Dance

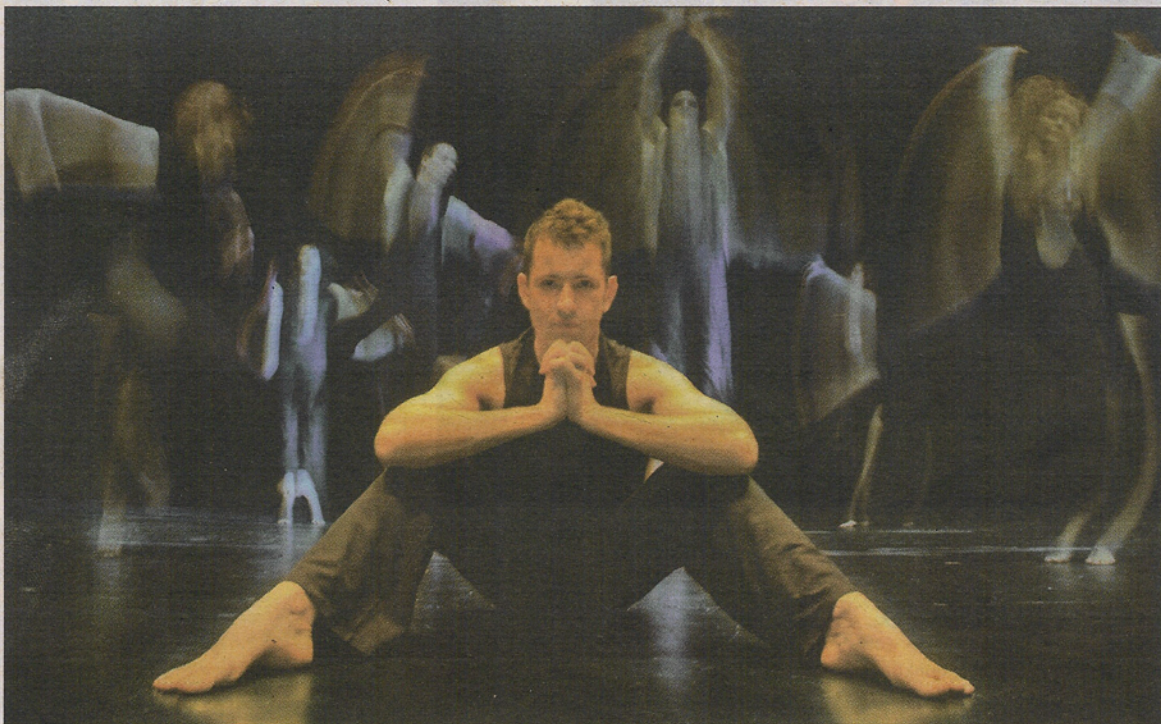**PUSH Physical Theatre presents its evocative, acrobatic works at the Geva Theatre Nextstage starting this week.** PHOTOS PROVIDED

It's a bird, it's a plane…

Time Remix

PUSH PHYSICAL THEATRE
FRIDAY, MAY 29-SUNDAY, JUNE 7
GEVA THEATRE CENTER,
75 WOODBURY BLVD.
$8-$30 | 232-4383, GEVATHEATRE.ORG

[PREVIEW] BY REBECCA RAFFERTY

When two people love each other very much, they get together and create something special. Sometimes they share that creation with the world: PUSH Physical Theatre is the love child of spouses and collaborators Darren and Heather Stevenson, who met while training at The Center in St. Louis, Missouri. In 2000, the couple brought their children and their talent to Rochester and formed PUSH out of the desire to work together, and with other gifted performers, to explore and leap out of the boundaries of both theater and modern dance. The troupe draws from literature, war, art movements, and current events to create interpretive movement pieces that combine acrobatics with drama and comedy.

Geva Theatre's Nextstage is hosting PUSH's new performance, "Time Remix," which features two world-premiere pieces: "Time" and "Flight 1549." As a bonus, viewers will get to see a live-action "trailer" of the company's major work-in-progress, "Dracula: The Shape of Evil," which is scheduled to debut in time for this upcoming Halloween.

I recently had the opportunity to sit in on one of PUSH's rehearsals for the upcoming shows. More versed in painting than performances, I can only liken seeing the practice to getting a peek at the planning stages of an acrylic or oil. The seams were still being worked out, but I simultaneously got an inkling of the amazing finished piece, while gaining a serious respect for the innovative, technical work that arose from the vague ether of inspiration and countless hours of physical labor. PUSH's work exhibits a depth of understanding and innovative physical vocabulary for the universals in human life. The group loosely defines "physical theater" as not just movement, but the purpose and emotion behind the motions made visible.

"Time" is an exploration of time perception during competition. The audience hears the disembodied voices of athletes describing the phenomenon, while the troupe brilliantly simulates running, hurdling, and vaulting in alternating slow motion and real time. The PUSH players flow smoothly as they transition from impersonating the grace of athletics, to imitating a hungry crowd, to embodying athletes in victory or in pain. I was totally immersed — the group members have the capacity to make you believe they are really in that space, rounding the bend on the track, their eyes glimpsing the finish line up ahead as their faces express excruciating exertion. PUSH utilizes all of the strength and poise required of ballet, as well as all of the emotional complexity required of storytelling.

When the company broke for a break, it morphed from highly focused troupe into the friendly, down-to-earth team that currently includes the co-founders and spouses, as well as Jonathan Lowery, Johanna Bystrom, and Christine Prewitt. They democratically and scientifically went about tweaking the pieces, with each member having a say in how to perfectly convey an emotion through an artful focus on different body parts, spatial relationships, tension between dancers, balance, and expressions.

During the following run-through of "Flight 1549," the team collapsed into clusters and broke away, vaulting off of each other's bodies to push, pull, and wheel through a reenactment of the titular flight's suspense-filled emergency landing in the Hudson River this past January. Of the unlikely pairing of movement set to the recording of the pilot calmly exchanging with air traffic control, Darren Stevenson says, "When I heard the audio tape, like everyone else, I was struck by how incredibly calm the pilot [Captain Chesley Sullenberger] was. Then a pilot friend explained that it's a skill, called 'deliberate calm,' which pilots practice for emergency situations, and that — to him — it felt like slowing down time. Since manipulating time and space is basically what PUSH does, I was immediately inspired to create this piece."

The performance will include pulsing blackouts and spotlights where dancers will disappear and reappear elsewhere on the stage, as their bodies simulate the birds, the plane banking for landing, the waves of the river, and the passengers in a powerful tension between sky, water, gravity, terror, and control.

"Dracula: the Shape of Evil" materializes right in time for the vamp resurgence in pop culture. The "trailer" performance will give a taste of local talent Danny Hoskins's version of the story, which is seen from Renfield's crazy, jumbled point of view. In Bram Stoker's the novel, Renfield is an asylum inmate who is under the influence of Dracula, but who suffers a conflict of conscience when he takes pity on Mina Harker (the Count's obsession), and begs her to flee. Hoskins's version is "meant to confuse the audience as to what is real, and what's in his mind," Stevenson says. Hoskins will play Renfield on stage, narrating while the dancers completely creep out the audience. I watched them work out the bits they want to include in the preview, trying to capture, as Stevenson put it, the "violence and speed of gesture," and the mood of Stoker's mythic, iconic tale. Stevenson estimates that the finished piece will clock in at 40 to 45 minutes, making it the longest movement piece PUSH has ever done.

To say that the performance is powerful is to understate it — the group emphasizes the strength of humanity's heart and soul made manifest in the body. The group's style evokes both oral-history stories being acted out around a fire, and the super-strong acrobatics from the circuses of our youth. Poised bodies and careful kinetics bridge the gaps between perception and reality, tragedy and hope, myth and magic. What this group executes physically is the perfect metaphor-in-motion for the strength with which we meet our experiences.