

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Ralph Alswang

Art World Interloper: Elizabeth Streb in Her Own Words

by Mira Treatman

The iconic Brooklyn-based [Streb Extreme Action](#) brought its work SEA, Singular Extreme Actions, to the Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts (PIFA). I spoke about this work, via Skype, with the mastermind at the helm of it all, Artistic Director Elizabeth Streb. After seeing SEA at the Kimmel Center on opening night, I was struck by the enormity of Streb's ability to actualize her beliefs. This feat rivals that of her fearless dancers. It is rare to [accomplish all that she has](#) while maintaining a high bar for her self-imposed ethics of making dance.

Mira Treatman: How has [SEA - Singular Extreme Actions](#) evolved over time, now that it is on tour?

Elizabeth Streb: This show is about two years old. It came after [Forces](#), which took twenty-five hours just to load into a theatre. I had to drill ninety holes to hold up the set. I still come with an enormous amount of equipment, but the beauty of SEA is that we work with [Hudson Scenic](#) to retrofit each piece. I believe you need hardware, instruments of action, to present a theatrical action show. It can't just be the human body. Our equipment absorbs an enormous amount of unpredictable errant forces because it's felt timing.

MT: What do you mean by "felt timing?"

ES: It has to do with how you occupy that half millimeter of space for a fraction of a second before or after someone leaves and someone is going to enter that spot in space. The term is used more often in sports because they don't have a "ready and a one and a two and a" for the pitcher to count in to music. There's no real artistic reason to go slower or less hard. Someone may have a timing system that's comfortable for their body, but we defy comfort.

MT: Do you edit *SEA* when new dancers join Streb?

ES: The rhythms might change a little, but each piece provokes a consistent epigram that is physical, provocative, and archetypal, really. We have a rubric that is “higher, faster, sooner, harder” and another which is “do whatever you want, whenever you can.” The performers are real human beings. Whereas typical dancers, forgive me, are so snotty. There are three thousand people in the audience and they’re ignoring them, thinking what’s happening up there is enough. I disagree.

MT: When you mention the snottiness of dance....

ES: It’s a class thing.

MT: Go on?

ES: I want to know if I’m keeping the attention of the every-person. I can learn a lot from the way they watch, even if they’re quiet. That the body is the subject and music is the temporal container for expressing what the body can express—I disagree with both of those things. We say music is the true enemy of dance, but it still reigns true in my activities. I’m a nice person and I like people. My participation in the dance world has been graceful even though I disagree with so much of dance as a theatre event.

MT: Who do you make work for?

ES: My audience is the whole wide world, because everybody understands action. I would love to open for a monster truck rally, Nascar, a rodeo, a basketball game, but I’m in the art world. I am in the same cohort of artists as Bill T. Jones, Molissa Fenley, Mark Morris, but I didn’t get successful early on. Thirty-five years later I’m aware that Streb will be performing for the elite for the rest of my life.

MT: Since you opened your company’s home base, Streb Lab for Action Mechanics (SLAM) in 2003, you’ve made all rehearsals open to the public. Why is that?

ES: I was not raised in the art world. My father was a mason. Much of our funding is public at the city, state, and federal levels. I felt strongly that SLAM too should be public. It is a very large garage in Williamsburg, which Streb acquired the second before it became “Williamsburg.” I think Lincoln Center should do it, churches should do it. You cannot lock your doors. It has been the richest thing. I would not have made some of the things I’ve made if we were not open to the public.

MT: With the highly diverse company of dancers in Streb, what would you say are uniting qualities?

ES: The performers work with a personal-best technique, based on the old fashioned modern dance notion that you are born singly with this body. Out of that, you create a series of vocabularies, syntaxes, grammars that no one else can. I mostly do not tell them what to do. We have an agreement of purpose to make an event consistent with the higher, faster, sooner, harder, and nothing extra. Their work is what’s necessary and sufficient.

MT: Is *SEA* a work of theatre?

ES: It’s not theatre. Theatre is trying to tell a story. That’s too slow for us. We’re an experience. It’s certainly theatrical, but it defies the rubrics. The house lights stay on, people can have phones out and scream and yell. I wish the audience could eat in the theatre and not leave the stuff of life at the door. It may not be theatre, but *SEA* occurs in one. I am an interloper, in I come!

[SEA - Singular Extreme Actions](#). Streb Extreme Action, Perelman Theater, June 5–7.

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