



Exclusive:

Aerial Dancer Julie Ludwick on Finding Modern Dance's Inner Peter Pan

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by [Michelle Vellucci](#)



If you ask Julie Ludwick how she made the transition from earthbound modern dancer to gravity-defying aerialist, she'll tell you that it's partly because she grew up in Alaska. "As a friend of mine said, Alaska is the only state where women carry their own luggage," explains Ludwick, artistic director of [Fly-by-Night Dance Theater](#) and founder of the [NYC Aerial Dance Festival](#). "And so carrying your own weight into the air is kind of a no-brainer for me."

In short, the dancers of Fly-by-Night don't need a man to give them a lift, as was evident on a recent morning in Williamsburg, where three company members swung, spun and somersaulted on a single-point trapeze that hung in a high-ceilinged artist's loft. They were rehearsing for the NYC Aerial Dance Festival, which takes place tomorrow at [The JCC in Manhattan](#) (home of one of the few theaters in the city equipped with a twenty-foot ceiling).

We had a chance to watch as Summer Baldwin, Kristin Hatleberg and Janet Aisawa put the finishing touches on *I Can't Not*, a paean to the physical abandon of very young children. In a particularly tricky section, Hatleberg attempted to jump up and grab the bar as the trapeze swung in wide circles, with Aisawa perched on top. After several failed attempts she made a beautiful grab. "Oh yay!" she squealed. "I feel like a kid."

The trapeze work is exhilarating, but it's not the stuff you'd see in the Big Top. The lower trapeze bar hangs five to six feet off the ground, and the emphasis here is on artistry — not circus tricks. Ludwick's style is based in [Skinner Releasing Technique](#), which uses imagery to ease tension and free the body for creative impulses — very helpful when it comes to responding to the mercurial movements of a trapeze.

At tomorrow's festival, *Fly-by-Night* will share billing with six other aerial dancers and companies, including the Vermont-based [MOTH Aerial Dance](#) and New York dancer and former Cirque du Soleil artist [Sara Joel](#). Here, Ludwick shares some insights about dancing in the air and why it still doesn't get the respect it deserves.

Flavorpill: What kinds of dance did you study when you were growing up, and how did you get involved with trapeze work?

Julie Ludwick: I came up with ballet and switched to modern in my late teens as I was going into college. I was in Seattle getting my undergraduate degree, and someone named [Robert Davidson](#) was just starting to do trapeze work. I got the trapeze bug from him. It was my last year, and I was already planning to move to New York, so I moved to New York as a modern dancer and did some auditioning for modern companies. But I really wanted to get back to trapeze.

FP: What did you like about it?

JL: As a kid, I was the tomboy who was not swinging on the swing but shinnying up the pole and walking across the top of it. As a choreographer... instead of thinking of the stage as just the horizontal, I like to think of it as the vertical as well. I think it's that combination of independence and being able to explore all these different dimensions.

FP: How did your company come about?

JL: I asked Robert Davidson for a trapeze recipe and just started doing it. I did it first with another dancer who had danced with Robert, and then I made a solo for myself. Then I decided I want to do a big piece, and I did a twenty-minute piece with six dancers in '93, I think. And I just kept going from there. We tried to do some pieces with trapeze work and some with just floor work, and eventually I realized it doesn't work — we have to train and specialize in this. In the summers I worked a bit more with Robert Davidson and danced with him in Boston. He had started to develop a trapeze dance class, and I just used that as a foundation.

FP: Of all the types of aerial apparatus out there, why did you choose the single-point trapeze?

JL: I use a single point because it's more three-dimensional. It spins and will fly in a circle as well as a straight line. It allows you to view the body in a three-dimensional way because you're almost always turning or spinning. What interests me aesthetically is that it's so unpredictable. A two-point is much more stable, but with a single-point if you move an inch, the other person moves a mile. What that requires as a performer is that you're in an improvisational mode. The performers have to be prepared to make it work when it does something else. It's frustrating sometimes as a choreographer, but it's also really beautiful to watch. You can't go on auto-pilot.

FP: How do you approach your teaching, particularly with inexperienced students?

JL: I think it's like any learning process. There are plateaus and then these leaps. I give them an improve structure to explore, like going up and down, and along the way I encourage the students to allow the dance that is happening to occur rather than trying to make the dance that you had planned happen. That's a skill that hopefully you apply once we reach rehearsal and performance. I am directing them to gain control of this partner but also recognize when it has control.

FP: When aerial dance was getting started back in the 1970s, there seemed to be some controversy in the dance community in terms of whether this was a valid dance form. Do you still encounter this attitude, or is it more accepted today?

JL: I think it's still a big problem. I've been denied grants from committees that have said, "Oh you're not dance." It depends on how traditional they are about what dance is. And there are still problems in terms of trying to get into a showcase [because of the rigging requirements]. Nobody wants to bother. There is certainly more of it going on today. [STREB](#) has opened a space for more of it to happen. But a lot of [aerial work] is circus and cabaret, and people are accepting of it in that genre. This is why I started these aerial festivals. I wanted to move it out of the loft and into theaters. I think it should be thought of as modern dance.

FP: What can we expect to see at this year's festival?

JL: It's always a one-of-a-kind event. Sarah Joel is pregnant this year ... and she's doing a very special piece in a Plexiglass bubble chair, which sort of represents the womb. We also have some people who are from out of town this year; it's the first year we're starting to get people from places other than New York community. Anna Vigeland is coming from Oregon to do a piece on a cloud swing, which we've never had in the festival before. It's like a big rope strung across a nine-foot span. MOTH Aerial dance is coming down from Vermont, and they've created this long metal rectangle that they dance in and around and on. It's fun to see these different things and gather people from across the country.

FP: And can you tell us a little bit about the piece that Fly-by-Night will be performing?

JL: When my son was about a year old, we created this piece. He just would never sleep ... and he was also a very early walker. When you have a nine-month old walking around... they just go. It doesn't make sense linearly but it's full of impulse, and I just used that. I came in with a phrase and we put it on the trapeze, we put it on the floor, we did it standing up, we made it travel. We just tried all these different things compositionally. It was really inspired by this sort of wonder at the mindset of a very small toddler. I think we laughed more creating this piece than we have ever laughed.