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## American Revolution as 'multimedia extravaganza'? Count Dayna Hanson in

The Seattle artist explores the contradictions between America's founding principles and current realities in 'Gloria's Cause,' making its L.A. debut this week.

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Dayna Hanson, center, prepares for "Gloria's Cause" at REDCAT. (Benjamin Kasulke, REDCAT / December 1, 2010)

By Susan Josephs, Special to the Los Angeles Times  
April 1, 2012

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- 'Gloria's Cause' info

At first, Dayna Hanson says, she felt "a little intimidated" when she decided to create a "multimedia extravaganza" about the American Revolution. As an artist, she says, "I don't often undertake such sweeping topics, and I didn't feel like I had a ton of knowledge about this part of history."

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Best known for co-founding the Seattle-based dance-theater company 33 Fainting Spells, Hanson wound up embarking on a rigorous research-based quest to expose the contradictions she observed between America's founding principles and current political and economic realities. She read numerous books, consulted with a number of historians and became fascinated with a multitude of stories, including the backroom machinations in the signing of the Declaration of

Independence and marginalized figures such as Deborah Sampson Gannett, who disguised herself as a male soldier to fight the British.

On top of that, Hanson had a conversation with one expert who told her, "When you're working with history as an artist, it's more important to convey some sort of essence of your own inquiry than it is to convey the facts," she recalls.

In the end, Hanson managed to funnel the results of her scholarly investigation into "Gloria's Cause," an ambitiously crafted, politically charged production receiving its Los Angeles premiere at REDCAT this week. Masquerading as an absurdist American history lesson, it features a quirky, raucous and nonlinear blend of postmodern choreography, scripted scenes of both iconic and obscure historical moments and characters, live music by an eight-piece rock band and a panoply of visual motifs that include cherry pie and a bald eagle mascot.

For Hanson, the work offers a portal into "the cognitive dissonance that we have to grapple with as a society."

"We're living in this country that's supposed to be the best and most prosperous country in the world, but the contradictions of that are devastating, whether it's about healthcare or immigration reform, and we can't deal with them," says the choreographer and multidisciplinary artist, 48, speaking from Seattle.

Mark Murphy, REDCAT's executive director, believes the piece has particular relevance in the current political climate, in which Democrats and Republicans offer starkly different visions for how the country should operate. "In any election year there's going to be a lot of debate about what the Founding Fathers intended, with all these revisionist versions of what did or didn't happen in the past," he says. "I think Dayna found a way to tap into this debate without going into agitprop theater. There's something about the wisdom and humor of her voice that makes you willing to become immersed in her fantasy world."

The thought of artistically tackling the American Revolution first occurred to Hanson some four years ago during a heated conversation she was having with her creative and romantic partner, Dave Proscia, about marriage inequality. Proscia had seen a bumper sticker on a car that said "engaged for 27 years" and discovered that the driver and her passenger were two elderly lesbians. He and Hanson lamented that these two women couldn't get married, which led to a larger discussion about equal rights in the United States and they "started talking about how the American Revolution seemed to be at the heart of so much of this."

"We felt a study of the American Revolution could really illuminate our current situation as Americans," she adds.

Since its initial premiere in September 2010 as a work-in-progress at Portland, Ore.'s TBA Festival, "Gloria's Cause" has generated strongly divided responses from critics. Some have lauded it as a must-see production, while New York Times critic Claudia La Rocco assessed its nonlinear structure and lavish mix of multimedia elements as "classic kitchen sink art."

La Rocco's comments, which appeared in Portland Monthly magazine after the TBA Festival performance, generated further online debate about the ethics of critiquing a work-in-progress. For Hanson, the experience compelled her to do some "severe editing," but she said it was also "awkward and discouraging, and I wanted to stand up and shout to everyone, 'We're not done!' Plus, I had initially billed the piece as a 'rock musical,' and that was a mistake. This isn't a piece where people are bursting into song to propel the plot, and I'm not trying to resolve the cognitive dissonance that I was exploring."

The piece was re-worked and had its official premiere at On the Boards in Seattle in December 2010.

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### Artistic background

Raised mostly in the Pacific Northwest, Hanson grew up playing piano, writing and illustrating her own stories. She attended the University of Washington, getting a degree in literature with a creative writing emphasis. Passionate about fiction and theater, she intended to become a writer until a friend one day "randomly suggested that I start dancing. I have no idea what inspired her to say that, but something resonated and I just changed course abruptly, with the blind confidence of a 24-year-old," Hanson recalls.

Determined to eschew formal training and the influences of other choreographers, Hanson taught herself to dance, beginning with footwork and slowly graduating to the upper body. She started showing her work at various Seattle venues and in 1994 teamed with choreographer Gaelen Hanson to found 33 Fainting Spells, which thrived for 12 years and brought the duo international recognition.

"Dayna's movement vocabulary is very unique, very gestural, and you don't see styles of choreography or other training signatures in her body," says Peggy Piacenza, a co-creator of "Gloria's Cause" and a performer-choreographer who's collaborated with Hanson for many years. "She has a very distinct sense of timing and a way of stringing her movements together."

Since disbanding 33 Fainting Spells in 2006, Hanson has received a Guggenheim fellowship for choreography and has channeled her passions for dance, filmmaking and music into various projects. She plays keyboards and bass for the band Today! and most recently completed the feature film "Improvement Club," a semi-fictionalized retelling of the making of "Gloria's Cause."

"I just feel excited that I'm still able to do what I love, and that's multiple things," she says. "Sculpting all these different modes and mediums together, that's part of the challenge. And I love to be challenged."

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