

Santa Barbara's First Aerial Dance Festival

By Elizabeth Schwyzer ([Contact](#))



Courtesy Photo

ABOVE IT: Santa Barbara Centre for Aerial Arts instructor Chelsea O'Brian contorts herself on the Aerial Kite.

Week Concludes with a Performance at the Lobero on March 1

Saturday, February 22, 2014

Two weeks ago, this group of international artists had never met. Two days from now, they will present an evening-length production — together. The show is part of the inaugural Santa Barbara Contemporary Floor to Air Festival, which launched on Sunday, February 23. The festival welcomes aerial dance artists and companies from around the world — Costa Rica, France, Portugal — as well as from the east and west coasts of the United States. Aerial dance enthusiasts ages 8 and up will take part in a full week of workshops and rehearsals in the lead-up to the grand finale at the Lobero Theatre.

In case the term “aerial dance” leaves you blank, picture a circus acrobat swinging from a trapeze. Now make that trapeze a hoop of metal. Or a bolt of silky fabric. Or a rope as thick as your arm. Aerial dance is the art of making each of these incredibly technical apparatuses look like the most natural venue for graceful, athletic movement. It’s an art form that extracts high physical, mental, and theatrical demands; only the sturdiest stick with it.

Given the challenges of their chosen art, aerial dancers tend to be pretty independent types. Floor to Air organizer Ninette Paloma says her primary goal in launching the festival was to foster a spirit of collaboration between aerial artists, who often work in isolation from — even in competition with — each other.

“You have all these people doing the same thing,” she noted. “Doesn’t it make sense for us to share the struggle

and the triumphs?”

Apparently, there are plenty of artists whose answer to that question is “yes.” At last check, Paloma had 48 registrants signed up for 18 daily workshops covering everything from ballet and modern dance technique to various aerial apparatus: fabrics, sling, kite, lyra, and corde lisse among them.

Paloma’s is not the first aerial dance festival in the states, but it’s one of few; Boulder, Colorado–based Frequent Flyers Productions launched the first, and others have since cropped up in New York, Denver, and Chicago. Given the relatively small population of Santa Barbara, Paloma’s new festival is certainly among the most ambitious. She’s banking on the appeal of the American Riviera to draw participants from around the globe. She’s also drawing on many years of relationship building with leaders in the world of aerial arts, a number of whom will be teaching and performing in Santa Barbara this week.

Among them is Fred Deb, a graduate of the famed Centre National des Arts du Cirque (National Circus School) in France and one of the original creators of aerial fabrics. Deb now runs an aerial dance festival of her own in France, as well as heading up her company, Drapés Aériens. Paloma waxed rhapsodic as she discussed Deb’s impact on the art of aerial dance.

“It’s amazing to be living in a time when we can work with someone who actually *created* the apparatus we’re working on,” she said, adding that as a performer, Deb “oozes sensuality. You want to watch her walk. She can just sit on stage and make a hand gesture, and you’re riveted.”

Also on the roster this week is Nancy Smith, founder of the first U.S. aerial dance festival in 1999, and one of Paloma’s heroes. “Her technique was featured in the first book on aerial dance,” Paloma explained. “She rarely leaves her studio in Colorado — she doesn’t have to; she’s so popular — so it’s a real honor that she’s coming to Santa Barbara.”

Other participants in the festival and the public show on March 1 include members of CircusEdge (New York), Danzaire (Costa Rica), and L’Envers du Pied (Portugal) alongside artists from closer to home, including Santa Barbara’s very own La Petite Chouette Aerial Dance Company.

What some of the visiting artists don’t know is that Paloma has been hard at work for the past few weeks, weaving their distinct creative offerings into a cohesive evening-length production. Over the course of the festival week, they’ll work together to develop transitions and make the show flow seamlessly. That’s no easy task for such disparate artists, especially given some of the theatrical differences between American and European aerial traditions.

“The Europeans tend to be more highly theatrical — moody,” Paloma noted, adding that she plans to divide the show into three sections to allow for shifts in tone.

No matter their aesthetic differences, Paloma thinks these artists from around the world form a natural community, and she’s intent on drawing that out. She’s rented one big house for visiting artists, where she hopes they will cook together, eat and drink together, and talk aerial dance into the wee hours.

“I think because of its familial circus roots, our genre lends itself to a community spirit,” she explained. “I love that sense of sharing, and I like to align myself with people who feel the same way.”

One thing’s for sure: By the time the curtain comes down on the inaugural Santa Barbara Contemporary Floor to Air Festival, these artists will know each other far better than they did one week prior. That, Paloma believes, can only be a good thing, for artists and companies, students and audience members, and the art form itself. And at the end of the week, Santa Barbara will have truly earned its spot on the international aerial dance map.

From there, the sky’s the limit.

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Santa Barbara’s inaugural Floor to Air Festival runs through this weekend, with a final performance at the Lobero

Theatre (33 E. Canon Perdido St.) on Saturday, March 1, at 7 p.m. For tickets to the show, call (805) 963-0761 or visit lobero.com. To learn more about the festival and about the S.B. Centre for Aerial Arts, call (805) 284-8785 or visit sbaerial.com.