

What is acrobatics? In Seattle, far more than a spectacle

Feb. 2, 2024 at 6:00 am Updated Feb. 2, 2024 at 6:00 am

Acrobatic Conundrum's new show "Threads" highlights the stitching that binds performers and audiences together. "The performance is this kind of little window into this personal universe that they've created, and that feels very intimate and wonderful," said Terry Crane, co-founder and artistic director of Acrobatic Conundrum. (Ramon Dompur / The Seattle Times)

By [Gemma Wilson](#), Seattle Times arts and culture writer

Fifteen feet above the 12th Avenue Arts mainstage on Capitol Hill, four circus artists hang, suspended, wrists or legs entwined in one of the thick, cream-colored cords that extend from the catwalks to the floor. As two artists spin toward the ground, the other two extend their bodies out from the rope, slowly and gracefully, with incredible control. They're not working in synchronicity nor are they forming a singular tableau, but somehow these four performers create a moment of visual harmony, small and lovely, singularly breathtaking.

Then someone laughs, the spell is broken, and these cast members of local circus troupe [Acrobatic Conundrum's new show, "Threads,"](#) which runs Feb. 9-24 at 12th Avenue Arts, tumble to the floor in a swirl of limbs and soft rehearsal clothes.



Leila Noone, left, and Terry Crane practice their moves on overhead ropes during a rehearsal of Acrobatic Conundrum's "Threads" at 12th Avenue Arts on Jan. 19. (Jennifer Buchanan / The Seattle Times)

“I think people have this image of the circus performer as being sort of angelic or superhuman, and it seems unattainable,” said Terry Crane, Acrobatic Conundrum’s co-founder and artistic director, after a long day of rehearsal in January. “We try to combine that level of technique with intimate, personal views of the performers as well. It’s very human, and we hope that people feel empowered by that.”

Human bodies that seem somehow un beholden to the laws of physics and gravity do inspire awe, but spectacle is just one facet of this modern circus group.

As someone who tends toward the analytical, coming to appreciate the thoughtful, physical language of contemporary circus gave me an incredible gift, as an arts lover, by unlocking my brain from rote interpretation, no longer worried about unraveling literal meaning and instead responding to this art form viscerally and physically. Don’t worry about what you think, worry about what you *feel* — what you think will follow.



Performer Leila Noone balances on top of a giant spool as other cast members wrap her toes in string during a rehearsal of Acrobatic Conundrum’s “Threads.” (Jennifer Buchanan / The Seattle Times)

When I [first wrote about Conundrum nine years ago](#), that discovery felt revelatory. Watching one performer cling to another as they spun together, faster and faster, inside a giant metal hoop, threw me off balance with its disorienting, borderline-silly reflection of human interdependence.

Recently, watching Crane and performer and “Threads” choreographer Christine Morano rehearse a playful double act on a single rope — intertwining, connecting, pulling apart — the emotional and physical vulnerability was almost overwhelming. Whether double act or group numbers, whether wistful or goofy, the performances in “Threads” rely on high-stakes human connection: The trust required is not metaphorical.

My early introductions to the circus came first from the San Francisco-based Pickle Family Circus, a clown-forward show that visited Seattle regularly when I was a kid, and later from mega-acts like Cirque du Soleil. The Seattle area has a strong circus scene all its own, with groups like The Cabiri, Vashon-based UMO Ensemble, the School of Acrobatics and New Circus Arts, and Emerald City Trapeze Arts; the annual Moisture Festival; and more aerial-burlesque artists than you can shake a sequin at.

As with any art form, there are good acts and bad acts, but more importantly, there are acts that speak to you and those that don't. The acts that speak to me the loudest come from circus artists who take their art — but not themselves — seriously; after all, the clowning roots of circus run deep, and comedy can be a shortcut to catharsis.



From left, Christine Morano, Madi Ward, Akrasia Arbogast and Ezra Fellini rehearse a scene from Acrobatic Conundrum's “Threads.” (Jennifer Buchanan / The Seattle Times)

Not long before I first wrote about Conundrum, my twin brother had unexpectedly died, and like billions of humans before me, I discovered that grief is deeply lonely, no matter the size of your support network. The idea of finding connection without having to explain yourself in words took on unexpected resonance, as did the power of watching artists achieve the impossible when everything in my life felt impossible. For a while, words lost all meaning, but actions cut through that fog — a rope performer in physical free fall broke my heart, which then caught in my throat as a flexed ankle stopped his descent, head inches from the floor.

Something Crane told me many years ago has stayed with me ever since: Good circus isn't about feats of strength; it's about saying something true.



Akrasia Arbogast blurs through a scene during a rehearsal of Acrobatic Conundrum's "Threads." (Jennifer Buchanan / The Seattle Times)

"Threads," which incorporates aerial rope, trapeze, slack rope, contortion archery and hair suspension, among other apparatuses, mines the truth of human connections writ large and small, literal and figurative. There are threads that make up the ropes they use, Crane said, and also the clothes that they wear: One piece of choreography has performers exchanging items of clothing.

But the concept goes further than that: Threads connect everything and everyone, from the mycelium networks in the forests to our DNA stretching back generations and the narrative thread in every life — where you’ve been, who you’ve dated, what your work has been. Each performer brings their own thread, their own history, and together the cast weaves those threads together into a cohesive whole.



Performer Leila Noone fires an arrow with her toes while doing a handstand during a rehearsal of Acrobatic Conundrum’s “Threads.” (Jennifer Buchanan / The Seattle Times)

Modern circus is not a monolith but much of it departs wildly from old-school Barnum & Bailey vibes and even from Cirque du Soleil, in which “circus arts” can be a shortcut to the whimsical or fantastical, with the human performer’s identity carefully hidden under bright costumes.

“I guess for me, that just doesn’t fit,” Crane said. “It’s about being yourself. I always brought comedy to my rope acts because I love subverting this angelic paradigm. Being goofy, that’s kind of my thing, so I took the company in that direction too.”



Ezra Fellini catches his hat while sliding down a rope during a rehearsal of Acrobatic Conundrum's "Threads."
(Jennifer Buchanan / The Seattle Times)

Crane, who attended the National Circus School in Montreal, found ongoing inspiration from companies like Montreal-based The 7 Fingers, whose delightfully melancholy show “Passengers” came to Seattle Rep last fall. (February is a circus-heavy month in Seattle: In addition to “Threads,” [Australian contemporary circus company Circa](#) performs at Meany Hall from Feb. 15-17, and [Emerald City Trapeze Arts](#) presents its Mardi Gras Spectacular on Feb. 9 and 10.)

“One of the biggest things that I try to rail against, as much as I can, is entropy, this dividing of people into more and more alienated states,” said performer Erika Bergren, who also co-wrote “Threads” with Crane. “How do we find that community again?”

“We’re coming from different perspectives,” Bergren said. “There are moments of tension and moments that are more awkward, moments that are really focused on ourselves. But we break through that, and that’s the end goal, this moment of hope that we really do find each other in the end.”

“Threads”

Feb. 9-24; Acrobatic Conundrum at 12th Avenue Arts, 1620 12th Ave., Seattle; tickets start at \$17.50; fully accessible for wheelchairs and walkers; acrobaticconundrum.com

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