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Nadja Issa: Vertical ballet at its best

UAE-based choreographer soars high with performances on walls, buildings and other standing surfaces

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Zarina Fernandes

Aerial jive: It's all about control and a lot of fun

Dubai: We are at an uninspiring warehouse in Al Quoz on a Sunday morning as two workers routinely load

trusses on to a waiting truck. Outside is a thin, vertical plywood mount about 7 metres high and 5 metres wide. The surface is bare, black and unwrinkled.

“That’s our training space,” says Nadja Issa as she runs up a flight of stairs behind the mount and suspends two red ropes from a couple of hooks on top. “Yeah, we’re ready now.”

The UAE-based choreographer from Germany is about to give XPRESS a demo of her globally acclaimed ‘Art in the Air’. She has held audiences spellbound with her aerial acrobatics at the most happening galas – including the opening of the Ferrari World in Abu Dhabi and the Atlantis and Dubai World Cups in Dubai – but nothing can showcase her unique talent better than this stark performance.

A strain of classical music wafts through the air as Nadja and fellow performer Tasiana Bokhan put on a harness to fasten themselves to the red ropes. Within seconds, they crawl up the plywood board, taking a position midway at a sharp 90 degrees.

It is vertical ballet at its best as they do everything one can imagine on a horizontal floor: from graceful static sways to energetic swinging, running, flying across the surface. In quick succession, they move up and down, left and right and topsy-turvy, but at no point do they ever miss a step.

“It’s all about control and a lot of fun,” says Nadja who has mastered the art of performing on walls, buildings and other vertical surfaces. “What we do is related to climbing, so we need to be very fit physically.”

She said she has a lean team of 10 performers, all from

the West and aged between 20 and 40. “We are six females and four males and we’re all professionally trained in jazz, contemporary or ballet. Some of us are acrobats or aerialists.”

Nadja, who established Art in the Air in 2003, can transform any venue into a vertical stage and adapt to any location indoors or outdoors.

It all began when Nadja was rehearsing for a show in Frankfurt many years ago when a lack of floor space prompted her to position a bench on an incline and perform on it with a harness.

Having learnt dance, music, singing and acting at the New York City Dance School in Stuttgart, Germany, she joined Argentina’s famous vertical performing company De la Guarda. There has been no looking back since, as she began to create her own aerial shows and performed on walls of several buildings around the world.

She said among the buildings she has performed on in the UAE, the DIFC has been one of the most challenging vertical stages. “The structure is a bit tricky from our point of view as there are gaps with crosses and we have to jump over them. Usually, we do one or two rehearsals at the venue before the actual show,” she said.

A highly rated performer in the world of art and mega events, Nadja’s versatility allows her to mix a number of art forms. “Vertical ballet is just one of the areas I specialise in. I also do fire blowing, stilt walking, body painting and LED Light shows with LED outfits,” she said, adding that recent performances which hit the headlines included the Burj Khalifa New Year’s Eve

show and the opening night of the new Fairmont The Palm, among others.

Recalling the opening of the hotel, she said: “The stunning vertical ballet was very inspiring. Roaming human statues and stilt walkers with extraordinary costumes created an amazing atmosphere for the launch of the hotel.”

Also an art director, teacher and coach, Nadja said Art in the Air recently trained Lebanese singer Haifa Wehbe to perform for her new music video which will be released soon. Haifa and four other performers will move in the air to the tunes of her new song Ezzay Ansak, she added.

She has also choreographed and trained other celebrities like Hape Kerkeling, Limahl (Neverending Story), The Weather Girls (It’s raining men!) and Coolio (Gangsters Paradise).

Nadja said she is launching classes in aerial art for both adults and children (aged above six) by the end of this month. For details, write to info@nadjaissa.com