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### Tangle acrobats mix realism and whimsy with 'Ambersand'

by Lewis Whittington  
EDGE Media Network Contributor  
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During rehearsal in one of the Philly Fringe warehouse spaces in Northern Liberties rigged with trapeze apparatus, choreographer **Lauren Rile Smith** changes into a male costume and hops on a trapeze with barely a glance at the bar. She even dangles upside-down as she directs Pascale Smith, her sister, reading poems about a young man's death from AIDS.

It is the meditative central section of, "**Ampersand**," choreographed by Tangle Movement Arts, an innovative eight member women's aerial troupe that mixes feats of daring with dance expressionism.

"This has developed as a collaborative work. Everyone has been training in their disciplines for several years." Smith explains after the rehearsal.

Tangle combines traditional circus arts with aerial acrobatics. The troupe explores role diversity and gender identity as part of their choreographic template. The company formed just this year with most of the performers having multi-discipline training. Smith, who has also been working in New York's strong 'new circus' scene, wants to bring something different to Philly Fringe.

She points out that her solo adds a touch of realism. "The emphasis usually is on making acrobatics look easy, which contributes to the sense of magic an audience feels. But, because the subject in my piece is grief, the physical work that goes into trapeze is more visible and part of this story,"

Smith adds she has been coping with a knee injury. "I'm really feeling it," she said.

The troupe also uses humor, live music, and text to make it more than feats of daring. A solo by Deena Weisberg, for instance, has the performer twisting and spiraling on suspended sashes as she depicts waking up and getting dressed for work - over, under, sideways and down.

Smith does not hesitate to say that many of her troupe are lesbian and identify as queer.

"It was really important for us to have a diversity of experience reflected in this first show. We have a drag piece, a queer cruising piece. We really wanted to bring different stories to the Fringe Festival.

"One of things that motivated us to put this together," she continues. "For me, in acrobatics routines there are often heterosexual stories- the strong man and a little tiny woman. I have nothing against that story, but the queer members of my troupe and I were frustrated by seeing that story over and over. Not seeing our gender expression, or our experiences as strong women...especially in this art."

**"Ambersand"** is performed September 9, 2011 at 6:30 and 9:00pm at the Philadelphia Soundstages, 1600 North 5th Street, Philadelphia, PA. For more information visit [visit the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival and Philly Fringe website](#).

Lewis Whittington writes about the performing arts and gay politics for several publications.

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