center of this identity is Bill T. Jones, Artistic Director, a world-renowned choreographer, dancer, theater director, and writer. New York Live Arts commissions produces and presents performances in its 20,000 square foot

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home, which includes a 184-seat theater and two 1,200 square foot studios. New York Live Arts serves as home base for the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company, provides an extensive range of participatory programs for adults and young people and supports the continuing professional development of artists.

FUNDING CREDITS

DESCENT was made possible, in part, by the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project, with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; general operating support was made possible by the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation; The MAP Fund, supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; Dance/NYC's Disability. Dance. Artistry. Fund, made possible by the Ford Foundation with additional support provided by the Mertz Gilmore Foundation; and the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography at Florida State University. Kinetic Light researched, developed, and honed DESCENT with financial, administrative, and residency support from the Dance in Process program at Gibney Dance with funds provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. DESCENT was also supported by Dancers' Group's CA\$H grant program, Puffin Foundation West, Ltd., and the Yip Harburg Foundation.

DESCENT performances are part of New York Live Arts' Plus program, designed to allow mission-aligned performing arts organizations access to state-of-the-art facilities and support toward the growth of their work. More information at newyorklivearts.org.

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