

## Hermosa Beach choreographer tackles mental illness with dance

By [Chelsea Schreiber](#) November 14, 2013 | News

Hazel Clarke was on a walk listening to one of her favorite artists, Laura Marling, when inspiration struck.

"I was listening to her song, 'My Manic and I' and it just hit me," said Clarke. "I just saw these images of a mental institution, of a male patient struggling with schizophrenia, and a woman patient who was in love with him."

Clarke, the Artistic Director/Choreographer of Kairos Dance Company, a local ensemble of professional and university dancers in the South Bay, recently won the Rocky Mountain Choreographer's Festival in Utah. Because of her win, she was asked to present a full-length work at Peery's Egyptian Theatre in Ogden, Utah.

"I saw those images in my mind and thought, 'Oh my God how am I going to make this an entire length's work?'" said Clarke, who then began researching mental illness and realized it was a more prevalent issue than she originally thought. "In the '60s they used to lock them in mental institutions but now they don't. Look at the amount of homeless people we have. Now we don't lock them away anymore, but we kind of throw them out... Everyday we see them, but we just ignore them. They really have serious issues that aren't being taken care of.

At that time is when de-institutionalization was happening, people were coming in and finding the horrors that were happening in mental institutions and I thought it would be perfect to do it during that time period to give the audience a chance to see what it was like back then."

Clarke decided to focus on treatments like electroshock therapy, lobotomies and hydro-therapy.

"People have asked me if I created this because I've suffered from some personal mental issues myself. I think everybody has been touched by mental illness in their lives, like depression or addiction," Clarke said, "This project really stemmed from me taking a walk, listening to a piece of music, and deciding to turn it into my art. And it found its voice and has touched the lives of so many who have been a part of it, and who have seen it performed."

She added that some of the scenes are dark, but many are hopeful.

Photo courtesy of *Only In Ogden* (Charlene Bittinger & Kate Newton)



"...Am I or are the Others Crazy?," Peery's Egyptian Theatre, Ogden, Utah

"If you come to the show you should expect to have a deeply moving experience. We touch on so many things – one piece is called 'Group Therapy' and it's five women sitting in their chairs, and on top of their clothing they have these sashes of whatever illness they have...and during the dance they realize they're so much more than that, and they pull them off and underneath it says, 'and a mother' and 'a poet', and so forth. It really celebrates all aspects of who you are and shows you its okay to admit that you have whatever it is you have, but it doesn't define you as a human."

Dancer Jessica Harper said that although it was an emotional project to work on, it was worth it.

"Everyone can relate to feeling alone or depressed," said Harper. "Not a lot of people want to look at issues with people that have mental illness. They think, 'oh you're bipolar, you're all messed up.' The reality is that [there are] so many people out there who struggle with this."

A spokesperson from NAMI LA [the National Alliance for Mental Illness] will introduce the show and talk about the statistics of mental illness in society today.

"It's a dark piece, but there are comical aspects of it and light parts," said Harper. "There is a lot of light and beauty in it. We're all human, we all have issues. It doesn't matter if you're diagnosed with anything or not, everybody can relate."

Clarke will be putting on one local show on November 14 at 8 p.m. at the Hermosa Beach Playhouse.

Visit [www.BrownPaperTickets.com](http://www.BrownPaperTickets.com) and search '[Kairos Dance](#),' for tickets.