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Your guide to good health and fitness



PUSH Physical Theatre founders Darren and Heather Stevenson of Brighton relocated here from Atlanta.

CARLOS ORTIZ staff photographer

Dance in DUALITY

Founders of PUSH Physical Theatre stretch perceived limits

NANCY O'DONNELL

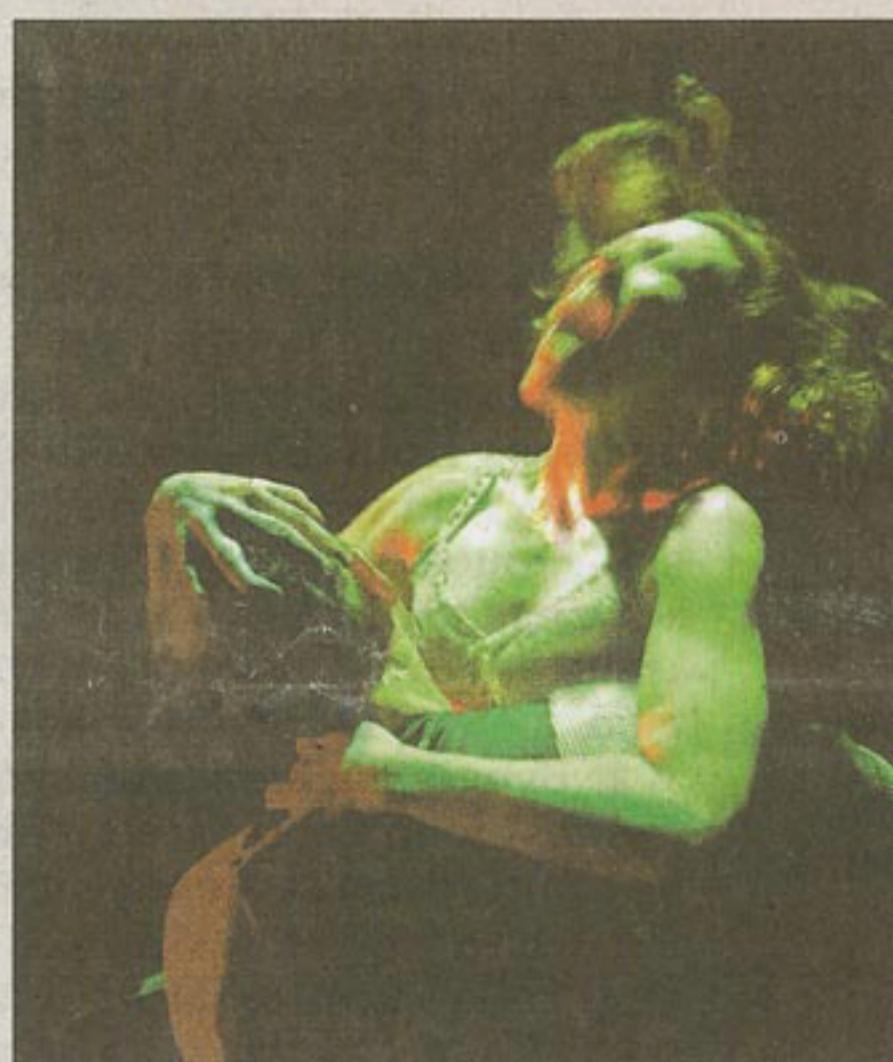
It's hard to describe exactly what Darren and Heather Stevenson do, but more and more people are witnessing it — and still unable to describe it.

They call it PUSH Physical Theatre — an athletic dance aesthetic that has been described as somewhere between fine art sculpture and the film *The Matrix* (imagine the digital effects, only live and without wires or the benefits of software).

Their inspiration can come from unusual places. Recently, PUSH performed *Flight 1549*, a dance accompanied by the cockpit audiotape from Pilot "Sully" Sullenberger's miraculous Hudson River landing.

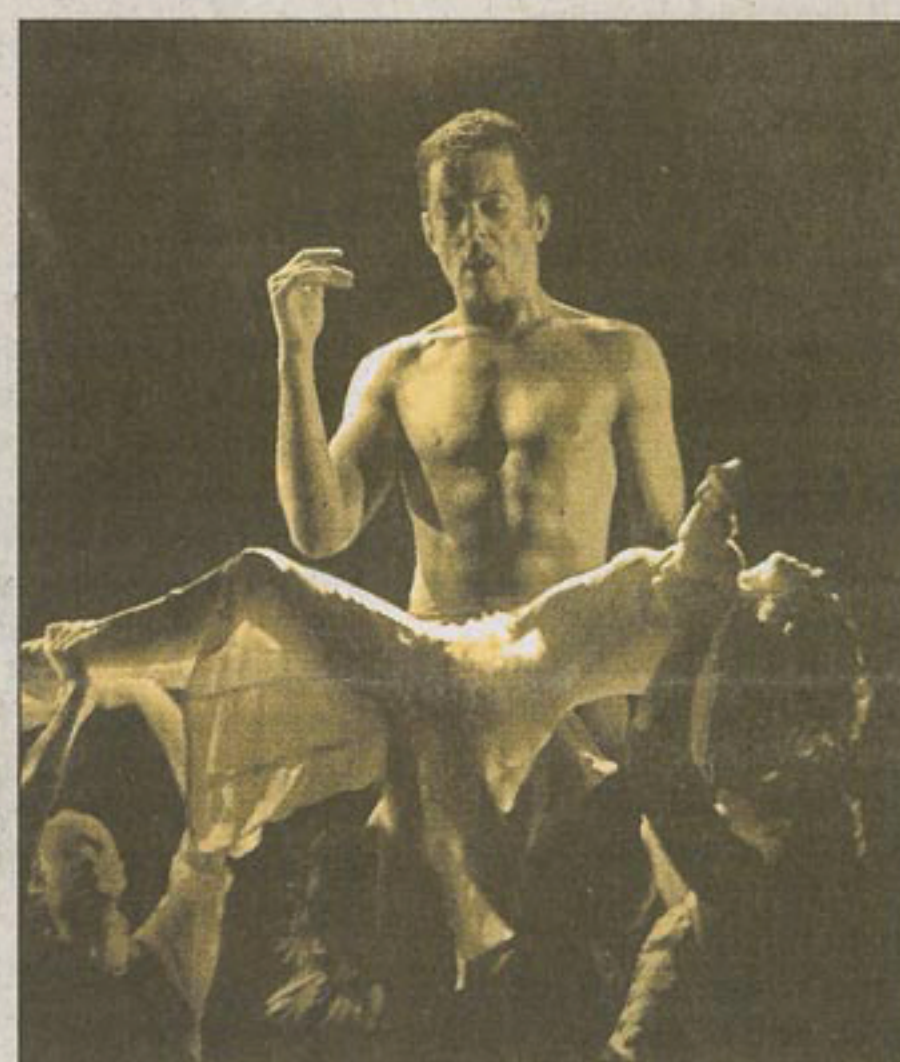
Later this month, they'll hit Geva Theatre Center's Nextstage for the world premiere of *Dracula: The Shape of Evil*. Then they'll be on a different sort of stage in November when they receive the Artist of the Year Award from the Arts & Cultural Council for Greater Rochester.

Yes, after a decade in existence, PUSH has definitely arrived. But with



Provided photo

PUSH reveals its fangs at Geva's Nextstage for the world premiere of *Dracula: The Shape of Evil*.



Provided photo

Darren Stevenson, above, fell under Dracula's theatrical trance when he was growing up in England.

Dracula, it has also come full circle. It was a production of *Dracula* in Darren's native England, when he was 10 years old, that first drew him to the arts.

"I was terrified. And I was amazed that people just walking around a stage could terrify me," he says.

The piece they'll perform at Geva was adapted for dance by the couple from the play written by actor friend Danny Hoskins. Because of PUSH's particular art form, Stevenson considers it more cinematic than

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If you go

What: *Dracula: The Shape of Evil*.

When: Oct. 23 to Nov. 11 (7 p.m. Wednesday through Friday; 4 and 8 p.m. Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday).

Where: Nextstage at Geva Theatre Center, 75 Woodbury Blvd.

Cost: \$20 (some discounts available).

For information: (585) 232-4382 or www.geva-theatre.org.

"Instead of a codified set of dance movements, we start with the idea and ask which movement fits around it, of all of the possible ways a body can move."

Darren Stevenson

PUSH

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theatrical: "We can do sudden scene changes," he explains. "We use illusion to become a chair made of bodies, a stool, a therapist couch."

At just under an hour, the program is the longest that PUSH has performed, and the first to have spoken narrative. The narrative mixes with PUSH's mime and dance influences, magic and special effects.

It's yet another step in Darren and Heather Stevenson's artistic journey.

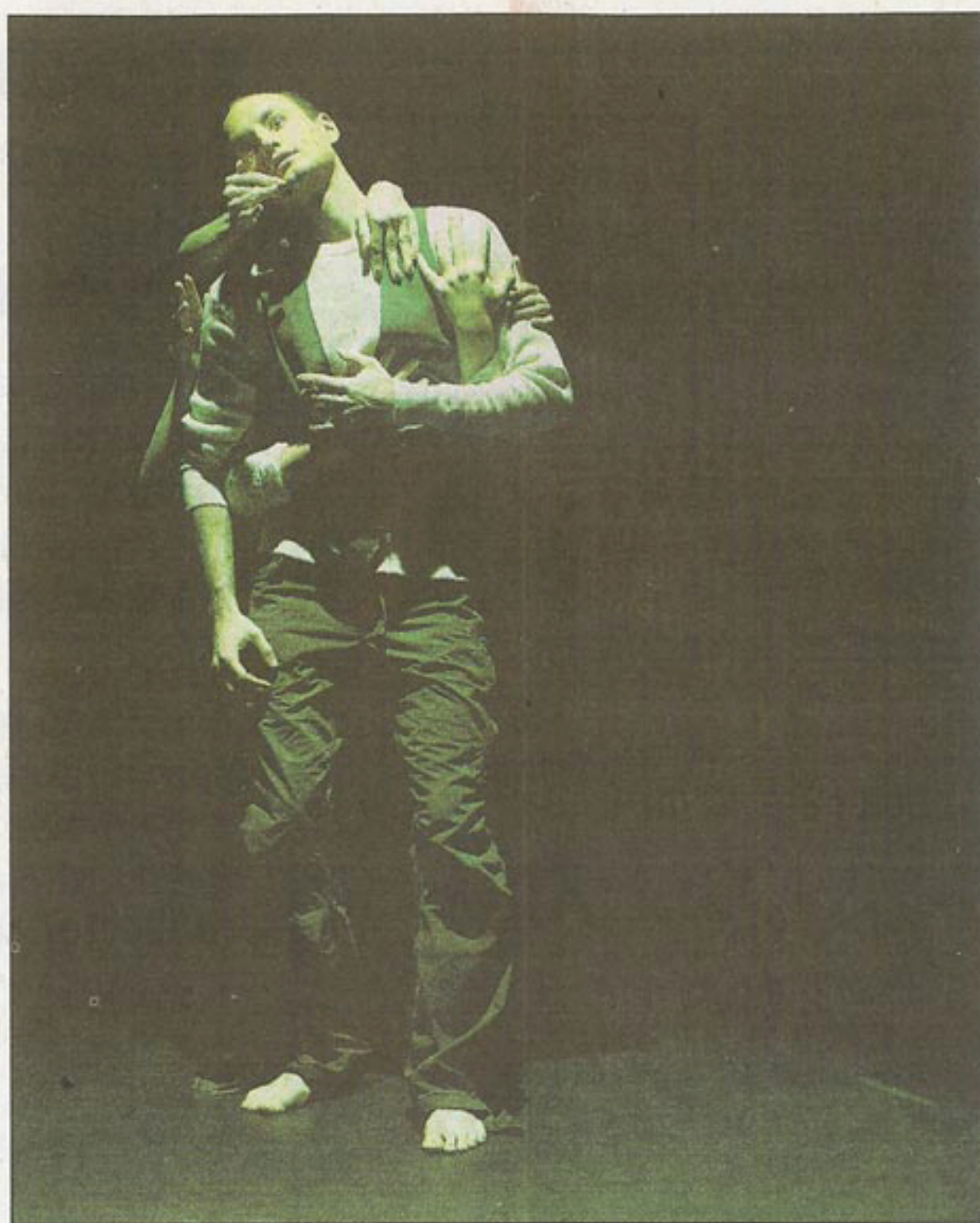
The couple married five months after meeting, while studying mime and dance in St. Louis. They began performing

and teaching dance, founding The Studio School of the Arts in Atlanta in 1997.

All the while, they were determined to be a family, as well. So, just three months after the birth of their first son, D.J., the couple was packing his collapsible crib in the car and traveling from venue to venue with baby onboard.

When their second son, Daniel, arrived, the couple started including nanny services in their performance contract. But some nanny services are better than others.

"We were two minutes before a show, and our son Daniel, 4 at the time, comes out wearing his superman cape, and he dives down into the audience," Darren says. "We told the ushers to look



Provided photo

Dracula was adapted for dance by the Stevensons from a play written by actor friend Danny Hoskins.

for him, and we struggled through the first act. During intermission, we ran into the audience. He was in the front row, curled up, fast asleep under his cape."

The Stevensons first

came to Rochester when close friends invited them to visit. Darren says they liked "the great acceptance of the arts and artists" here. So they moved to Rochester, founding PUSH in 2000.

Video Extra

DEMOCRATANDCHRONICLE.COM



Click on this story to see a video of

Dracula: The Shape of Evil.

Their idea was to use a collaborative approach, inviting dancers to bring "life experiences" into a performance (three other "PUSHers" are currently in the company).

"Instead of a codified set of dance movements, we start with the idea and ask which movement fits around it, of all of the possible ways a body can move," Darren explains.

Another guiding principle is that members would be people they had gotten to know over the years. "People have to like each other," Darren says.

This summer has been especially busy with preparations for fall and with Push Pins, Heather's annual summer day camp in Pittsford, where children learn physical theater, mime, dance, acting and taekwon do. And Darren and company just

completed a series of intensive dance classes that attracted dancers from as far away as Dubai.

Still, family time is important. Camping trips with their sons are on the calendar, and the couple manages to sneak away when they can.

"Even though we're together all day, we're not really together," says Heather, via cell phone while driving to New York City. "We still miss each other in the midst of it all. We still go out and get coffee at midnight or just sit together and talk."

But really, they can't ever leave the work completely behind. "A painter can put the brush down. A musician can put the instrument down. A dancer's body is the instrument, 24 hours a day," Darren says. "You think about what you eat, your posture. You're training your body and you're aware of how you're holding your shoulders or your hip." □

O'Donnell is a Rochester-based freelance writer.