

Defying gravity

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Her dancers blast through glass partitions, enter into combat with concrete blocks and steel beams, throw themselves against walls or run down them horizontally, and fly through space in every way possible. The American 'extreme action choreographer' Elizabeth Streb defies the laws of nature to radically reposition the boundaries of dance. With her group she will be opening the Cultural Olympiad of the Olympic Games in London this coming summer. Holland Dance Festival snared her just before that, to make her Dutch debut.

She was trained in modern dance and has 'enormous respect' for the discipline – and absolutely for its notables and masters like Merce Cunningham and Trisha Brown – but Elizabeth Streb nevertheless knew very early on that she wanted to go beyond that. "For me, modern dance was too 'mellow', too baroque, too decorative. I wanted higher, faster, more extreme." She began to experiment by dancing with sticks, hoops and ropes and up against inclines. Later there followed all sorts of 'flying machines' and scores of other props and ingenious installations. "Sometimes I compare it with the development of musical instruments: at a certain point people no longer found that the human voice was enough, and started to make flutes, violins and harps, in order to increase the range of possibilities." In 1985 the now 61-year-old and still 'punk' looking Streb founded her own company, Streb/Ringside, since renamed Streb Extreme Action. The group, she says, has gone through different phases, but the driving forces behind it are still Streb's unremitting curiosity and her need to create confusion for herself. "I constantly ask myself questions about space and time, questions that many scientists are still wrestling with too. For instance, what is space, precisely, and how can you fully occupy this space? You can't succeed in doing that if you stay on the ground, so you have to let go of the familiar and go in search of new ways. One of the first things that fascinated me was whether people could fly. No, I am not naïve, I know that we will never fly in the same way as an insect or a bird. Nor do I ever try to deny or camouflage the force of gravity in my work. One can perhaps fly for a couple of seconds, and then crashes to the ground. But for me, it is precisely in that failure that the content, the true drama of movement, is hidden."

Mad scientist

Once one succeeds in suppressing the laws of nature, then, according to Streb, everything becomes possible. She sees herself less as a choreographer than as an 'extreme action architect'. "I don't have that much interest in the biomechanics of the body; my aim is to use the body to create action, and then create a perfect structure with this action. If, as a spectator, you spend five minutes following the lines my dancers execute, these lines together have to form a superb structure." That's also the reason for the rotating and moving stages, inclines and installations continually present in Streb's work: "So that the audience can see the movement from all angles and sides."

That is also what is happening in *Forces*, the new production that Streb Extreme Action is bringing to the Netherlands. "Since the first try-out in July, 2010, we've been constantly developing the production. Den Haag is the third performance." This is the first time Streb has worked together with a director and dramatist. "They have conceived a story line, in which I appear on a video screen like a sort of 'mad scientist' and guide the audience, as it were, through the questions that I have been asking myself for years now." Stories of other 'investigators' were also a source of inspiration for the performance, like that of Larry Walters, who in 1982 flew to an altitude of 4600 metres with a lawn chair to which he had attached helium-filled weather balloons.

Streb calls *Forces* 'a journey out of space'. "Very dramatic, sometimes relentless, sometimes hysterical. I investigate all the qualities that movement has to offer, trying to expose their foundations." As an example, she points to the sense of harmony that you can realise with movement, and that, according to her, is farther-reaching than the harmony music can bring about. "The production is also a sort of symphony, in which you use various tools to create different moments that together make up one whole: first you hear the violin, then a flute, then the whole orchestra, and then the singer starts..." Early in her career Streb created her performances without music, but only with sound effects, so that not only were the movements of the dancers 'audible', but also, for instance, the sound of their bowels (or at least the suggestion of it) during a fall. "Music is the true enemy of dances", says Streb, from deep in her heart. But she has made a concession on this for her audience. "I have added music simply because, after all, these are theatre productions. But I don't choreograph to music."

Hungry lion

Streb describes her dancers as 'out of the ordinary'. "They are action heroes. Their body must be able

to take it and they have to have good technique. But it really doesn't interest me if they have a beautiful plié or not. What's important for me is that they can change into a hungry lion when they move. They must have an inquiring mind, really be engineers of a sort, and absolutely not prima donnas. They must not be concerned too much about their well-being."

Streb believes that it is important that the public can become acquainted with her work and dancers in every way possible. Therefore the doors of her studio in Brooklyn, called S.L.A.M., are always open. People can stop by to watch rehearsals, workshops and lessons are given, and anyone who wants to can even learn to 'fly'. All sorts of activities for the public will also be organised in The Hague surrounding the performances.

In addition to further developing Forces, Streb is also busy with the 2012 Olympic Games, which she terms an 'unbelievably exciting undertaking'. "As the opening for the Cultural Olympiad we will perform along the Thames, I am doing a 'ghost dance' on the London Eye (the giant Ferris wheel on the bank of the Thames – ed.), and I am working with fourteen dancers and athletes on an event on Tower Bridge, in which they will shoot up and down through the rectangular space of the bridge." Streb, who has always been fascinated by unusual locations – which is why her performances in The Hague will take place in the Atrium of the City Hall – has fallen completely under the spell of bridges as a result of the London project. "My next challenge", she says indefatigably, "is a series of action events on and around the bridges of the world."