

DANCING ON THE CEILING

Think dance. Think bungee jumping. Now imagine bungee-assisted dance. Chelsea graduate and co-founder of Wired Aerial Theatre, Wendy Hesketh, introduces us to her world.

"There's a real exhilaration I feel when flying on stage," Wendy tells the BGA Magazine. "Seeing every member of the company working towards an end goal, all full confidence and dedication... I often take a breath and ask myself, however did we manage all of this?"

Certainly, Wired Aerial Theatre is not your average dance troupe. Performers wear harnesses attached to bungee straps, and each is partnered by a 'climber' in the wings who assists the dancer in moving around the floor and air. At each performance, the audience is treated to a blend of contemporary dance, physical theatre, gymnastics, climbing and flying. "There's no doubt that one of the major rewards of what we do is seeing peoples' reactions to our style," says Wendy.

A graduate in Physical Education and Mathematics, Wendy co-founded the Wired Aerial Theatre in 2000 alongside Jamie Ogilvie. Rather than holding one post in the company, the Brighton graduate has three – that of artistic director, chief choreographer and principal performer. As you can imagine, there's a lot of work to be done.

"It means covering pretty much every aspect of the company," she tells us. "Jamie and I share administration, tour booking, funding application writing, scheduling, legal matters. And then there's the performing, choreographing and training new cast and climbers."

"The fun *really* begins when we're creating a piece of work and I'm both choreographing and performing in it. In these situations, I use our video camera as my outside eye and spend a lot of time watching footage after everyone has gone home."

From a young age, Wendy dreamt of becoming a professional dancer. Though, when applying to university, she reveals that she did hedge her bets somewhat with her choice of course. The BA (Hons) in Physical Education and Mathematics allowed her to pick up teaching skills and, with these under her belt, she says there was always something to fall back on when auditioning. That said, whilst at Brighton – majoring in dance and grabbing every single dance module she could find – it was obvious that Wendy was going to pursue her dancing more directly. It was obvious, at least, to Fiona Smith, dance tutor at Chelsea College.

It was Fiona who suggested Wendy should apply to the London Contemporary Dance School after Brighton. And Wendy did apply, though she admits it took her four years to pluck up sufficient courage.

"After four years of contemplating, I decided to be brave and just do it. It was a great experience. I spent a glorious year there, dancing for at least three hours every single day. From 8.30am to 6.30pm we covered choreography, improvisation, extra technique, dance history. It was heaven."

After the London Contemporary Dance School, Wendy scored an aerial job with dance company, Sirens Crossing. She then joined De La Guarda, an Argentinean aerial theatre company she toured the world with for four years.

"The De La Guarda job undoubtedly changed my career path, my hopes and aspirations, and my body... all for the better," she says. "It was a dream job and show. But, I had to leave. By staying, I knew I'd have been living out someone else's dream rather than the ones I'd planned for myself. And I have lots of dreams."

It was at this time, in 2000, that Wendy started working with Jamie Olgvie, now technical director with Wired. Since then, the company has thrown lots of challenges at the pair – not least, the need to find a suitable rehearsal room. Room specifications for bungee-assisted dance are not your average. Over and above the obvious height requirements, flooring needs to be semi-sprung to aid dancers coming down to earth at speed. Even with such a difficult brief, the company found its space. It was – and is – a Liverpool warehouse, where the company works all hours of the day and evening.

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Now taking advantage of their secure base, they crack on with perfecting their flying art. "The most interesting types of days for me are the physical rehearsal days," Wendy states. "We begin the day with a run along the canal, returning to do exercises that focus on particular muscles in the stomach, back and sides of the torso. I then teach a short ground-based sequence to help bungee-assisted dancers use their bodies correctly when in the air. As soon as we've finished with that, we get straight to the ropes."

"The great thing now is that the company and its productions have built a reputation for themselves," she smiles. "Jamie and I used to work with other theatre companies. But, since 2006 we've concentrated more on Wired."

"Having said that, I've recently been awarded the post of Associate Circus Director at the Contact Theatre in Manchester. It means I get to teach youths

and adults as well as professionals... which is great. I get to work on new pieces of my own and with others to develop their ideas."

There's certainly little doubt that Wendy enjoys her nine-to-five. Asking her what the one key highlight of her career has been so far, she rubs her forehead. "It's hard to say really. Until recently, I'd have said co-choreographing and performing the finale event for the cinema premiere of *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* in Wellington, New Zealand. Then the commission from Deborah Bull at The Royal Opera House topped that. And now we've been asked to perform a bespoke aerial theatre piece when the Millennium Dome reopens as the new O2 centre."

From Wendy's responses it seems fair to say that the future is never quite set in stone for Wired. Both Jamie and her certainly make plans. But, new and exciting ideas seem to pop up weekly, and different paths are revealed all the time. "We'd always dreamt of creating a space where aerial companies could come, rehearse, create work and be supported by us," she says. "The idea was to develop a centre of excellence that firmly establishes this cross art form. And this is now a reality."

The future may be fluid. But, having taken some of her dancing lead from her Brighton days, she's still looks to the past with some fondness.

"I had a fabulous time there," she says about the university. "I spent every hour possible in the John Fulton Hall – dancing, rehearsing, devising. As long as it involved dance or gymnastics, I had a massive smile on my face. When I graduated in '96, I honestly grieved for everything to do with university. My friends, house, lifestyle. We were spoilt with financial grants, cheap booze and nights out at Ziggy's."

"Our physical education department was small and everyone knew each other well. Lecturers were mostly welcoming, and a special few were inspirational. The inspirational ones definitely have a lot to do with how I am and what I'm doing right now."

Wired Aerial Theatre: www.wiredaerialtheatre.com