

Dancer's death reminds us performance can be perilous balancing act

By Hedy Weiss Theater and Dance Critic January 15, 2014 7:00PM

Marco Antonio Huicochea Gonzalez was struck in the head during a rehearsal break. | Ópera Prima@elcolectivo

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Some very real dangers can lurk in the realm of fantasy and imagination. It is not all make-believe for performers, whether they are working on a stage, under the big top or in a rehearsal studio.

The latest reminder of the perils that can undo those practicing even the most highly disciplined art forms came with the tragic death on Monday of Chicago's DanceWorks star, 22-year-old Marco Antonio Huicochea Gonzalez. According to the official autopsy he died from "blunt force trauma of the head [as a result of being] struck by a heavy object" during a studio rehearsal break. The Police News Affairs office said he was "holding the top bar of a steel acrobatic ring when it began to tip over and he fell, with the ring then striking him in the back of the head."

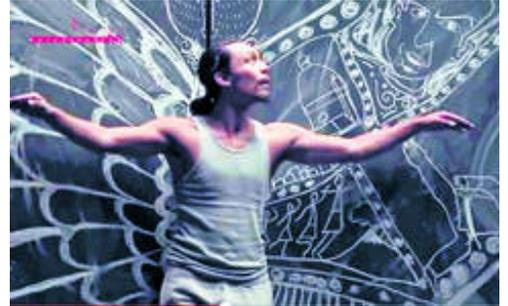
Huicochea Gonzalez, who graduated from Mexico's National School of Classical and Contemporary Dance, studied in New York and Paris, and had performed with a number of professional companies, joined DanceWorks (which is devoted to nurturing dancers as they move into their careers) in 2013. I never saw him perform, but by all accounts he was a dancer of enormous promise.

Those who followed the trials and tribulations of the recent Broadway musical "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark" know all about the serious injuries that plagued its performers. Two stunt doubles suffered broken bones during various flying sequences in rehearsals; a leading actress suffered a concussion when she was struck in the head by equipment in the wings; a stunt performer fell more than 20 feet when his harness was not connected to the safety cord, and more recently, an actor was pinned under a piece of equipment and suffered severe leg trauma.

Even Cirque du Soleil performers are not immune: In July, a veteran aerialist fell 50 feet to her death in a Cirque show in Las Vegas.

Chicago theater and dance companies make extensive use of aerial work and other "circus" skills: the flying scenes in the Goodman Theatre's "A Christmas Carol"; the harnessed descent of a Hubbard Street dancer in Alejandro Cerrudo's "One Thousand Pieces"; the many flights of fancy in Lookingglass Theater shows, from "The Little Prince" (now running), to "Cascabel" and "Hephaestus: A Greek Mythology Circus Tale" (the latter so terrifying I was compelled to ask why its performers didn't use safety wires.)

But even when a show contains no actual "stunts" these days, the combination of complex movable sets, visually disorienting laser lighting and projections, and the nerves that can afflict even the most experienced performers can combine to create more than enough potential dangers.



Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, the co-founder and co-artistic director of Evanston's Actors Gymnasium, and a choreographer for Lookingglass, is a second-generation circus performer who grew up touring with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and other troupes.

"I don't know any of the details of the DanceWorks accident," said DiStasi. "But I think a lot of people these days are trying to do new and exciting things, and they sometimes use new equipment. And when you do that you run the risk of unexpected results. I also think that because so much of this experimentation is going on, young performers especially sort of take things for granted."

"In addition to teaching my students all the physical things they need to know, I always teach them to think about everything that can go wrong. I tell them to take every precaution, and then go to the next level of precaution. I remind them to always check their own hardware and safety locks. And I make sure understudies have the same preparation. But accidents happen even under the best of circumstances."

Hubbard Street Dance Chicago turns to the experts at Chicago Flyhouse when it needs rigging. "They work with the dancers and venue crew and are on-site for every installation, both here and on tour," said Zachary Whittenburg, HSDC's spokesman.

I still have nightmares about a heart-stopping pratfall by the Humpty Dumpty character in Lookingglass' "Lookingglass Alice." And hearing about the death of Huicochea Gonzalez I thought yet again: No matter how thrilling or beautiful, no art is worth the ultimate sacrifice.

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