

The Boston Phoenix

January 8 - 15, 1998

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## Whammers

### Streb takes no prisoners

by Marcia B. Siegel

Some critics have been complaining that Elizabeth Streb's work isn't dance. Such carping seems unnecessarily picky when dance presenters offer "carnival" and "cybertech" among their upcoming attractions. Streb, who just completed a three-week season at New York's Joyce Theatre, now calls her stuff "real action."

It isn't any more real than dance, gymnastics, or tightrope walking, all highly artificial precision skills of the body.



I think what gets under people's skin about Streb's work is that it's just on the edge of being dance. It can't be dismissed as a sport or a stunt, and it even has moments of aesthetic pleasure. The elements of design and group patterning, and even rhythm, have crept into her pieces, but these always occur as extrapolations of a basic equipment-generated task for the individual performer. Streb will multiply and elaborate the task, but only far enough to exploit the physical idea. Like Chinese ribbon dancing, her work beguiles the eye and sometimes snatches the imagination, but it doesn't tell a bigger story.

In *Fly*, Streb's newest piece, a single performer (Hope Clark) hangs

in an all-directional harness on one end of a sort of catapult. This long, counterweighted boom revolves 360 degrees and dips up and down, propelled both by Clark pushing off from the floor and walls and by other company members who boost her trajectory with little tugs and pushes as she glides past them. While circling above the stage, Clark can do somersaults and barrel rolls as well as swooping stretches. She looks like a diver in perpetual suspension. Her cohort jog and tumble beneath her like a school of fish.

Dependent as it is on equipment or architectural launching pads, Streb's work creates its own practical yet oddly theatrical environment. She and designers Bill Ballou and Michael Casselli have now combined all the set-ups into one unit, called a box truss, that gets repacked, hinged, hung, and anchored during the performance. The general effect, with lurid industrial lighting, exposed grids, railings, ramps, and panels, is more like a billiard hall than a stage. All the equipment is miked to register the sound of the movers' impact. For *Up*, a trampoline piece, the whumps and splats the performers produce while bouncing off the springy surface onto high platforms activate pre-programmed reverbs and booms from a synthesizer. (Michael Ostrowski is composer in residence.)

In *All/Wall*, the five performers hurl themselves against a wall, scramble to the top, hang from the edge, team up to catch another person as he drops off the top or pivots in midair from a sprint to land athwart their crooked-back legs. All during this piece, two video images (by Dennis Diamond) are projected onto panels at the sides. The video can freeze the moment when the dancers hit the wall, capturing what the audience hardly sees in real time.

Probably because it doesn't lead your mind away from the moment into metaphor, character, or emotional associations, Streb's work is an intensely physical experience for the viewer, even a sensationalized one. In *Breakthru*, a man dives headfirst, straight toward us, through a pane of glass. The people in the first three rows of the audience have been supplied with protective welders' masks. The man lands exactly at the edge of the stage and accepts our

screams like a victorious matador.

It was interesting to see one of Streb's earliest pieces, *Little Ease* (1985), on this program. Stuffed into a box with one side cut away, she jerks from one position to another, occupying the whole space but never really accommodating to any part of it. She moves everything at once, then settles into a tense moment, her whole body deciding where to go next, then springs into another move.

It's this sense of the body fully engaged at every moment, active or resting, that enlivens Streb's work, and also marks it as non-dancerly. There's no indulgence here, no pretty curves or subtle oppositions, nothing extraneous to survival. As Streb said during a brisk Q&A with the audience, she thinks her work is about "action as subject, not body as object." I sometimes feel worn out by the unrelenting toughness of it, but I'm always intrigued by its invention, courage, and wit.

