

Newsday

New York City

Friday, January 5, 2001

Tumbling Into Life

Diavolo's dancers dare to take an imaginative leap or two

By Sylviane Gold

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Jacques Heim, artistic director and choreographer.

Program of New York premieres: "Tête en l'Air" (1994), "Apex" (1998), "Le Siège" (2000) and "Trajectoire" (1999).

Seen Wednesday at the Joyce Theater, Eighth Avenue and 19th Street, Manhattan. Through Sunday.

READ ABOUT the members of Diavolo, and you find among them gymnasts, a former diver, a performer who knows tae kwan do and one who has worked as a stuntwoman. To join this awesome Los Angeles-based troupe, which made its New York debut Wednesday night at the Joyce, dancers need power, daring, speed and accuracy. Oh, there's one more thing: acrophobics need not apply.

Because the Paris-born artistic director, Jacques Heim, sends them tumbling down a flight of stairs or bouncing up from trampolines; he'll leave them wobbling aboard tall ladders or ricocheting across a giant teeterboard; and he'll cheerfully push them off all of the above into the void.

It would be terrifying watch if not for the fact that someone always manages to slide, roll or jump into exactly the right spot at exactly the right time - and we're talking milli-seconds here - to act as catcher.

The staircase, a tall, boxy structure with lots of secret doors, is in "Tête en l'Air," an unruly farce set to a crash-rock score by Jean Pierre Bedoyan, Juliet Prater and John Zeretzke. The title, which means "Head in the Air," is an expression the French use to describe daydreamers and other distracted souls, and the piece propels bodies heedlessly to and fro burdened by increasingly unmanageable baggage. Borrowing imagery from the surreal paintings of Magritte and the surreal film comedies of Jacques Tati, it wants to be about the rush and anomie of modern life, but it succeeds - and this is no small thing - in being mostly about falling.

The second piece, "Apex," is equally fascinating to watch and equally gimmicky. Set to John Adams' "The Chairman Dances," it features four dancing people clambering on

four dancing ladders. If the program ended here, Diavolo would appear to be a brilliant, elaborately theatrical company of highly skilled acrobats. But the feats give way to art in the evening's final, more recent, works, "Le Siège" and "Trajectoire." The word siège means both seat and siege in French, and "Le Siège" is a double-edged work in which dancers vie for a plain red bench to music by Prater and Michel Colombier. They enlist those trampolines and each other in their knockabout war, which ends with a bang-and with nobody sitting.

And in the master "Trajectoire," Heims puts his feel for props, his knack for kinetic drama and his taste for danger in the service of a metaphor, and the result is dazzling. Daniel Wheeler has designed an ark-like set, open at the front and back, with railings on each side. In the first half . . . it is more or less anchored; in the second . . . it pitches from side to side as the dancers move across the deck in a stretching, yearning search for the stability that eludes us all.