Arts

Dazzling Diavolo visits Greenville

Dance troupe's pieces depict struggle of life

By Paul Hyde
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Imagine an ensemble of ultra-athletic performers who combine ballet and modern dance with gymnastics and high-risk acrobatics.

You've just envisioned Diavolo, the celebrated Los Angeles-based dance troupe coming to the Peace Center on Tuesday for one performance.

If Diavolo's dance pyrotechnics bring to mind the dazzling physical showmanship of Cirque du Soleil, that's no surprise. Diavolo's artistic director, Jacques Heim, has choreographed for Cirque.

"What we do is like a live abstract painting, but with very strong themes," says the Paris-born Heim, 46, speaking from Richmond, Va., where the 10-member company was performing. "Audiences may not always understand completely, but they connect to what we do."

A principal theme in almost all of Heim's work concerns humankind's struggle in a dangerous world.

But the key to survival is simple: working together.

For instance, Heim likes to use huge structures and mechanical objects on stage as a way of posing a question: "What is more important, man or machine?" he says.

He also pits structures — cubes, columns and wheels — against humans as a metaphor for our unsafe world.

"I try to show how vulnerable humans are against those structures," says Heim. "How fragile we are, yet how powerful we are as a group."

Amid the struggle of life depicted in Heim's works, positive themes emerge: the importance of trust and teamwork, for instance, as dancers leap from high above set pieces into the arms of their fellow performers.

"Audiences connect so well to our works," says Heim. "I think the reason is that they see on stage five men and five women working so hard to accomplish something together."

Heim says his works' themes reflect real life. He remembers, for instance, what happened in California after a catastrophic fire. Suddenly, neighbors who had never spoken to one another began to work together.

"When you put people in a state of survival, suddenly they begin to communicate and share food and water," he says.

Among the works being performed in Greenville is "Fearful Symmetries," which premiered to rave reviews two weeks ago at the Hollywood Bowl. *Los Angeles Times* dance critic Lewis Segal wrote that "acts of collective and individual heroism fused with the music in ways at once startling and uplifting." The piece is choreographed to the music of John Adams.

Segal detected in the work Heim's theme of humankind struggling in an unsafe world. It brought to mind natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina.

Diavolo favors hefty and towering set pieces. "Fearful Symmetries" features four aluminum and wood columns and two U-shaped pieces that sit atop a 2½-ton motorized "field" that rises and tilts toward the audience at a 20-degree angle.

Heim likens his fearless dancers to "gladiators."

"This company is not for every dancer," says Heim. "They have to not be afraid of blood. These works are tremendously challenging, mentally and physically."

Diavolo is part of the Peace Center's Place for Everyone program, which offers tickets (beginning at $5) for less than half the usual ticket price. The program is sponsored by BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina.

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Diavolo's pieces are tremendously challenging for its 10 dancers, artistic director Jacques Heim says.

YOU CAN GO

- What: Diavolo
- When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday
- Where: Peace Center for the Performing Arts, 300 S. Main St.
- Tickets: $5, $15 and $25.
- Information: 864-467-3000 or www.peacecenter.org