

DESCENT

BY KINETIC LIGHT

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**EMPAC PRESENTS DISABILITY ARTS INNOVATOR ALICE SHEPPARD
& KINETIC LIGHT IN *DESCENT*, NOVEMBER 15-16**
*A new dance work exploring the potent intersection of
disability, dance, design, and technology*

October 12, 2018 (Troy, NY) – The Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute presents choreographer and disability arts innovator Alice Sheppard, along with the Kinetic Light collaborative, in *DESCENT*, November 15 and 16. Performed on a custom-designed architectural ramp installation with hills, curves, and peaks, *DESCENT* explores the pleasures of wheeled movement and reckless abandon. Combining dance, architecture, design, and technology, this new evening-length duet takes audiences on a transformative ride and obliterates cultural assumptions of what disability, dance, and beauty can be.

Brian Schaefer of *The New York Times* comments, “Ms. Sheppard has been an innovator in disability arts, and this work illustrates just how much she’s expanded the notion of physicality in dance.” Kinetic Light will be in residence at EMPAC for ten days prior to the performances, exploring immersive sound design including sonification of dance for Audimance, a new audio description app currently in development. In addition to the live performances; both shows will be livestreamed online.

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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.

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 with Disabilities Act) compliance and essential mobility needs. This unique approach to set design has received recognition in the field, *DESCENT* won a production design award and will be featured at USITT Design Expo and Prague Quadrennial in 2019.

“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. Sheppard

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was featured on the July 2018 cover of *Dance Magazine*, the first disabled artist to be featured since 2003. 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 well matched for partnering with 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 of OSF's new accessible outdoor stage. In *DESCENT*, he performs more than 300 responsive light and video cues.

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 experience 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.

EMPAC is an accessible venue. The lobby is accessible via the double doors facing RPI's campus, with an entrance off of College Avenue. All-gender wheelchair-accessible restrooms are available on all public-access levels of the building. The main audience entrance to the theater is wheelchair accessible and located on EMPAC's 5th floor, which can be accessed from the lobby by elevator. If you have any questions about access, please contact EMPAC Box Office Manager John Cook by email at COOKJ4@rpi.edu or call 518.276.2822 (voice only). Kinetic Light is in the process of booking a 2018-2020 national tour of *DESCENT*, with support from NEFA's National Dance Project. The production will tour to Georgia Tech in Atlanta, GA

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and Wilson Arts Center in Wilmington, NC in Fall 2019, with aims to bring *DESCENT* to Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, Washington DC, and New Jersey.

TICKET DETAILS

DESCENT will be performed at EMPAC Thursday, November 15 and Friday, November 16 at 7:30pm. Seating is general admission, with the first two rows reserved for audience members requiring accessible seating.

Tickets for *DESCENT* are \$18; all tickets are general admission and at least 20% of theater seating is reserved for people with disabilities. Discounts are available for senior citizens, and RPI students and faculty.

Tickets are now on sale via EMPAC in person at the box office, via phone at 518.276.3921, and online at <http://empac.rpi.edu/events/2018/fall/descent>.

Recognizing that disability access is often about more than the venue hosting a performance—it includes transportation, health, and financial access as well—EMPAC and Kinetic Light have partnered to livestream both performances using EMPAC's state of the art 4-camera set up and broadcast station.

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

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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. She was featured on the July 2018 cover of *Dance Magazine*. Disability arts writer and educator Kevin Gotkin wrote the cover story; “Sheppard's work models a truth that is rarely understood among dance audiences: Disability does not signify incompleteness. In fact, it offers novel pathways to several movement styles, each of them whole and generative of unique choreographic forms.” 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. Kinetic Light presented the New York premiere of *DESCENT*, the collective's first evening-length work, at New York Live Arts in March of 2018 and made its Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival debut (as part of the Inside/Out Performance Series) in August 2018. For more information visit kineticlight.org.

ABOUT EMPAC

Designed by London-based Grimshaw Architects, EMPAC opened in fall 2008, with the *The New York Times* declaring, “The concert hall of the 21st century has arrived.” The 220,000-square foot building includes many firsts in the fields of acoustics, performing arts infrastructure, and architectural engineering. The integration of these features with audio, video, lighting, computer, and stage rigging networks makes EMPAC an ideal environment for human interaction with digital media.

Both a performing arts center and research and production facility, EMPAC provides an environment that supports the realization of complex artworks and research projects at any stage, from inception to completion. The EMPAC artist-in-residence program runs year-round, developing new and commissioned projects, many of which receive their premiere here. This work focuses primarily on music/sound, theater and dance, and time-based visual art, with one curator assigned to each respective discipline. The Cognitive and Immersive Systems Laboratory (CISL @ EMPAC), a joint initiative with IBM founded in 2015, uses these same spaces and technologies to research new human-computer interfaces.

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