Take to the skies

Aerial dance, on silks, ropes and bungees, is exciting dancers who want to defy gravity. **Kevin Berry** looks at this dynamic new dance form and the UK leg of the first European Aerial Dance Forum, to be held in Brighton at the end of the month

Dancer Wendy Hesketh always felt frustrated whenever she leapt up in the air and came back down to earth again. She wanted to hover and float; she wanted to dance in the air.

"When you are up in the air you get these amazing shapes that an audience will only see for a fraction of a second," she says. "With aerial dance, people get to see gorgeous movement for much longer – and it's fun to do. It is an exhilarating experience." She uses the word "exhilarating" often – as does every other aerial dancer.

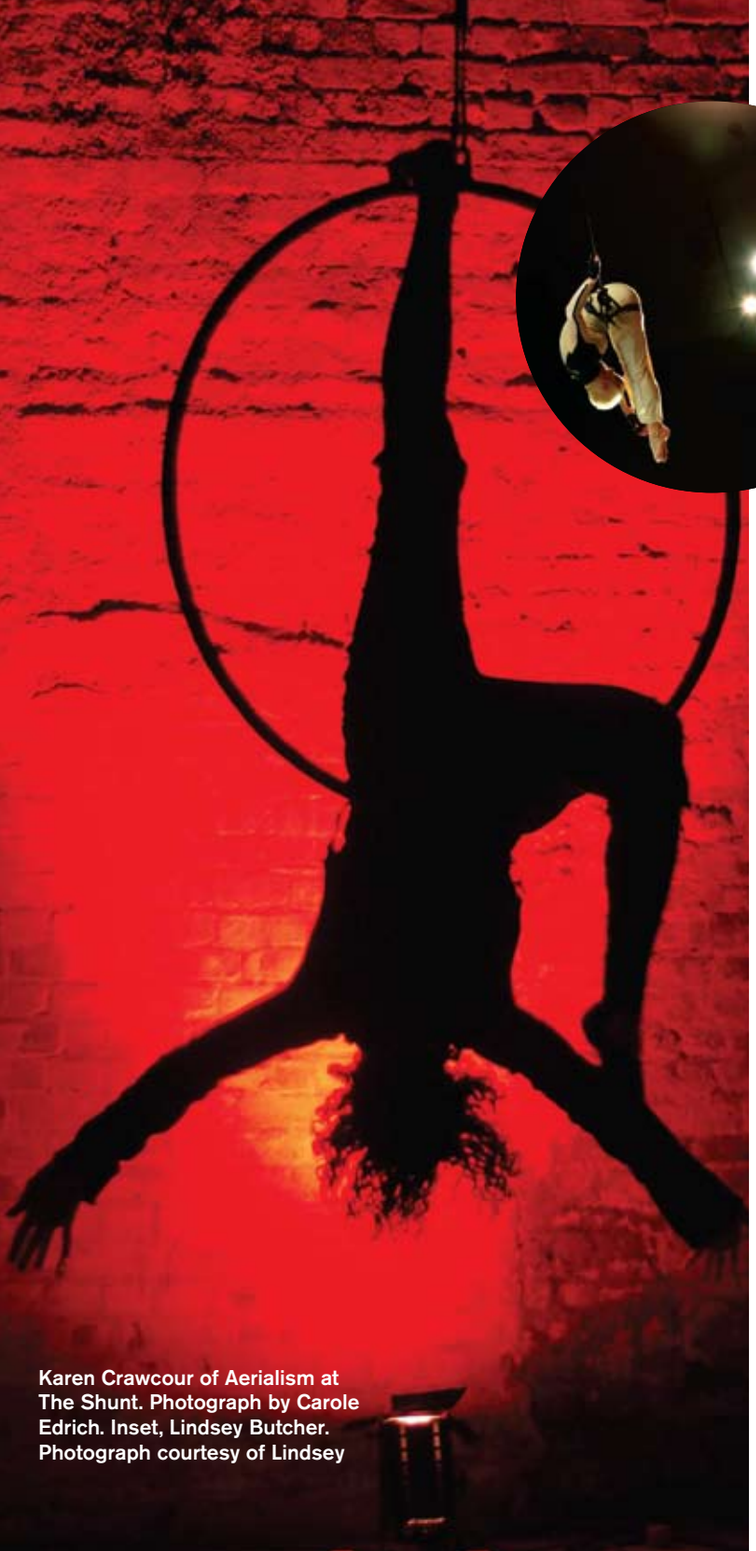
Hesketh and her husband Jamie Ogilvie, a respected mountain climber, worked on the desire to fly at Jackson's Lane, the multi-arts complex in north London. They tried static ropes, but Wendy was not satisfied. Then they tried suspending her from a bungee, with Ogilvie steering, and bungee-assisted dance was born. The freedom of movement was almost there, but the harness and other parts of the apparatus had to be refined over many months.

Now Hesketh can fly freely, gravity is no longer a problem. She can soar and swoop and is only limited by the size and position of the bungee. When she performs on the bungee we can see the "climber", a term invented by the pair, operating the bungee but he is part of the performance. Hesketh's movements are exquisite and fluid, and her joy is infectious. Watch her and you will want to try it. You, too, will believe you can fly.

Wired Aerial has a training centre, called The Higher Space, in a huge converted fruit ➔



Left, Karen and Emma of Aerialism peform. Photograph by Carole Edrich. Right, Gravity and Levity's *Re-flex*. Photograph by Jym Daly



Karen Crawcour of Aerialism at The Shunt. Photograph by Carole Edrich. Inset, Lindsey Butcher. Photograph courtesy of Lindsey

warehouse in Liverpool. The company has workshops for beginners through to advanced aerial dancers.

"We offer bungee-assisted dance and vertical wall work," says Hesketh. "We have a wonderful fabric wall to learn aerial dance on. It's soft, just like bouncing on a bed when you were younger. Most people learn on a brick wall with sheets of wood – that can hurt. We also offer Chinese pole workshops, aerial hoop and trapeze, led by visiting teachers."

Many professional aerial dancers come from either a circus or a dance background and then put a foot into the other camp. They delight in expressing themselves in the air through this dynamic new art form, which is still developing.

Noted aerialist and teacher Lindsey Butcher is artistic director of the Brighton-based company Gravity and Levity. Lindsey started off as a dancer, having trained at London Contemporary Dance School; she worked with many prestigious dance companies and, by chance, trained with a circus company. She was intrigued, so she joined them.

"It was an exhilaration," she says. "As a kid I always enjoyed climbing, being in trees. I was enjoying the circus work but then I was missing dancing and it took me quite a while to realise that I could combine the two and make them more than the sum of their parts – I guess I must be a slow learner. Aerial dance is liberating and quite affirming. It's a really positive thing to do."



Wired Aerial's *Straw Dog,* with the "climber", top right, at Norfolk and Norwich Festival 2010. Photograph by Wendy Hesketh

Butcher's company, in association with South East Dance, is organising the UK leg of the first European Aerial Dance Forum, in Brighton from August 26 to 30. Forums have already been held in France, led by the Cie Drapes Aeriens Company, and Ireland, where it was led by the company Fidget Feet. Members of the French company, including the almost legendary Fred Deb, and Fidget Feet will be at Brighton. A Pilates master and a rigging technician will also be on hand. (Further details can be found on the company and South East Dance websites.)

"We're planning classes and study, creative labs and lunch time discussions," says Butcher. "There will be informal performances, but it's more important to get the classes in. We've all three run aerial dance labs in the past, but this is the first time we've brought together so many teachers and so many classes. Next year I would hope to run the Forum for a week. I'm looking at advanced professionals and enthusiasts and also people who want to try aerial dance for the first time. It's the only way we'll continue to grow, if we get new people interested."

> "Hesketh's movements are exquisite and fluid, and her joy is infectious. Watch her and you will want to try it"

Please be aware, though, that aerial dance is a demanding physical activity. Lindsey Butcher recommends Pilates. Dancer Robert Guy, who performs with Wired Aerial Theatre, was a gymnast in his teenage years and is exceptionally fit. He says the company routine on workshop days, teaching days and even performance days is to start with a 30-minute run and then a pattern of core strength exercises.

Lindsey Butcher emphasises the need for core stability: an inherent stability within the body that supports the spine. "As a beginner you can get so far and then you need to keep



Karen and Emma of Aerialism. Photograph by Carole Edrich

building your strength and your flexibility," she says. "One of the things I want to see as a standard, throughout this dance form, is preparation of the body. Without that preparation you can't progress. You get to a certain level and you can't go any further. You will stagnate."

So, how to get started in aerial dance? There are circus centres in Newcastle, Bristol, Brighton, Sheffield and London where forms of aerial dance take place. People who have been on a workshop are grouping together, when they are back home, and meeting in village halls or other suitable buildings where they can safely erect a rigging point.

Hesketh and Butcher, and the other aerial professionals, are keen to have an accepted working vocabulary for aerial dance, which can only be a healthy sign. Hesketh recalls a workshop from just a few days before we spoke and she glows with satisfaction. "We came up with three totally new moves. And we called them something and now we teach them. It's a constant evolution of technique."

FURTHER INFORMATION

Websites

www.gravity-levity.net
www.wiredaerialtheatre.com
For a list of regional dance agencies, visit www.danceuk.org

Recommended reading

Aerial Dance, by Jayne C Bernasconi and Nancy E Smith, comes with a DVD and is available from www.amazon.co.uk