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Diavolo: Powerful metaphors abound

PHYSICAL: Daily struggle underscored by athletic metaphors.

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These guys have no fear. Catapult off a 15-foot staircase into darkness? No problem. Leap across a pitching boat deck? You got it. Oh, and can we make that fearless athleticism creatively metaphorical? Just watch.

People discovered a brave new world Friday at the Atwood Concert Hall. Diavolo Dance Theater saw to that. The troupe pushed physicality to its limits in exploring ourselves, society and our place in it. Dancers and sets became equal partners here, facing the challenges of modern life together.

"Tete en L'Air" -- head in the clouds -- was full of symbols, some understood, others unexplained. People dressed in street clothes at the dance's start walked up and down a staircase, carrying all sorts of baggage.

Soon individual idiosyncrasies appeared: a man wore a bird cage on his head, a woman donned a bridal veil. Another man covered his head in a white cloth and carried a single rose as he quietly stepped down the stairs.

These props represented the emotional baggage we carry in life. The movements and gestures were the journeys we are often forced upon -- to get ahead, to find our self-esteem, even just to survive -- and the confusion we all feel at times.

"Tete" picked up the pace as dancers dropped through trap doors, threw themselves off the staircase, and skied, sledged, or rolled down the steps. Their actions became more frantic as they embraced physical risks just to keep up with the world around them.

The piece ended with a leap of faith, literally. After finding some pseudo-sense in tuxedos, champagne and roses, a lone man at the top of the stairs pitched backward into the dark unknown.

While "Tete en L'Air" was surrealistic and intellectually challenging, "Trajectoire," was emotionally visceral. Dancers rocked and were rocked by a tilting platform reminiscent of a boat deck. Metaphors of survival, companionship and a struggle waged together filled the piece.

"Trajectoire" -- trajectory -- opened with two silhouetted performers slowly moving through a barred semi-circle. Shapes dissolved into one another like waves on the

shore. Rising and falling motions became more evocative as the deck was exposed. Dancers slid and leapt across the rolling platform, finding a moment of suspended stability before they moved on again.

Dancers flung themselves from railing to railing, and even off the deck, as the storm intensified and pitched the deck to a 45-degree angle. Yet they returned again and again to the relative safety of this rolling platform, determined to ride out the violence around them.

But as in life, not all would succeed, or even survive. One by one, dancers fell into the void until a solitary woman battled almost overwhelming forces. Her final triumph was bittersweet, coming at a great cost to all.

These works are powerful because we recognize their metaphors. Diavolo Dance Theater seems to say that we can survive our life struggles, and sometimes we can even be winners.

Anne Herman holds a masters degree in dance and has been a consultant for the National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program.