

Streb

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"I think it'll open up dance to a larger audience," he says. "Too often people think of dance as classical ballet. This is not classical ballet."

Her dancers in Brooklyn-based STREB Extreme Action leap off 30-foot landings, smack into plastic walls like bugs against a windshield and hop on people-sized hamster wheels that revolve with violent force.

Streb — a MacArthur genius grant recipient, Guggenheim fellow and member of the New York City Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission — calls it "pop action." It's based on the science behind movement and physical strength (and pushing those to the max). The result is martial arts, gymnastics, circus tricks, dance and theater all rolled into one — a combination that can produce fear and exhilaration in the practitioner and audience alike.

"The work is important for the dance world because it exposes something to dance audiences that they wouldn't see otherwise," says Garth Fagan, who will participate in one of the festival's moderated discussions with Streb on July 15. "And long before we had Cirque du Soleil, which introduced us to gymnastic and acrobatic movement with dance, Streb was doing it, way back in the '70s. ... The invention and the excitement — it's a wonderful addition to our field."

But how did a local girl with a love for athletics blossom into a radical choreographer?

Quieter beginnings

Streb's earliest memories are not of daring activities, but of her ability to draw.

She drew posters for the nuns at St. Joseph School, where she went to elementary school, and her mother took her to the Memorial Art Gallery once a week from age 8 to about 14, when she started taking the bus there by herself.

"My identity was as an artist," she remembers. Now 60, Streb continues to use her drawing skills. She works out her choreographic ideas in a sketch book, employing her knowledge of the physics behind how the body moves.

Streb discovered another side to her personality when she was young. Her father introduced her to hunting, and her mother to downhill skiing, and her penchant for dangerous activities and extreme sports was born. She would spend days at Bristol Mountain.

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Always ready to test the extremes, she found herself in a certain amount of trouble at Our Lady of Mercy High School. She remembers putting out a fire, one she says she probably started, during a chemistry class, dumping water on students when the teacher wasn't looking and delivering a fake message to the bus drivers to take the kids home early on a particularly windy day (still remembered by schoolmates as "wind day").

She bought her first motorcycle, a Honda 50, with money she saved from an after-school job. And she also found an outlet in sports, playing baseball and basketball — unusual activities for a young woman in the 1960s.

Becoming a dancer

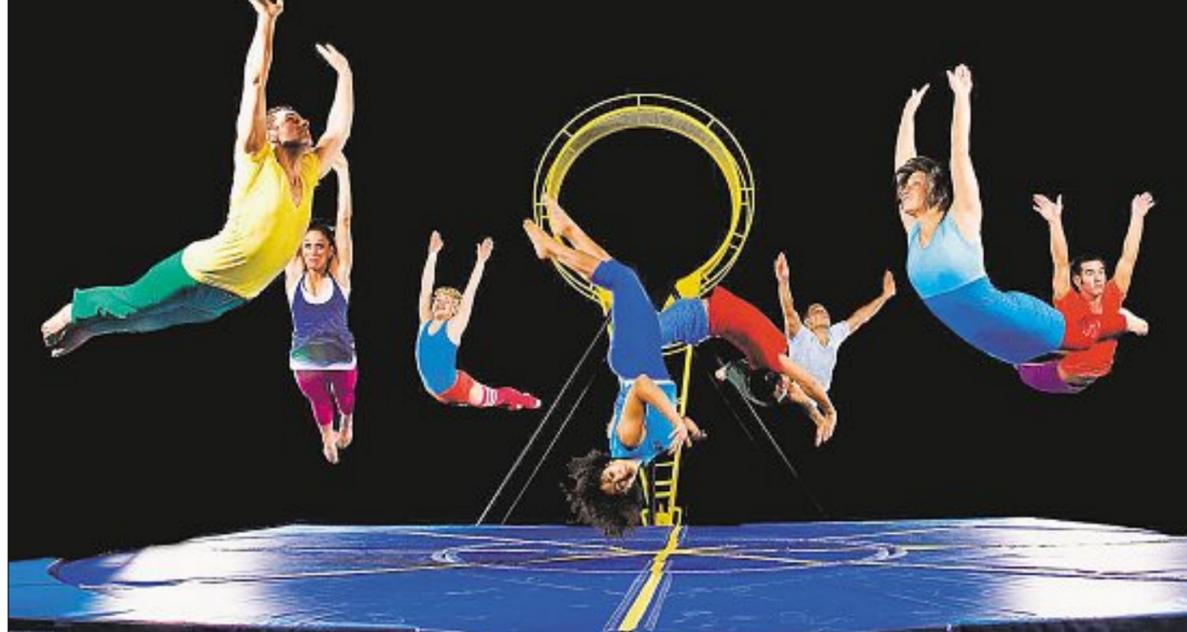
She decided she was going to major in physical education in college.

"I felt I was really a consummate athlete," she says. "I was going to learn phys ed because that's where my skills were and my interests kind of were."

She visited SUNY Brockport with a friend, and at the

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TOM CARAVAGLIA

admissions meeting, a list was passed around to pick majors. Not impressed with the school's PE department, she browsed the list carefully, stopping on dance.

"I wanted action art. That's really what I was looking for. I saw dance and I went, 'That's it! I'll do dance. It's perfect, it's art and motion.'"

But she had never danced before.

Her friend cautioned against it. Her parents suggest mathematics since Streb had shown an aptitude in the subject. But Streb went to the chair of the dance department, Rose Strasser, to describe her uncanny ability to pick up dance moves at disco halls.

"I was really astute physically," Streb says. "I could figure out which body parts moved and what the rhythm was and teach it to all my high school friends."

So she asked Strasser, "Does that count?" The answer was, of course, no. But the department accepted her anyway.

"I don't know why they let me into it," she says, "but I really did fall in love with it."

That first year, she struggled to learn basic techniques. But she asked questions about dance that might have eluded trained dancers.

"I just didn't understand why they did certain strictures, like counting and looking in the mirror," she says. "I felt like the training of dance filtered through the movement, and I thought movement is located somewhere in your corpuscle, neurological, chemical, muscular engine that is our body."

At the time, Streb was just another girl with long hair pulled back in a bun for

dance class. She says she wasn't particularly anti-establishment. Her path in the dance world has come to a surprise for some professors, who simply remember her as a hardworking student.

But others at SUNY Brockport knew Streb was different.

"She wasn't in the mold of what you were supposed to do to become a dancer," says Jacqueline Davis, currently the interim chair of SUNY Brockport's dance department and a professor at the time Streb attended.

But it was an experimental time in the late '60s, Davis says. "She was a student here in the days when there were alternative views of not just dance, but culture. It was such a mix of people who were anti-establishment, people who were willing and daring to experiment."

Streb struggled to catch up with the other dancers. At the end of her sophomore year, she faced a one-on-one evaluation by professor Susannah Newman, now a professor emeritus at Brockport.

"I walked into the room, my heart pounding out of my chest," remembers Streb. Newman simply said, "Elizabeth, you're a dancer."

"I definitely had a career that was pretty slow, for many years, but I held that sentence in my heart and mind for every one of those years," Streb says. "Sometimes it was the only thing, when the times were really difficult, through all the broken hearts, for all the dreams that

didn't happen fast enough, showcases I didn't get in, companies I wasn't invited to join."

Forging an identity

Streb left Brockport on a motorcycle with two bags and \$70 in her pocket and moved to San Francisco. In 1975, she relocated to New York City, where she found the downtown, experimental arts community accepting of her extreme ideas and lesbian identity.

By 1978, Streb remembers, "I realized that doing normal technique was embarrassing to me." She began to make a list of movements she would never do again. "The list went on and on until I went down to the ground and I just started changing my basic step," she says.

She finally landed her first show in 1982. As proof that Streb's early experiments with gravity were beginning to cause curiosity, people on the vanguard of the New York City creative scene, including choreographer Merce Cunningham and composer John Cage, attended.

Three years later, she founded her own company. By then, she had a signature look: over-sized black suits with knee-high black buckled boots, thick black glasses and boy-cut hair worn in a sort of Edward Scissorhands style,

spiked out in every direction.

One of Streb's major accomplishments since has been the opening of her performance space in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn in 2003. Called S.L.A.M. (Streb Lab for Action Movement), the warehouse was acquired through a sympathetic developer. Her community philosophy, where the public was welcomed in the space and could take classes, has helped build the area into a highly desirable neighborhood for the young and creative.

At age 57, she received a master's degree from New York University, where she had continued studies in physics and philosophy. Her dissertation turned into a book, *How to Become an Extreme Action Hero* (The Feminist Press at CUNY, \$18.95), which was published in April.

Changing the world

In addition to opening her studio to the public, her company teaches classes to about 350 children each week, helping them harness their energy into something positive that builds lifelong confidence. Streb says that dance may not feed the hungry, "but you can say if it can uplift spirits and allow kids to go from day to day without Ritalin — and I think that movement can do that, that this can change the world."

Streb's choreography is so physical that Nazareth had to scramble to find enough gym mats to meet the safety needs for the dance fest. As a result, Streb says her dancers work slowly to try to minimize accidents, and a technical director and extra consultants work with the company to ensure safety all the time.

Still there's inherent risk. "I think fear is healthy and I think it's something you have to work at to not let it limit yourself," says Sarah Donnelly, a company member for five years who, in rehearsal recently, strapped herself into a rotating metal beam and flew around the room.

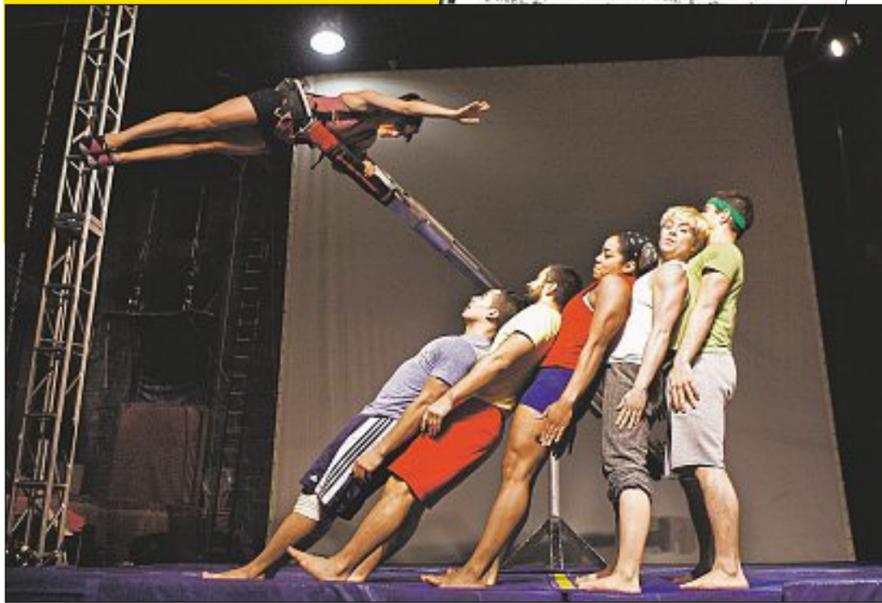
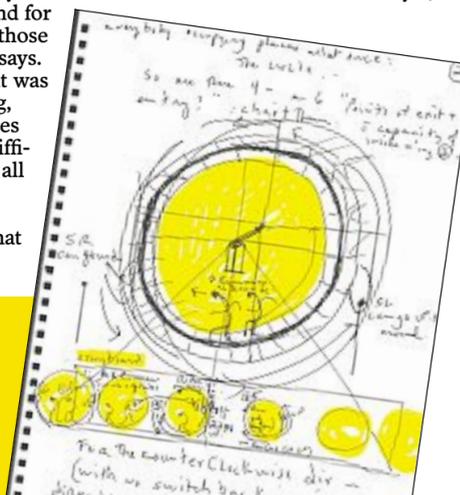
"There are all these ideas, 'You can't do this, you can't do that,' that when you start actually attempting to bust through that 'I can't' thing, it changes the way you see the world," says Donnelly.

She thinks that approach can have a positive effect on the audience, too. "When the viewer sees it, hopefully they'll go out and start to challenge their own things that they're saying 'I can't' about, that aren't necessarily about physical limitations but just about their life."

Shaped by Rochester's arts and education, Streb is excited and proud to bring her most ambitious project here.

"It's my hometown," Streb says. "It doesn't get better than that." □

Right, Streb's illustration of the "Whizzing Gizmo," one of the extreme action devices Streb uses in her highly physical choreography. Below, dancer Sarah Donnelly flies above company members at the Streb Laboratory for Action Mechanics in Brooklyn.



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AREGUERO@DemocratandChronicle.com