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photo: Mike Snarr for QED Productions



photo: EYE R8 Productions

One Extraordinary and Unusual Day

On Sunday 15 July, London witnessed a series of daredevil events created by US 'extreme action' choreographer Elizabeth Streb, LSi reports . . .

UK - *One Extraordinary Day* was a series of awe-inspiring displays of acrobatics, beginning at 7.30am at the Millennium Bridge and culminating at 10.30pm with 32 dancers using the London Eye as a performance space, pitting their bodies against the extraordinary height and the disorientation of constant rotation.

Four of the events were created especially for the Day, and key to these was the support provided by Unusual Rigging, tasked with the welfare and safety of the dancers and proving, once again, that never has a company been more aptly named . . .

Robin Elias, technical director at Unusual, worked with STREB and Sapsis Rigging, Streb's preferred contractor in the US, for three months prior to the day to ensure that everything went without a hitch - and earning himself the tag of "the hardware whisperer" from Elizabeth Streb in the process.

"The first two of our four events were, for us, pretty straightforward," says Elias. "For Waterfall at Millennium Bridge we designed a system that allowed STREB to use their own harnesses and bungees, which were supplied by Sapsis, in a new and foreign environment as well as enabling a fast dismount into the getaway boats. For *Sky Walk* at City Hall, Elizabeth Streb herself and two other performers walked forwards down the side of the glass building. This was hugely stressful for them, because they had never been up there before, and they put a huge amount of trust in us and our capabilities.

"*Speed Angels*, which was handled personally by Alan Jacobi, managing director of Unusual, was an anti-gravitational ballet performed by three STREB dancers while falling and rising at 6m per second. The performance required a 30m truss 'goal post' which we fitted with three Revolution winches. We were able to pre-programme these

from a video of an earlier performance, so when the STREB team arrived at our facility in Bugbrooke for four days of rehearsals, everything was ready for them."

However, it was the finale, *Human Eye*, which really tested everybody's ingenuity - performers and hardware whisperer's alike. "With one dancer on each of the 32 riverside spokes of the London Eye, Elizabeth wanted a system that would allow the performers to travel hands-free along the full 50m of the spoke, yet have the ability to perform while either stationary or moving at a fixed, safe speed," explains Elias. "I devised a system that incorporated an on/off switch that they could flick easily without taking their concentration off the performance. We set up a rehearsal system for them in New York and again in London, but nothing prepared them for the height and scope of the Eye, which reaches to 150m and has a circumference of 380m. They rehearsed on the Eye on the nights of the 11th and 12th July in really adverse weather conditions, but it did enable us to fully test both the system and my operational skills!"

Getting to the spokes was a challenge in itself - a 70m climb up ladders to reach a very small crow's nest at the hub. The wheel was set to rotate faster than normal for the event, at 20mins rather than 30mins per revolution. With just a 37 second window for each performer, Robin took personal charge of helping them out of the hub and hooking them onto the spokes, making sure they were totally secure. Then 20mins respite before helping them dismount - in the same time-frame - and getting them safely back down to terra firma.

As a performance space, the London Eye must be one of the most challenging, the performers themselves being almost dwarfed by the immense wheel, so the lighting for the 10.30pm event was crucial. Designed by Paul Cook, the lighting was programmed by Simon Hicks of Pharos using the



photo: EYE R8 Productions

company's existing controllers on the London Eye and County Hall, which were kept in sync by the controllers' real-time clocks. A ChamSys desk controlled the temporary LED uplights and BigLites, mounted at ground level around the structure. Visual cues for the Pharos LPC were manually triggered using the controllers' built-in web interface over a wireless network, enabling Simon to operate from the pier in front of the Eye alongside Gerry Mott, the ChamSys programmer.

The LED lighting on the Eye was programmed to highlight the appearance of the dancers as each moved out onto their spoke from the wheel hub and then follow their dance as they joined together for unison moments. The effect 'unwound' as each dancer climbed off the wheel.

To ensure the sheer power of the performance was not lost on the audience, QED were contracted to project live images onto the neighbouring Shell Centre building. Cameras were positioned on the Victoria Embankment, vision mixed locally and then relayed back across the Thames via a microwave HD video link to the projection point on the Southbank where 20 of QED's Christie HD18K 20,000 lumen Roadsters projected the action onto the iconic 107m high building.

The images were blended horizontally and vertically in an array of two by five projectors, which were doubled up for extra brightness and essential live back-up. The cameras provided x172 magnification and with only one followspot on the performers it was a challenge to generate

sufficiently bright, high quality images for the projection. The need for secrecy gave no opportunity for rehearsals, but as soon as the first images were seen, it was clear this was an extraordinary spectacle.

QED's production manager, Paul Simmons, handled technical production, with Head of Digital Media, Richard Porter, managing the projection mapping and the switching between the live camera feed and additional graphical content. Four d3 media servers were used for the building mapping with QED's bespoke fibre distribution rack supplying all the signals and remote control for all the projectors, plus individual monitoring on each fibre channel output.

The whole extraordinary day was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for the crowds, which grew in size with each progressive event. Elizabeth Streb's appreciation of Unusual's commitment to making the day happen was summed up in a comment to Robin: "You're the dream who made the dream come true". And in an interview with the BBC afterwards, Elizabeth Streb again paid tribute to Unusual Rigging, saying: "Without the hardware, there's no action in untoward places."

One Extraordinary Day was commissioned by the Mayor of London and London 2012 Festival and staged by LIFT.

- > www.unusual.co.uk
- > www.sapsis-rigging.com
- > www.pharoscontrols.com
- > www.qed-productions.com



photos: EYE R8 Productions

Facing page, and above:

STREB performers spent *One Extraordinary Day* on a series of London landmarks.

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