

Face to Face: Elizabeth Streb

DT dance-teacher.com/face-to-face-elizabeth-streb-2392289485.html

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Dance Teacher Tips

Michelle Vellucci

Feb. 08, 2010 11:52AM EST

How do you stage turbulence? Can you move in more than one direction at the same time? Can you break through a surface? Elizabeth Streb, aptly dubbed “the Evel Knievel of dance,” has devoted her life’s work to investigating questions like these. For the past 25 years, Streb and her Extreme Action Company have tested the boundaries of movement with a high-impact blend of acrobatics and daredevil athleticism called PopAction. And since 2003, the company’s home base in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, has offered year-round classes, workshops and camps for children and adults.



No traditionalist, the MacArthur Award–winning choreographer flouts the notions that dancers should land on their feet and make movement look

effortless. Streb’s dancers are “Action Engineers,” and they fly through the air in harnesses, slam into Plexiglas walls, somersault through gauntlets of swinging cinder blocks and free-fall onto their backs and stomachs. DT recently caught up with the “Action Architect” at the STREB Lab for Action Mechanics (SLAM) to see what her latest action-adventure, *BRAVE*—now touring—is all about.

Dance Teacher: In *BRAVE*, dancers move on surfaces that continuously rotate. Describe your creative process.

Elizabeth Streb: It started with a 20-foot revolving circle device that has an 8-foot circle inside of it; the two circles turn in different directions at different speeds. Then I asked questions like, “Can I make the body appear to immediately shift directions?” which you cannot do in reality because of inertia. But if you jump on and off the moving surfaces, you immediately shift directions. So I built patterns and will try to see if the audience even notices that it’s an alarming idea.

DT: When do you involve the dancers?

ES: I get the equipment made, get it in the space and then bring in my dancers. By this point, I've already done a lot of drawings so I understand the conditions, but I have no idea what the dancers can do until they step on the equipment.

DT: Your work is physically challenging. What do you look for in your dancers?

ES: I'm looking for the wild animals. I want people who are riveting to watch. And my dancers cannot be chronically weak anywhere.

DT: Anna Kisselgoff of *The New York Times* once wrote: "A choreographer who requires a special taste rarely appeals to a broad public. But Elizabeth Streb's pieces do both, and this paradox is the secret to her success." How do you accomplish this?

ES: I try to create a non-predictive temporal structure—the equivalent of a page-turner in movement. I want your attention. I think people love the series of surprises. The nature of my work is very working-class and street, and very anarchic in a certain way. I'm really breaking rules on many different levels.

DT: When developing your style, why did you depart from traditional dance?

ES: When I first started dancing in my teens, I kept thinking, "Why are there mirrors? I thought I was supposed to be moving." It was so positionally acclimated, and I thought, "Who cares? I'm going to be out of [this position] in half a second anyways." I started collecting questions about modern dance from the get-go. It just didn't seem organic enough to me in terms of its procedures.

DT: How would you describe your teaching approach?

ES: Our theory is based on the belief that humans can fly. We want students to adhere to their personal best. It's not compare-and-despair. We have positions like crouch, sit, ball, pike and downward dog; each one of these shapes has a different base of support. When a kid comes in, we say, "Make an X! Make a T! Do a crouch!" And they just do it. It's completely see-and-do.
DT

Former senior editor of Dance Teacher, Michelle Vellucci writes about dance and the arts in New York City.

Photo by Jack Mitchell, courtesy of Elizabeth Streb

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Nov. 09, 2018 08:17AM EST

Let's Celebrate the Last Bit of Fall by Watching Some Biscuit Ballerina Falling Friday Videos

Shelby Williams via @biscuitballerina

Fall is arguably the best season of the year, and "Falling Fridays" are arguably the best day of the week on the @biscuitballerina Instagram page. So, we thought it was only fitting that we combine the two "bests" for a fall-tastic post today!

Heaven bless @biscuitballerina for making us laugh day in and day out. SHE. IS. EVERYTHING.

Get ready to laugh 'til you cry, ladies and gentleman.

There's just nothing that can hit your funny bone like watching dancers eat it!

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Dance News

Lauren Wingenroth for Dance Magazine

Nov. 08, 2018 12:48PM EST

When Can We Finally Talk About Why Boys In Dance Get Bullied?

A still from the new documentary, *DANSEUR*. Image courtesy *DANSEUR*

According to the new documentary *DANSEUR*, 85% of males who study dance in the United States are bullied or harassed. A quote in the film from Dr. Doug Risner, faculty member at Wayne State University, states, "If this scope of bullying occurred in any activity other than

dance, it would be considered a public health crisis by the CDC."

So why is it allowed to persist in ballet? And why aren't we talking about it more? These are the questions that *DANSEUR* seeks to answer. But primarily consisting of dance footage and interviews with male dancers like ABT's James Whiteside, Houston Ballet's Harper Watters and Boston Ballet's Derek Dunn, the film only addresses these issues superficially, with anecdotes about individual experiences and generalizations about what it's like to be a male dancer.

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[Mia Michaels, As Told to Haley Hilton via Dance Magazine](#)

Nov. 07, 2018 03:04PM EST

Mia Michaels Opens Up About Burning Bridges

Mia Michaels has learned the power of inspiring those she works with. Here, rehearsing Rockettes. Photo courtesy MSG

Dancers are human, which means they're bound to make mistakes from time to time, both on and off the stage. But what happens when those mistakes burn bridges? In an industry so small, is it possible for choreographers and performers to recover?

In a moment of vulnerability, three-time Emmy Award winning choreographer Mia Michaels opened up to Dance Magazine about some of the bridges she herself has burned, the lengths she's gone to in order to rebuild and the peace she's made with the new direction her career has taken because of them. —Haley Hilton

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Nov. 07, 2018 10:02AM EST

These 3 Dance Teachers Are All Our Second Mothers

Stacey Tookey and student at Camp Protégé via @sjtookey on Instagram

There are certain dance teachers out there who have a gift for making students feel loved, cared about, capable, encouraged and inspired—all at the same time. They're beautiful sparks of light in the midst of this competitive and at times exhausting industry.

Three of those special souls happen to have a gigantic reach through conventions and television, and have somehow made each and every one of us feel like they're our second moms. Don't believe me? Go take (or observe) class from anyone of them and then try to tell me they don't love you as their own!

Check 'em out below, and then share a time one of them said something that made you feel important and validated!

xoxo

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Nov. 06, 2018 08:40AM EST

Exercises to Solve Forward Head Posture and Realign Your Students

Thinkstock

The human head weighs somewhere between 8 and 12 pounds. For many of us, our youngest students included, that comparatively large weight spends on average at least a couple hours a day hunched over a screen. While you may not consider your students as average, there is no denying we spend more hours than ever looking down at handheld mobile devices. "I think of it as 'tech posture,'" says Blossom Leilani Crawford of Bridge Pilates, "when the head is forward and the shoulders are forward. People don't know where their heads are anymore, and you certainly can't turn well with the weight of your head forward."

Forward head posture seems to be the very antithesis of the open chest, lifted spine and presentational sensibility of most classical dance training. But beyond the aesthetics, this misalignment can affect balance and coordination in developing dancers and, at the extreme end, can be associated with nerve damage and pain down the arm.

According to Dr. Marshall Hagins, physical therapist for the Mark Morris Dance Group, there are really two things going on when you see forward head posture. First, the skull is projected forward in front of the body (as in when we look down at a phone). But then, because we are social creatures who want to see and interact with the world in front of us, the head rotates backward on the spine, thrusting the chin up and out. "The muscles in the front of the neck are short and relaxed," he explains, "while the muscles in the back, which are keeping the head from falling further, are lengthened and overworking." The neck muscles have a very high density of proprioceptors and the nervous system feedback is working to fight gravity all of the time, all of which can result in a levator scapulae that is overused and painful.

Hagins offers a tent analogy for balancing the head in three dimensions without simply resorting to a military posture. "All the surrounding neck muscles need to have just the right amount of tension to keep a heavy object, such as the head, balanced atop the tent pole of your spine," he says. "When it leans one way, the corresponding wire becomes loose and the other wires have to pull harder." He notes that it can still be possible for dancers to move in and out of the proper positions even if the resting posture is slouched. However, assuming such a posture for most of the day can lead to injury.

The phenomenon has caused Crawford to modify the abdominal exercises in her mat class. "I sometimes ask for the head to stay on the floor for the single-leg stretch or double-leg stretch," she says. "I call it 'angry turtle' when you work to draw the back of your head into the floor. Once that is understood, it is easier to transfer into lifting the head off the ground properly."

However, both Hagins and Crawford caution that dancers are often hypermobile and prone to overcorrecting, so it is important to focus on good postural habits and incremental changes so they don't move from one misalignment of the head and neck to another. Here are three simple exercises Crawford uses to help students find and feel where proper head alignment is in different planes of movement. They are great on their own, in any warm-up, or can be easily sprinkled into a Pilates mat routine.

Supine Head Float



Elena Prisco, age 17, student at Lake Tahoe Dance Collective. Photos courtesy of Thompson

1. Lie on your back, knees bent and feet planted, with a yoga block, or prop of similar height, under the shoulder blades. Let your head rest back into this big, chest-opening stretch, with your fingers interlaced, hands behind your neck so that your pinky fingers are against the base of your skull.
2. Float your head up to spine level, chin tucked in, hands helping to traction your neck long. Use exhales to activate the abdominals and keep ribs heavy and soft while your head is up. Hold for a few counts and then rest back into the stretch.
3. Repeat several times, being careful not to let the chin jut forward.

*If you are ready for more, float the pelvis up to spine level along with the head. Keep the pelvis in a neutral, untucked position.

Viral Videos

Katherine Beard for Dance Spirit

Nov. 06, 2018 10:33AM EST

Watch and Learn as Ciara Demonstrates 5 Fierce Dance Moves

screenshot via YouTube

If anyone's going to demonstrate how to break out some fresh dance moves it might as well be Ciara. This dancing diva is working on her seventh album, and everyone knows that any great album should be served with a side of dancing. So Ciara decided to show *Vogue* five of her fiercest moves—and we are here for every single one of them.

From the 1, 2 Step to Bucking, Ciara reminds us why we love her in this beautiful tutorial. We dare you to watch this and NOT bust a move. We can't wait to see what routines Ciara and her longtime choreographer Jamaica Craft pair with the tracks on her upcoming album. Whatever

they decide, we know we'll be in for a treat. Until then you can master Ciara's iconic dance moves with the help of the video below. We won't judge you for playing it on repeat.

Ciara Breaks Down 5 Iconic Dance Moves to "Dose" | Vogue www.youtube.com