

DANCE

DANCE; Way Up High, Soaring, Floating, Diving, Dancing

By Wendy Perron

Aug. 18, 2002

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AN abandoned grain elevator rises high above the docks of Red Hook, Brooklyn. With 54 joined silos, it looks like a pack of gigantic cement ladyfingers. During its heyday, from the 1920's through the 50's, bulk grain was weighed, cleaned and dried there by laborers who lived in the neighborhood.

From Thursday through Saturday, in "Picture Red Hook," Joanna Haigood will be scaling the heights of this massive 12-story grain terminal with her San Francisco company, Zaccho Dance Theater. Produced by the adventurous arts presenter Dancing in the Streets, the show is a result of several years' preparation to create a performance work involving the community. The area, which includes the Red Hook Houses, a large public housing unit, is a blue-collar neighborhood in transition. Troubled by drug-related violence in the past, it is now attracting businesses as well as artists in search of low-cost housing.

Last month in San Francisco, Ms. Haigood rehearsed in her studio, a former mattress factory that is rigged for aerial dancing. One woman, a few feet off the ground, was swinging like a pendulum, while another advised from the floor, "There's a little moment of weightlessness, and that's a good place to turn yourself around."

In "Picture Red Hook," members of Zaccho Dance Theater (the name comes from the segment of a Greek column that anchors it to the ground) will expand that "little moment of weightlessness" into an extended foray of soaring 160 feet in the air. Seven dancers will strap themselves into climber harnesses that are clipped to cables. The cables will be secured to the structural steel at the top of the building. Two more lines will be anchored to the ground on either side of the audience, so the dancers can fly directly overhead, hundreds of feet in front of the silos. (Note to the audience: bring lawn chairs or blankets.)

Asked if aerial dancing is risky, Ms. Haigood replied, "We all work very very hard to take the risk out of the work." Still, though the dancers are intensely watchful during what mountain climbers call "the approach," there are risks. "You have to watch that you don't knock your head when you come into contact with any surface," said Suzanne Gallo, a dancer and choreographer who is a member of Zaccho.

In a practice session, one dancer momentarily lost control and looked like a fish out of water, flopping against a wall. Another got an instant skin abrasion and had to wrap a layer of neoprene around his hips before re-harnessing. But aerial dancing, done correctly, gives the dancer a powerful sense of freedom that translates into a kinetic and psychic thrill for the audience.

In "Picture Red Hook," the dancers will glide through space using airborne versions of familiar actions like running, jumping and diving. A theme of harvesting, with movements reminiscent of cutting grain, becomes transformed as the cutting gesture lifts the dancers further into space. Behind them, projected onto the facade of the silos, will be a video that includes larger-than-life faces of local residents talking about their hopes and dreams for the neighborhood. They were interviewed by Mary Ellen Strom, a video artist who is collaborating with Ms. Haigood on the project.

Ms. Haigood, 45, is a graduate of Bard College, where she was influenced by Aileen Passloff. She later attended the London School of Contemporary Dance, which has a curriculum based on Martha Graham's teachings. "It wasn't suiting me very well," Ms. Haigood said of the conservatory-like program. (She had studied dance improvisation with Lorn MacDougal, a disciple of Daniel Nagrin.) "I went on some wonderful escapes with a neighbor who had been an aerialist with Barnum & Bailey. She took me to circuses, where I got to see the Flying Wallendas."

Ms. Haigood incorporated what she learned into her choreography. "It was interesting to get off the flat two-dimensional plane and explore movement that was lateral, diagonal and vertical," she said.

Ms. Haigood creates site-specific works, delving deeply into the history of each place. She has brought her flying techniques to a variety of settings, including a clock tower in San Francisco and the wooded area surrounding Jacob's Pillow. She has created works on subjects like the Underground Railroad, the paintings of Chagall and the first African-American labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. (Ms. Haigood is of mixed race. Her father, a retired Army officer, is black and her mother, a retired school administrator who was born in Germany, is white.)

Called a "poet of memory" by The San Francisco Bay Guardian, she blends research and fantasy to evoke a world that draws the viewer in. Witnessing a work of hers can be both edifying and haunting.

Ms. Haigood, whose choreography is in the repertoires of the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago and Alonzo King's Lines Ballet in San Francisco, relates aerial dancing to a personal dream world. Dancing off the ground requires a disorientation that may be a clue to the magical quality that marks her work.

Ms. Gallo observed: "You need a sense of ease being inverted. For Joanna, she does it all the time. When you're inverted, you look at the world differently; you respond differently; you have a heightened awareness."

In a large-scale project like "Picture Red Hook," the producing organization usually plays a major role. The idea, according to Aviva Davidson, the executive director of Dancing in the Streets, is for artists not just to plop down a work of art in the middle of a neighborhood but rather to engage the community as a collaborator. "Picture Red Hook" is part of a 10-year arts initiative between Dancing in the Streets (www.dancinginthestreets.org) and Red Hook that includes an annual Young People's Performance Festival, arts education programs and site-specific works. In Ms. Haigood, the organization has found an artist who merges innovative ideas with a commitment to community.

For the last few years, Ms. Haigood and Ms. Strom have given creative workshops in Red Hook schools. One project sent middle-school children to social events to observe dances, culminating in a dance swap in which different generations taught one another the popular dances of their day. (Scenes from the swap appear in the video.) Another project trained teenagers to assist in interviewing residents. The final interviews from the neighborhood -- a mix of Italians, Irish, Latinos and African-Americans -- reveal a common desire to work together to address issues like toxic dumping, youth violence and gentrification.

As Ms. Haigood prepared for the performances, she tried to picture the grain terminal decades ago. Built in 1922, the Port of New York Authority Grain Terminal was a stop along the Erie Canal shipping system until 1965, when the increasing use of container ships drove the waterfront activity to more open ports in New Jersey and Staten Island. According to

John Quadrozzi Jr., president of the Gowanus Industrial Park, in the ensuing period of economic decline, the granary was infiltrated by crack users and prostitutes. Since 1997, when the industrial park bought the facility and surrounding lots and waterways, it has become part of Red Hook's renewal.

Ms. Haigood regards the granary as a symbol of abundance, loss and revitalization. In that context, she said, "The flying represents the will to transcend social challenges." But there are formal factors as well. "For me, choreographically," she said, "working with the human body and the human scale next to something so colossal is an artistic challenge."

"Picture Red Hook" will include live video close-ups of the dancers aloft, a sound collage by Lauren Weinger (grain pouring -- think ocean waves) and a stilt walker from the community. (A shuttle bus will be available to take dancegoers to and from the performances. The information and reservations number is (212) 625-3505.)

Ms. Strom has shot footage of the granary as well as scores of interviews for the video, which will be projected from scaffolding 25 feet high, at times giving the illusion that some of the silos are revolving. About the building, Ms. Strom said: "It's extremely beautiful in its purity of form. It looks like a 70's minimalist sculpture, like a Donald Judd upended."

Mr. Quadrozzi said that the site had been used for scenes in the films "Vanilla Sky" and "Shaft," as well as for fashion spreads in Vogue and Elle (in its August issue). But nothing seems to have elicited the sense of wonder that Ms. Haigood's aerial dancing has. After watching her rehearse, he said: "She appeared to be flying in slow motion. She looked like a seagull up there. It's beautiful, and it's scary."

Seeing the economic polarization in the community between longtime residents and the new arrivals, Ms. Haigood decided to organize a group photograph of the people of Red Hook. Dancing in the Streets enlisted the help of churches, community centers and other civic groups. In the spring of 2001, residents from every sector gathered in a nearby baseball field. During "Picture Red Hook," this celebratory image, in which hundreds of people posed for the camera, will appear on the face of the historic grain elevator, radiating hope.

Picture Red Hook

Zaccho Dance Theater.

Gowanus Industrial Park, 699 Columbia Street, Marine Terminal, Red Hook, Brooklyn.

Thursday through Saturday at 9 p.m.