

THE VILLAGE VOICE

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Born in France, Living American Lives What Price Daring?

by Deborah Jowitt

Since the 1970s, when a handful of intrepid choreographers began to define virtuosity as risk, the ante has been upped. While ballet dancers edged from three or four pirouettes to umpteen, those in the postmodern kamikaze set learned to hurtle through the air, hang from ropes, burst through plates of glass, and dive onto trampolines.

At its best, *Diavolo*—run by a Frenchman, Jacques Heim, and based in Los Angeles—combines organized peril with drama and a mordant wit. The fact that his performers, who are drawn from theater, dance, gymnastics, and Hollywood stunt crews, wear real clothes (even tailcoats) gives their shenanigans a surreal edge.

The simpler of the pieces Heim showed at the Joyce last week (hardly simple to perform!) involve lightning interactions between humans and movable structures. In *Apex*, to John Adams's "The Chairman Dances," Nicholas W. Erickson, Meeghan Godfrey, Robert Lou, and Allen Moon perform startling balancing acts on two sturdy red

stepladders—closed, open, tilted.

In *Le Siège*, Erickson—the tallest and baldest on-stage—holds down a coveted red bench. Benches multiply, people launch themselves into the fray from minitrampolines in the wings. Erickson actually fields Laura Everling with a bench.

Tête en L'Air and *Trajectoire* are more resonant and larger in scope (the former feels too long by one episode). Both involve big set pieces. In the first, characters and images drawn from René Magritte's paintings (bowler-hatted men, umbrellas, apples, valises, etc.) parade or are paraded down a towering flight of very deep steps, redesigned by Cinnabar and Jeremy Jacobs from Roger Webb's 1994 original.

The participants shed attire as the piece progresses, and the events get more prodigious (for instance, skiing down the staircase over prone bodies). In one miraculously timed sequence, people pop up intermittently through the six stair treads, and the hinged lids they raise catapult passersby into space.

Tête en L'Air puts Magrittean imagery in a dryer and tumbles it with theatrical verve. The newer *Trajectoire* achieves a marvelous dreamy poetry, aided by the music selections from Hans Zimmer's *The Thin Red Line* and Philip Glass's *Mishima*; by Daniel Lonazzi's splendid lighting; and by dancer-designer Godfrey's trim white outfits. The centerpiece is Daniel Wheeler's immense, fat half-column laid on its rounded side. With a deck railed on two edges and a transparent hull, it looks something like a ship—and it rocks like one, too.

Lifts and dives acquire a new riskiness when they occur on a slanted surface. In this, Heim comes closest to building sustained dance passages. In one beautiful sequence, four of the company's women (Godfrey, Everling, Blasa Acevedo, and Monica Campbell) repeatedly climb the tilting deck and slide down one by one into a demure row.

The ending is austere: The "ship" is beached, and Godfrey, left alone, cannot reach the deck's high end.