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Downtown Express photos by Jefferson Siegel

Above and below, dancers at a recent rehearsal of "escalator," a gravity-defying, site-specific performance that premieres at the World Financial Center, March 10 and 11.

Where every escalator is a stage

By Sara G. Levin

Dance choreographer and AMDaT founder, Andrea Haenggi, likes to give fantastical dimensions to what she calls "prosaic spaces." So it seems only natural, upon arriving at a rehearsal for her new show, "escalator," to find one of her dancers sliding across the marble floor of the World Financial Center 1 lobby as if he were swimming, and another snaked along a descending escalator rail in a red, retro swimsuit and bathing cap.

"There are some things we get so used to that we are not really aware of them anymore, and we forget what their original source was," Haenggi said, describing why she decided to develop a work about, of all things, escalators.

As an artist with a growing portfolio of site-specific dances, Haenggi said that when she was invited to perform at the WFC, she was originally struck by how escalators cut through the building's beautiful atriums. Upon researching the machines, she discovered that they were originally invented in the late 1800s as a ride at Coney Island.

Inspired by the original playfulness of something most people take for granted today, Haenggi set out to sprinkle whimsy over a machine adapted for practicality.

"The movement definitely has an acrobatic element, but I'm still working on how to make it look like normal people riding down, only differently," Haenggi said. Even though Haenggi considers herself a minimal choreographer, at one point during rehearsal, two men slowly arched their backs as if preparing to back dive off of the moving steps.

"I'm always excited by presentations that let people see the building's architecture in a new and unique way," said Debra Simon, Artistic Director of World Financial Center Arts & Events, who has arranged a series of site-specific works within the center. "And I think that in Andrea we found the perfect partner for taking dance off the stage and combining movement with architecture."

Formed in 1998, AMDaT (Andrea Maria Dance art Technology), strives to enhance everyday locations with dance, visual art and technology. For "escalator," which runs this Friday and Saturday, Haenggi designed the performance to wind throughout each of the four buildings over forty minutes, as audiences follow the dancers into separate lobbies and rotundas. For each location, soundman David Linton assembled musicians Alexandra Mareculewicz, Charles Cohen, David Watson and William Hooker to convey different moods, starting with a synthesizer and moving to bagpipes and drums. Using their live recordings, the last scene blasts a mix of earlier sounds.

AMDaT dancers Einy Aam and Tori Sparks will be joined by guest performers Eric Bradley, Blanca Cubillos-Roman, Jeff Crumrine and Uta Tukemura. In addition, the piece will include projections of video shot by Haenggi of similar architecture during a recent trip to Moscow.

During the rehearsal, few passersby take much notice of the performers. As the dancers balance between the electronic stairs, curl up on their railings or arabesque-jump across their entranceways, people come and go from work, barely looking up. As funny as this looks, the choreography is meant to be flexible enough to accommodate men and women who will be free to use the escalators during the performance.

Although Haenggi admitted that connecting such spread out areas has been difficult, she said the layout of each temporary stage is so beautiful, they are calming. Compared to some of her other performances, like a 2001 debut in Bushwick, Brooklyn that had to be controlled by local police, Haenggi only wishes she had more time to explore her surroundings.

While preparing for this performance, AMDaT is also developing a full-length piece to be shown at Dance Theater Workshop this fall called "correre I+II." Unlike the openness of "escalator," "correre I+II" will be about adapting movement within tight corridors.

"escalator" runs from Mar. 10-11 for four performances at the World Financial Center, 200 Vesey Street (212 945-0505, worldfinancialcenter.com).