

# PUSH Physical Theatre's Trunk Show Will Be Presented as Part of Virtual Rochester Fringe

**PUSH Physical Theatre's Trunk Show will be available on demand throughout the 12-day festival (September 15-26).**

by BWW News Desk Sep. 1, 2020



Rochester's internationally renowned **PUSH Physical Theatre** hasn't missed performing in a **Rochester Fringe** since the festival debuted in 2012, and this year's virtual Fringe is no exception. **PUSH Physical Theatre's Trunk Show** will be available on demand throughout the 12-day festival (September 15-26); tickets are \$10 and available at [rochesterfringe.com](http://rochesterfringe.com).

The show's official description is as follows: "As you know, all the members of award-winning PUSH Physical Theatre live together in a small travel trunk. Their stage manager folds them carefully inside after each performance and sits on the lid until the next show. They've been in there for a while now and it's time for a break-out. Created especially for the small screen, witness original stories, funny, intimate, heart-breaking and universal, caught and released into the world with PUSH's signature athleticism and no-holds-barred physicality."

What the description leaves out is just as important as what it includes. Almost the entire show was shot during the COVID-19 shut-down and finding ways to do so safely necessitated some major creativity on the company's part. The only portion that features an actual audience is from a pre-COVID-19 recording, and its inclusion draws a powerful parallel between the current and former states of the performing arts.

"We quarantined for weeks before rehearsing and shooting together, and did a lot of both outdoors," explains Darren Stevenson, who founded and directs the 20-year-old company with fellow performer and wife, Heather Stevenson. "We're physical performers - yes - but we're storytellers as well, so we had to learn very quickly how to think like filmmakers in order to make this virtual show work."

In addition to a comic opening by the Stevensons, five varied pieces, and interviews with each PUSH performer including newbie Sydney Burrows, the 45-minute show includes the world premiere of

"RACE or 'You've Seen Me Before.'" Created just weeks ago by Darren Stevenson, company member **Ashley Jones**, and guest artist Hassiem Muhammad from New York City, the work addresses racism in a very visceral way. It was made possible in part by an ongoing fundraiser called **Support the PUSH Forward Project**, which supports PUSH's mission to create and perform stories that inspire change.

"I can't speak for all black people, but...odds are I'm not the only black guy who feels like I'm walking through this world with a burden," says Muhammad in his on-screen introduction to the piece. "Odds are I'm not the only black person who feels like I'm in a race that I never signed up for."

About **PUSH Physical Theatre**: Founded in Rochester, NY in 2000 by husband-and-wife team, Darren and Heather Stevenson, out of a desire to "push" the boundaries of conventional theatre, PUSH Physical Theatre has since earned an international reputation as one of the U.S.'s leading physical theatre companies.

Recently featured in acclaimed collaborations with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, the Ying Quartet, and Pulitzer Prize-nominated composer Ricardo Zohn-Muldoon's two multi-media operas (Comala and No Se Culpe with fellow composer Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez), PUSH has also produced its own full-length works including DRACULA, Jekyll & Hyde, and Arc of Ages. Additionally, its wide-ranging repertory includes many shorter works such as "Red Ball," a hilarious take on the interplay between the real and virtual worlds using iPad technology.

Known for intense athleticism, gravity-defying acrobatics, and soulful artistry, PUSH has been called "a perfect metaphor-in-motion" by CITY Newspaper and "a rare treat" by NY Theatre Guide. PUSH was a season finalist on TruTV's national series, Fake Off, a competition/reality show featuring what producers dubbed "the captivating art of 'faking'" - a mix of theatre, acrobatics, and illusion. Their performances caused judge and Glee star **Harry Shum Jr.** to exclaim: "You guys are superhuman!"

These masters of physical storytelling have received the Community of Color/Anton Germano Dance Award, the Performing Artist of the Year Award from the Arts & Cultural Council for Greater Rochester, and the University of Rochester's Lillian Fairchild Award. In addition to a busy touring schedule, PUSH is passionate about arts-in-education programs and runs a summer intensive for adult students from all over the world.

Media please note: Additional high-resolution photos and broadcast-quality video are available, and interviews can be arranged. Reviewers: please request comp tickets at [https://rochesterfringe.formstack.com/forms/press\\_comp\\_requests](https://rochesterfringe.formstack.com/forms/press_comp_requests).

# Fringe Festival Day 4: Physical Theatre & Fielder's Choice

By JEFF SPEVAK • SEP 16, 2018



PUSH Physical Theatre

CREDIT JEFF SPEVAK

Rochester's PUSH Physical Theatre has established itself as one of the foundation acts of the [KeyBank Rochester Fringe Festival](#). It is essential viewing each year: What amazing stories will it tell, through the simple act of moving one's body?

On Saturday, Day Four of the 11-day festival, PUSH took its audience to laughs, tears, and to the stars. True comedy carries with it elements of poignancy and sadness. And something

grander than the joke.

From a dynamic contemporary dance opening of five white-clad bodies using flashlights in the darkness to emphasize their bodies, with the lights at times seeming to emanate from within their bodies as a life force, the five-member PUSH ensemble turned on the lights for "Red Ball," a piece that had a little bit of everything: The Ministry of Silly Walks, decapitation sight gags and the namesake red ball flitting from iPad to iPad, until it was shot from the sky and exploded to reveal its soul, a firefly to be chased through the night, until gently caught in cupped hands.

Those two pieces were remarkable visual treats. Others were solo works relying solely on movement. For "The Pew," PUSH co-founder Darren Stevenson depicted churchgoers from a child to a dozing man in his interpretation of what audience members were up to as Stevenson's father, a pastor, was preaching. Stevenson hiked up his trousers and aged his face just by expression to turn himself into an old man. But the rubber-bodied physical comedy soon gave way to each churchgoer clutching his heart, having received the message.

PUSH co-founder Heather Stevenson – the two are married – offered a solo piece, "The Visit," a thoughtful, and very moving, interpretation of an elderly woman with Parkinson's being visited by her daughter and granddaughter. Pushing aside the curtains to peer out the window, awaiting their visit, body trembling with disease, then watching out the window as they drive off.

The group, breaking three new members, closed with its remarkable "Galileo," a homage to the astronomer, as they scurried around the stage like the workings of a clock, which the universe is, to chiming music.

Darren Stevenson's commentaries between the pieces often dwelled on the trauma of his recent broken toe: "I could pee myself and not know it, I have so many drugs in my body." But after "The Visit," he reminded older people in the audience to share their valuable experience with younger people. And younger people should seek out the elderly, to learn from that experience.

And "Galileo?" Stevenson said whether you believe in a god or not – and Galileo was imprisoned because he promoted a non-deity version of the movement of the solar system – be good to each other, "because it's the right thing to do."

PUSH returns to the School of the Arts' Main Stage at 7 p.m. Sept. 20 and 7 p.m. Sept. 22. It embarks on a five-city tour next month with its interpretation of *Dracula*, and will perform in Rochester again on March 30 and 31 in a collaboration with The Ying Quartet.

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## Casey reviews PUSH Physical Theatre

By Casey Carlsen

**P**USH Physical Theatre, the brainchild of artistic directors and founders Darren and Heather Stevenson, has a satisfying repertoire built from the local company's 16 years in existence, but it's always exciting to see a new piece. The Fringe audience Saturday night at the School of the Arts' main stage was shown the world premiere of "0's and 1's," a work still in progress.

Darren prefaced the performance of the piece with a brief talk about national and political identity in the world. "I just feel like maybe, if we could do a few more silly things ... and a little less hating and shooting ..." he said.

Light and the absence of light contribute greatly to an aura of menace that imbues most of this piece. Performers wear portable video projectors and flashlights, which initially, spookily illuminate their faces and leotard-clad bodies; by the end, scattered colored light from the projectors ushers in a lighter mood -- hope, perhaps peace.

The piece has a high-tech, calculated feel, but at the same time, a primitive, elemental side. For much of it, the performers are enmeshed together or alone in large pieces of a shiny, stretchy fabric. Bodies struggle inside. Black fabric covers faces. Then hands and feet protrude. Eventually, the fabric is discarded, the movement becomes more upward bound, and the music is more optimistic.

PUSH excels in deeply layered work that grows richer in meaning with repeated viewings. This is one such piece. I look forward to seeing it again to gain further insight into its message.

The company is, however, equally adept at conveying humor and lightness through movement. Saturday night's program was balanced between dark and light. "Parenthood," for example, a hysterical take on beleaguered parenting, had the audience chuckling as the Stevensons mimed an exhausted couple woken repeatedly to attend their young children. The genius of the company's physical comedy is readily apparent as the two take turns shuffling off to burp and change the babies -- all made clear without any props, only movement and facial expression.

The other two pieces performed Saturday -- "Job" and "The Soldier" -- are both hard-hitting. "Job" takes its name from the biblical character and delivers a powerful rendition of his anguish. The action centers on an immense metal ring that the performers clamber in and out of as they fight their way to some kind of freedom. AviPryntz-Nadworny demonstrates his prowess with this apparatus (he has performed with Cirque de Soleil) as the title character trying to master his demons.

"The Soldier" features Darren progressing from a boy at play to a soldier in battle. His expressions during his slow motion war scenes are, alone, worth attending the show. He fires his gun and his face contorts in agony and disbelief. Then, it appears he is hit. Red light floods the stage floor. He staggers, his body flaying, he falls, contorts, stills, and then the stage goes black.



**“A THRILLING AND  
ARTFUL PERFORMANCE.”**

– Alli Crandell, Coastal Carolina University

# Dance



PUSH Physical Theatre and Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra will perform collaborative new works this week. PHOTO BY ERICH CAMPING

## Come together

### “Breaking Boundaries with PUSH Physical Theatre”

FRIDAY APRIL 13,  
AND SATURDAY, APRIL 14, AT 8 P.M.  
KODAK HALL AT EASTMAN THEATRE,  
60 GIBBS STREET  
\$24-\$110 454-2100;  
RPO.ORG; PUSHTHEATRE.ORG

[ PREVIEW ] BY DANIEL J. KUSHNER

On the surface, the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra's upcoming collaboration on April 13 and 14 with the nearly undefinable local performance troupe PUSH Physical Theatre may seem like nothing new. The RPO has long worked with performers from other artistic mediums, including movement-based groups as varied as the Rochester City Ballet and Cirque de la Symphonie. But in actuality, this program — entitled “Breaking Boundaries with PUSH Physical Theatre” — is all about subtle innovations that find both the musicians and stage performers presenting their craft in new contexts.

Though the initial approach to this collaboration was open-ended, Darren Stevenson, co-Artistic Director of PUSH Physical Theatre, was clear about the direction he wanted to avoid. “There is this thing that sometimes happens where we say that we're collaborating,” Stevenson explains. “What's actually happening is the musicians are onstage playing something and the dancers are onstage dancing something. We just happen to be doing it at the same time. And we call it a collaboration. And that's great for writing grants and everything, and we all feel good about it, but did we really collaborate?”

This attitude toward the program resonated with RPO Pops Conductor Jeff Tyzik, and a more organic brainstorming for how the music and movement would converge was the result. “It's just opened my eyes to thinking about how we program concerts in a totally different way,” Tyzik says.

What makes the meeting of PUSH and the RPO dynamic is the creation of new work. In addition to bringing some of his existing compositions to the program — which will focus on the concept of

journeys, both personal and universal — Tyzik has composed new music for PUSH's work, “Galileo.”

For the first time, PUSH co-Artistic Director Heather Stevenson will perform her signature solo piece “The Visit” with musical accompaniment, Tyzik's “Memory” from his orchestral cycle “Images: Musical Impressions of an Art Museum.” The conductor will also present his composition “Blue Funk,” with the members of PUSH portraying primordial beings that emerge from the ocean.

“I am fond of the idea that things don't change that much, we just think they do,” Stevenson says. “We're kind of concerned with the same sorts of things as everyone else is, and everyone else has always been. So these little creatures, they're slithering around, you know, one of them figures out how to walk, and the others wanna walk. And they have little conflicts with each other, and they wanna know ‘Who is my friend and who am I fighting?’”

Stevenson and PUSH — a group whose creative experiments with movement place them somewhere between where traditional dance ends

and performance art begins — brought a paradigm-shifting concept to collaborative process. “When you're improvising, and you're lifting someone, they're lifting you, and you're dancing together in physical contact,” Stevenson says. “You're trying to think of that in terms of there being three parties: there's me and you, and there's the movement, as if the movement is another person.”

Stevenson acknowledges that trying to answer the question “What does the movement want to do?” is not always a sure-success. “It doesn't always work, but when you fall into those moments, it's like magic,” he says. “It's meditative, in that for one moment, you're not planning for the future, you're not evaluating the past. You're right in the moment.”

Perhaps the most intriguing and potentially risky part of the collaborative performance will be a live improvisation between RPO trumpeter Herb Smith and the members of PUSH. In it, the previously mentioned primordial life forms will physically interact with Smith, who will play the god figure that they worship.

“So in this piece, we said, ‘OK, so God can only communicate through the trumpet, and we can only communicate through movement, and so how do we understand each other?’” Stevenson says.

As a joint effort, “Breaking Boundaries” is distinctive. On the one hand, PUSH Physical Theatre embodies not merely characters, but also the environment of the characters, the sense of space that environment implies. Stevenson explains: “What I'm trying to do is say, ‘What in the entire universe of possible movements is the right way to transmit this idea the best?’”

For its part, the RPO's willingness to present both new works and canonical classical music (in this case, Samuel Barber's “Adagio for Strings” and rarer pieces by Zoltán Kodály and Maurice Ravel) in a more unconventional light helps to make these concerts more than just business as usual for orchestral programming.

“I think that really speaks to the future of orchestras,” Tyzik says of the collaboration. “The ones that take chances and keep experimenting are going to have a much better prospect of developing new audiences going forward than the ones that just say, ‘OK, we limit our concerts to Broadway and film music, and whatever these six categories are, and then that's it. That's who we are. We sell out and we do really well.’ Well that's right now. But what about ten years from now?”

# Rochester Fringe Festival, Day 3: PUSH Physical Theatre review

## ONE OF THE MUST-SEE SHOWS OF THE FRINGE

by Casey Carlsen

A large crowd filled the lobby and looped around the entrance to the TheaterROCS stage at Xerox Auditorium Friday night as people waited patiently for the doors to open for **PUSH Physical Theatre's** first show at Rochester Fringe. I gleaned from snippets of conversation in the rapidly overheating space that many had seen PUSH perform before and were coming back for more. They were, in PUSH parlance, "PUSHERS," as followers are playfully dubbed on the group's website.

Darren and Heather Stevenson founded the group in Rochester in 2000, wanting a vehicle in which to perform and create that embodied not just dance and not just theater, but a host of other disciplines, including mime, gymnastics and acrobatics. In short, it was to encompass whatever physical vocabulary they needed in order to convey what they wanted to express. In fact, the company includes a classically trained actor, Jonathan Lowry; a parkour (climbing urban spaces) instructor, martial arts expert and gymnast, Andrew Salmon; and an actor, juggler, and gymnast from Cirque du Soleil, Avi Pryntz-Nadworny.

The company's first piece last night, the premiere of "The Evolution of Aviation," immediately demonstrated the impact of combining these various forms of movement and expression. The members of PUSH possess a startling ability to transform their bodies into other entities through movement, sound, and expression. Without using any props, the performers became gliders, helicopters, and planes, as well as the pilots of these vehicles. Starting with the basic position of laying stomach to the ground, arms hovering sideways like wings -- the plunky strains of ragtime music establishing the time period - the group progressed to more elaborate depictions of flying machines. A flurry of hands became propellers. A central dancer supported a smaller dancer in the air on either side of him to become a plane's wings. PUSH possesses the beguiling ability to access the inner world of the imagination through physical transformation, that innate gift of early childhood that most of us, sadly, left behind long ago.

The audience responded with resounding enthusiasm throughout the show, bursting into laughter or chuckling with appreciation again and again. In fact, humor and accessibility are part of the group's wide appeal. Unusual for a dance company -- almost unorthodox, in fact -- Darren Stevenson spends substantial time on stage during every show addressing the audience, his truly funny anecdotes and insightful, self-effacing quips chipping away at that limiting wall between performers and their audience.

By far my favorite piece of the evening was the gut-wrenching "Web," a dark departure for the group. The 2011 piece closely examines both the savagery of abuse and violence and its emotional and psychological fall-out. Lowry was superb as the victim, literally harnessed and roped to his torturers who yanked him around and mimicked striking him with ugly sneers on their faces. Lowry's classical background was evident, as finely filtered expressions moved across his face to convey the pain, fear, and bewilderment at the brutality he was enduring. His body was no less expressive than his face. He recoiled again and again as would an animal under attack, each time his resistance fading incrementally. **The most affecting 10 seconds of the night's performance -- in fact, the most affecting 10 seconds of anything I've seen in Fringe so far** -- transpired after the brutes had finally tired of their tormenting, unleashed Lowry and left him, a collapsed heap of humanity. Salmon turned abruptly then and mimed a final fierce jerk in the air. Brilliantly choreographed, Lowry responded as if he were still wearing the rope; his body spasmed up into the air, then collapsed back into itself.