

Frequent Flyers Join Appalachian Springs Concert

by Cindy Marvell

Appalachian Spring could be thought of from many angles: Aaron Copland's seasoned composition, Martha Graham's hauntingly inspiring ballet, or a new circus opportunity for an aerial fling transcending time and space. This latter type of phenomenon is most likely to materialize at a university, as it did this fall when Frequent Flyers Productions collaborated with the Boulder Ballet and the Boulder Philharmonic to create a multidisciplinary meld of motion and music.

The proscenium of Macky Auditorium on the campus of University of Colorado soars to dizzying heights. Once you climb up, you might just stay there for the duration. So this aerial dance required performers to give up the floor work and rely on airborne techniques. The ballet dancers favored group configurations and gestures rather than leaps and lifts. A more traditional form of aerial dance would be able to use swing techniques to catch the glory of the climactic moments of freedom. Here the idea was to rise to the collaborative occasion.

Double hammocks came into play as a fabric rig stretched out in tent-like formation. A lyra occupied the center spot as if to complement the searching centeredness of Copland's music. Fabric, one could say, has come a long way since the days of Martha Graham, yet one would have to work to feel quite the sense of freedom, quirkiness and longing her choreography imparted. Yet this version offered more complex gifts that expanded the mythology in a way traditional on-the-ground practitioners could only imagine.

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Given the dual nature of this collaboration and its divided planes, the dancers were able to capture the staccato rhythms of the piece while the aerialists basked in the serenity underlying its tuneful revelry. Such basking required sustained strength and some creativity starting with how the rigging came together. Rigger Jeff Rusnak developed an imaginative map of the set, not exactly based on the one associated with the Graham company's rendition. As anyone connected with the Mackey production will point out there was no aerial dance in Graham's version, lamentably. It has taken over half a century for the lord of the dance to see the circus light.

The delicate and uplifting tones of the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra lent themselves to the airborne dryads which gamely ascended the fabric as dancers cavorted en pointe below. Lynda White, Daniel Nolasco and Stephen Pohuski were among the flyers. Graham would probably not have envisioned incorporating aerial terms like meathook, helicopter, or 360/580 drops when she suggested in 1944 that Copland name the original piece *Appalachian Spring* after the poem, but she might have gone with woman in the moon, lion in the tree, sleeping beauty and scorpion.

This ballet's choreographer Alex Davison, who has performed as a dancer with the Boulder Ballet and the Edward Villella company in Miami, probably knows a bit extra about circus arts since his father Peter Davison is one of the champion jugglers from the trio Airjazz. In fact the dancers seemed to move with an intricacy of form as if they were part of a human juggling pattern.

"Because of the way the aerial equipment was rigged, a physical frame for the stage was created," Alex Davison explains. "Through the movements of the dancers within that frame, different ideas in the piece were pictured. For instance, in our idea of the Greek gods, having the aerialists as a frame or context for the dancers on stage was a very visual and immediately understandable representation of the power and dominion of the gods over man!"

Davison also notes that, given the number of players in the orchestra plus ballet & aerial companies, this was probably the largest ensemble production anyone on stage had been involved in thus far. During a Q/A on the night of the performance, participants found it amusing when the conductor asked for a description of the activity since he lacked familiarity with it given his angle directing the orchestra.

There was a lot to see from any angle. Danielle Henricks, a mainstay FFP performer, initiated the idea to incorporate hammocks on the side diagonals similar to those used in aerial yoga. The dizzying height from which these were strung almost made it a different technique, however. Hendricks recalled that once the audience filled up the space the distance from the floor seemed to decrease and somehow the slightly wobbly frame became relatively stable. Fabric, when stretched far enough to cover the length of such a stage, acquires swag that is a bit tricky to overcome.

Aerial dance choreographer Nancy Smith summed up the staging elements as they related to the resultant effect: "The choreography needed to reflect strength, grace, beauty and some indifference to the people below. We pulled from movement vocabulary for traditional fabric climbs, locks, and drops, as well as static trapeze duo work for the center lyra. We also needed to ensure that the dancers would be safe working at 20-25 feet from the ground for 26 minutes without coming down, so resting poses were built in."

This unperceived challenge in no way detracted from the ethereal quality Davison, Smith and Co. sought to create. The expertise of the practitioners brought a surety and artistry to the moves and pauses that harmonized with the whole. The lyra solo performed by Valerie Morris encapsulated the awe and technical expertise the audience experienced as she engaged in a silent drama of gestures with a ballerina below that Graham could hardly have objected to.

Smith describes Davison's concept that the soloist would represent a young woman coming of age amid the at times buffeting waves of family, society, and spiritual influences: "We linked her solo to a lyra solo directly above by translating the ground movement into the aerial vocabulary for continuity." One of the Boulder Ballet's guiding lights, Ana Claire, Davison's "ballet mom," commented on the strong sense of ensemble that worked around Emily Speed to create this powerful and memorable exchange between dancer and aerialist.

While the ballet costumes conveyed a more pastoral ideology, aerial designs gave flight to the fawnlike image of airborne nymphs. At the start of the piece, the nymphs seem more in listening mode as if the music gradually fills their senses until they become harbingers of lyricism down to the last slide on an X formation as the tempo modulates. Lovely descents via hand loops should have earned some extra miles for Frequent Flyers' next orchestral excursion.

Davison speculated the success of the entire endeavor, which was sold out to the point that I attended the dress rehearsal rather than risk contraction in the 2000-seat hall, indicated future such collaborations might be viable. The Boulder Phil had proposed this idea to Nancy Smith as a somewhat novel one given the iconic nature of the music and the fact that the aerial moves would have to be entirely off-the-ground.

She was ultimately pleased with beauty of the result. “The challenges presented to us were like the grit in the oyster that created the pearl!”

FFP fans were able to see the group again in the Scrooge show Dec. 7-8 at Dairy Center for the Arts in Boulder. Recently another “next generation” moment occurred as Haley Sutcliff, daughter of hoop dance teacher and performer Kristina Sutcliff of O Dance, joined FFP’s youth aerial ensemble in a performance at the Boulder Theater off the Pearl Street Mall. In addition to their performances, FFP runs a massive outreach program, sometimes for neophytes who might never have thought to try aerial.

Last year, Kira Truthdancer, a Boulder expatriate from Berkeley, CA decided to expand her repertoire of juggling and contortion skills by joining FFP’s Ratcracker for some spiffy production numbers and low flying trapeze. Rehearsals generally take place at the circus warehouse FFP founding director Nancy Smith has developed in a complex off Valmont in Boulder. The Aerial Dance Festival, a yearly event in July/August, attracts several hundred aerial coaches and students for a two-week intensive training and performance.



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