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Fall girl

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No - it's the world's first bungee-jumping dance show. By Alfred Hickling

Thursday November 16, 2006
[The Guardian](#)

With less than a week to go before her new dance work premieres at the Royal Opera House, Wendy Hesketh, principal performer, chief choreographer and co-founder of Wired Aerial Theatre, is going up the wall. Literally. She



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strides across the company's rehearsal base in a chilly, high-ceilinged former engineering works in Liverpool and, when she comes to a piece of scenery, swings back 90 degrees and proceeds to stroll up it with an insect-like disdain for gravity.

Welcome to the world of bungee-assisted dance: a strange hybrid of circus skills, contemporary dance and climbing technique that Hesketh and her partner, technical director Jamie Ogilvie, have been developing since Wired was established six years ago. They are believed to be the only bungee-assisted dance specialists in the world.

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Hesketh honed her ground-based technique at the London Contemporary Dance School, then learned to fly with the renowned aerial troupe De la Guarda. But whereas conventional aerialism involves performers who are permanently suspended on wires, Hesketh grew tired of simply hanging around. She began to explore the elastic properties of climbing rope as a means of augmenting a dancer's natural spring - and discovered that attaching herself to a bungee enabled her to execute leaps and

bounds previously attainable only by trampoline.

At first, Hesketh concentrated on one-woman performances, though bungee-dancing is never strictly a solo effort. Rather, it's a finely balanced pas-de-deux between the flying performer and an earthbound technician in the wings, who has to execute a complementary sequence of hoisting, knotting and tugging. It's remarkably innovative; yet watching the dancers weave around one another, while the attendant technicians strain on tensile lengths of rubber, one is reminded of the more ancient arts of bell-pulling and skipping round the maypole.

Precise communication between dancers and technicians is vital, and Hesketh has developed a vocabulary to coordinate such manoeuvres.

"I work in boinks," she explains. "One boink represents the length of bungee required to move a certain distance, whereas a booo-iiink would be three times longer."

Lacking any standard choreographic terms for elastically enhanced movement, Hesketh generally instructs the dancers in animal metaphors. A "dolphin", for example, is a 20ft handspring executed in a graceful arch. A "seal" is similar, but stays close to the ground, while the "caterpillar" is the same as a seal, with dancers propelling themselves by lifting their bottom in the air.

It all adds up to a fluid, quirky, often breathtaking style, though bungee-dance is subject to limitations. "Twenty minutes is the maximum amount you can stay in a harness before it becomes too sore," Hesketh explains. It is also noticeable that she and her fellow dancers are tiny. "I'd really love to be able to work with a male dancer," Hesketh sighs, "but we wouldn't be able to get him off the ground".

•Wired Aerial Theatre are at the Linbury, Royal Opera House, London WC1, on November 17 and 18. Box office: 020-7304 4000.

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