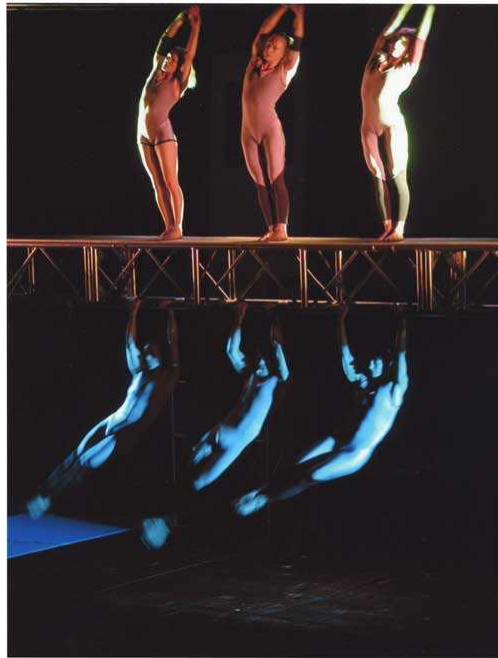


Final Fantasy

-- A Review of Streb Go! Action Heroes

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An In-depth Review for
Ballet Technique I: Marline Skog

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— An Review of Streb Go!’s Action Heroes

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The Wisconsin Union Theatre presented Elizabeth Streb Dance Company’s *Action Hero* on March 26, 2004. The evening-long concert was performed by Terry Dean Bartlett, Aaron Henderson, Jonah Spear, Dee Ann Nelson, Christine Chen and Fabio Tavares, with live DJ spinning music by Miles Green and others, and set design by Dan Jagendorf. Using the space defined mainly by gymnastics pads and a “box truss” — a movable metallic scaffolding rising more than 20 feet, the action heroes — the company’s dancers, presented an evening of fantasy: gravity-defying leaps, daring repetitive crushing against all kinds of surfaces and breath-taking split second timing. This thrilling performance conveyed a clear motif: challenging human body limit, attempting the impossible.

Distinct from traditional modern dance, Streb’s choreography intertwined multiple disciplines, such as dance, acrobatics, circus, gymnastics etc., each borrowed element serving the same clear purpose: to make “pure movements”. Firstly, the movements are purposeful and purely functional. In *Rise and Fall*, the dancers dived spread-eagled from the box truss at different heights. *Against the Wall* was composed of different variations of dashing onto the blue wall, adhering to it, and bouncing off, as well as different variations of interaction among dancers. Secondly, the movements had the quality of unexpected suspension and rebound. Take *Against the Wall* as an example. To crush against the wall was daring, yet predictable. What made it interesting was the

“adherence” to the wall. The performers leaped, crawled, slithered, sometimes even rebounded from it. Such suspension created moments where gravity seemed to magically disappear!

Although appearing plain or even giving a pedestrian feel, the Streb movements were extremely demanding. First, they required excellent physical body condition, for example, abdominal muscles of steel and great shoulder blade strength. In *BiLevel*, a performer hung from the truss with his hands. A second performer leaped, and the first one caught her body with his legs. This sequence would have been impossible without great body strength. Second, they required specifically developed techniques based on the law of physics. The dancers crushed themselves against any prop they could find: the floor, the wall, the hanging metal board, and even other dancers. Without exception, each time, their bodies were exactly parallel to the surface, which minimized the impact to the body by maximizing the interacting area. Such techniques enabled extreme actions without killing the dancers.

Pure movements were the vocabulary for *Action Heroes*, but by no means all of it. Other basic dance elements such as timing, spacing and partner work, created moments in this work that were sublime in their beauty and rigor. In *Up and Down*, Christine was secured to one end of a lever that moves in two planes: horizontally and vertically. With its movements, the lever divided the space dynamically. The dancers regrouped, interacted with Christine, and avoided the lever by crushing onto the floor right at the moment before it swept through. All happened in a swift and precise way. It felt like walking into a kaleidoscope, but only with extremely high speed and in 3 dimensions!

Props were a crucial component in *Action Heroes*. They are not only striking by their shape, size and color, but also very functional, just as the action. We classify them into three categories by the purpose they served in applying a certain physics law. The first category is supporting props, which includes the truss, the gymnastics pads and the spinnable lever. They worked because of gravity. The “box truss” provided a platform at different heights, producing contrast when performers jumped off it. *BiLevel* also made use of the movable feature of the truss. First one performer hung from the truss, interacting with the second one on the floor; later on, when the truss raised higher, the second dancer swung to the top of the platform. Both dancers moved almost simultaneously, creating the image of a lagging reflection. The second category is rebounding props, like the walls and the metal board, working according to the law of “action and reaction”. Good examples could be found in *Against the Wall*, *Black wall*, *Heavy Metal*. The third category is strings. In *Black Wall*, a performer was secured to one end of a string, of which the other end was fixed. He demonstrated two types of movements: when he ran outwards along the radius, the string pulled him back; when he ran tangentially, the pull forced him to make a circle. They produced different effects when he flew. Another interesting use case of string was in *Tied*, where two performers were tied to each end of the string. Individually, each performer was off-balance, but they were balanced as a unit through the pull of the string.

Last but not least, the design of other stage elements was consistent with the motif of the work, which amplified the effect of the actions and hence better illustrated the motif. In what follows, we briefly review them. First, costumes. The dancers wore one-piece costumes, simply wrapping the body as a second skin. They showed the clear line of the

body, and avoided loose material that may interfere with movement. Second, vocalized cuing. Emphasizing pure movement, there was naturally no tight bond between the actions and music. Vocalized cuing was both economic and made the work more interesting. When they called out “Disappear” in *Against the Wall*, it imposed a short mental suspension: how? Which was answered by their action: to hide behind the wall. Third, set. The action took place in a movable performance space provided by the “box truss” complete with lighting, distorted mirror, moving walls, screens and sound. Video projection, narration, still images, and live action occurred at once, creating a rich contrast, and a futuristic atmosphere. Practically speaking, it also made the work flashy and entertaining.

Action Heroes was mind-breaking and inspiring. It redefined the purpose of dance by focusing on pure movements, using elements borrowed from a wide range of disciplines. Meanwhile, it also emphasized many good old basic dance principles, such as dorsal alignment, strong pelvis support, efficient movement, timing, spacing etc., which in fact could not be too important in Streb actions. In order to well prepare oneself as dancer, it is necessary to concentrate on basic technique, be exposed to cross-discipline training (e.g., somatic training) and be courageous and even risky in trying new movements.

It was an inviting trip, as Streb taught the audience to try to turn 270 and 360 degrees, urging one to free his/her imagination. Who are action heroes? Those who challenge human body limit and attempt the impossible, realizing a fantasy. Exactly by doing so, this unusual edge-of-seat thrilling work successfully demonstrated the following formula: passion + unbounded imagination + acknowledging physics and making use it = unbounded dance.