

Centerwork: Learn to Fly

Increasing your versatility through aerial dance

By Rachel Rizzuto

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Rachel Salzman knew she was meant for bigger and better things when her kindergarten teacher called her parents in for a talk. Her teacher begged her parents to make Rachel stop performing such advanced tricks on the monkey bars—not because she believed Rachel would get hurt, but because other students were quickly following the future dancer’s lead, with far less facility.

Not surprisingly, Salzman is now a student at the National Circus School in Montreal, happily pursuing a career in circus arts that incorporate aerial dance.

At left: Janet Aisawa of Fly-by-Night Dance Theater. Photo by Fred Hatt, Courtesy Ludwick.

If you’ve ever felt similarly inclined on the monkey bars or drawn to other exhilarating flights of fancy, aerial dance might be the next level of training you need in order to make yourself a stronger, more well-rounded performer. This art form, which requires suspending oneself in the air with the help of equipment, used to appear almost exclusively in the

circus. But where a traditional circus aerial routine would most often rely on a double-point trapeze—which only swoops back and forth like a swing—aerial dance has expanded to include more versatile apparatuses, such as silks, hoops, harnesses, or hammocks. These allow for a wider range of movement and lend themselves to more elaborate choreography with expression, theme, and mood.

A huge increase in upper-body strength is one of the most obvious benefits of aerial dance. “When I first started doing aerial, I had weak little ballerina arms,” laughs Salzman, who has performed (earthbound) with the Seán Curran Company and CorbinDances, in addition to freelance circus work in New York City. “I never thought I’d be able to do it, because I didn’t have the strength to climb.”

Julie Ludwick, founder and artistic director of New York-based Fly-by-Night Dance Theater, likens aerial dance to sitting on a horse: You have to engage your core, because the apparatus is never completely static—even if you’re just sitting on it. This develops plenty of torso strength and powerful back muscles. And hanging by your knees will strengthen your hamstrings—often a weak spot for dancers, who tend to have an imbalance between their quadriceps and hamstrings, which can easily lead to knee injuries.

The drastically different relationship to gravity in aerial dance is an added bonus: Heather Hammond, director and head instructor of Heliummm Aerial Dance and Entertainment in New York, says that aerial work improves a dancer's sense of kinesthetic awareness. "When people go upside down," Hammond explains, "they lose the sense of up, down, left, or right. You're forced to expand your sensory-motor perception."

Aerial work can give even the most experienced dancers a new sense of focus, too. When Jennifer Nugent was cast in the 2008 resetting of Martha Clarke's acclaimed *Garden of Earthly Delights*, which involves dangerous feats of aerial partnering, she found herself with a newfound discipline. "I would never call myself an unfocused performer, but working in the air, in a potentially perilous situation, definitely affected my dancing, both in the air and on the ground," says Nugent, who is a member of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company.

Ludwick adds that because your movement is on a swivel—and therefore much more difficult to control—any tiny deviation will give you immediate feedback about your trajectory through space. "Aerial teaches dancers to send their bodies in a direct path," Ludwick explains, "whether in a jump, a leap through space, or in a lift."

An aerial dancer also develops more ease and nuance with partnering on the ground. "After increasing your upper-body strength, partnering totally improves," says Hammond. "You can lift your own body weight, so you become less of a burden." The benefits go both ways: Nugent, who had no aerial experience before *Garden*, credits her facility in the air to her extensive work in contact improvisation. "During aerial partnering, it was really about sharing the weight and using the centrifugal force," she says. "I made up the two lifts I did in the piece—all of us involved were like kids having free play. We were excited to try new things."

Joanna Haigood, artistic director of San Francisco-based Zaccho Dance Theatre, found that her experiences with aerial dance influenced her choreographic approach. "It inspired me to think about working three-dimensionally and more sculpturally," explains Haigood. "I wanted to fill the space with more volume, and it pushed me to think about choreography in context."

Haigood's company produces site-based works that take inspiration from natural and architectural environments as well as the histories of a place. "Taking dance off the ground," she says, "helps highlight areas of a site that are sometimes overlooked. It gives the performing area more dimensionality. It can shift our perception of time. It produces qualities that are surreal and dreamlike. It also gives the dancer a different, sometimes expanded, range of motion."

Perhaps the most practical benefit of aerial dance is the increased marketability it brings a dancer. "We're in tough economic times," states Hammond, "so if a client can hire me to do three different acts, I'm going to get hired over someone who is 'just a dancer.'" And her company has no shortage of work: Heliummm performs at corporate events, festivals, product launches, and private parties. Hammond has also found the pay rate to be generally higher for aerial, because it's a special skill that not only requires extensive training and commitment but also carries an increased risk factor.

And aerial dance is popping up everywhere: It's become something of a staple in Broadway musicals, including the much heralded return of *Pippin* this spring, and Hammond has former students now dancing with international cruise ships and European circuses. Salzman got to collaborate with Jodi Sperling, of Time Lapse Dance, on a solo that aimed to take Loie Fuller into the air—combining Salzman's training in both modern and aerial.

The doors that aerial dance can open, both marketability-wise and creatively, are boundless. "I had a dancer," says Ludwick, "who told me, 'You know, I was doing an improv on the Staten Island ferry, and I realized—I can hang from that railing!' Your movement possibilities just open up."

Rachel Rizzuto is a dancer and writer in New York City.

