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Exclusive Interview

Aly Rose

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The Many

Facets of

the

One Show

Filmmaker Aly Rose explains how her short film, *Beings of Light*, is but one of many art forms that combines suspension, technology and performance and is inspired by the original aerial dance production, the ONE Show.

BY FILMMAKERLIFE EDITORIAL



“When we are dancing on the floor, we feel the gravity of our bodies; we are accustomed to being upright and create vocabularies around that stance. However, when we go aerial, the sphere of reference is completely altered. We are spinning upside down, keeping our spine relaxed in many positions, pelvis tucked in, but core engaged...while dancing. We are moving 360 degrees with no floor, and fast. The body and mind must create new bearings, internally. To me, these aerialists are like astronauts.”



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY ALY ROSE

Aly Rose heads the Dance Program at New York University Shanghai. As an Associate Arts Professor at NYUSH and a Global Network Associate Arts Professor at NYU, she teaches Choreography & Performance, Composition and Dance for Camera. Before joining NYUSH, she pioneered the Dance Minor at Tisch School of the Arts, NYU.

As a choreographer and dance filmmaker in China, her work has been shown at the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra Hall, the Power Station of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art MoCA, the Power Long Museum, and the Glass Museum. Her screendances have received awards and recognition from such prestigious festivals as the San Francisco Dance Film Festival, Dance Camera West, and the Osaka International Film Festival. In partnership with the National Art Network and the Mexico City Videodance Festival, she helped to found Coreocinema, the first streaming platform in the world dedicated exclusively to dance films.

She is an American Mandarin Society fellow, an Asia 21 Young Leader of the Asia Society, a lecturer for the United Nations Leadership Programme, and is a member of the National Committee of US-China Relations NCUSCR. In China's history, she is the first and only Westerner to have graduated from the Beijing Dance Academy.

Her large choreographed works have been shown for the Opening of the Temple of Light in Chile 2016, the Closing of the Shanghai Expo 2010, at the Opening of the Beijing Olympics 2008, the Times Square New Year's Ball Drop 2014, at the 798 Dashanzi International Art Festival, and in the United Arab Emirates in Al Ain and Abu Dhabi.

Her most recent exhibition, entitled "Beings of Light," suspends hundreds of moving translucent 3D figures into flowing sculptures and can be seen at the Power Long Museum in Shanghai from 2021-2022.

She is passionately collaborating with a creative team at NYUSH and 100 international aerialists in bringing the the ONE Show to fruition.



BEINGS OF LIGHT

Lifting, spiraling, and descending through the ethers; this aerial display of artistry is one of a kind.

WITH THE FILMMAKER, ARTIST & CHOREOGRAPHER ALY ROSE

Below is a conversation with Rose about her most recent screendance entitled Beings of Light:

What is Beings of Light about?

Grace defying gravity. Floating with finesse. Our short film artfully depicts the fluidity and power of three aerialists who are rehearsing the choreographic sequences for the finale of the One Show, a large-scale live production comprised of four acts: Sound, Light, Movement and Flight.

How does this film relate to the ONE Show specifically?

What this film does with three, is what the One Show aims to do with 100 performers.

How would you describe this collaboration?

This collaborative endeavor is nothing less than a discovery of the interdependence of the artist, the animated, the aerialist, and the apparatus in creating 3D dance. In this project, we are reliant on artificial means first to inform and guide in Unity, a software platform typically used for gaming. And yet, it is the aerialist who transfuses us with her flexibility, is breathtaking in his grace-- only to be lifted up and brought down, as if by magic, by a machine. Man, Machine, Man, Machine.

Simply put, the whole project aims to harness various technologies in transforming the current performance space for an unprecedented number of performers, moving in 3D, the consequence of which will heighten and alter our sensory intake.

Spinning 360 degrees while dancing, while being suspended and moved quickly along a vertical access is a burgeoning frontier. Suspension is not necessarily new, but exact and precise suspension for a hundred aerialists is a revolution in flight and dance, and for the viewing audience.

Can you tell me about the ONE Show and its history?

In 2005 while gazing up at the sky in Central Park, I had a vision. In this vision, a flurry of movement above me, caressing the air, bodies in white, diving in and out of one another. Their bodies glided while holding awe-inspiring formations, and people below felt transcended to another realm. The bodies appeared to weave in and out of one another, each suspended by threads of wire. They made dynamic sculptures when viewed from afar, and from below they embodied such grace and strength, with seeming effortlessness.

Now at the time, I had recently graduated from the Beijing Dance Academy and had been performing Chinese and modern dance. I could not explain what I saw, but took it in from three vantage points: from the perspective of the audience, the perspective of the dancer, and the perspective of those watching it from a tall building or skyscraper in the distance. I did not know how to make it a reality, but I felt its rarity, magnificence and beauty.

The first step in this journey began just two years later.

What kind of technical challenges have you encountered?

From 2007-2009 I worked with an animator from Japan to keyframe this vision and its concepts into two videos. However, the product of that collaboration remained just moving pictures, so to speak. At that stage, none of the data points could be manipulated or translated into data for the stage production team, riggers or aerialists alike.

The technology for rigging so many performers was also not available at that time. Many innovations have come to fruition since the original concept. While we created the keypoint animation for the aerial renderings from 2007-2009, they were painstaking to produce. We needed to create in a program that could communicate with TAIT's Navigator System. That is the only fly system which can actually control suspension with fixed points in 3D space, enabling us to make mass morphing shapes, with humans, masterfully orchestrated by automated winches. And TAIT only built their rehearsal center 9 years ago. It is as if we were waiting for audiences to want more than illusion and pure entertainment. The pandemic happened and now I believe unity consciousness and the concepts of oneness are ripe.

Can you explain why you consider this animation component to be 'ground-breaking'?

We are going to fully animate a first-time ever aerial piece with 100 performers using the gaming software, Unity. This animation serves three main purposes. The first purpose is to document data points in 3D to automate the rigging positions for 100 aerialists for 23 minutes of choreography. The second purpose is to create a tool to train and teach each performer their respective choreographies wherever each person is located without requiring everybody to be physically in the same place for any length of time. The third purpose is as a visualization template for the head choreographer in the creation process as well as an assistance in conducting rehearsals in a 3D environment (xyz plane). The applications of dance and this software are endless and it is frankly, exciting!

How did you resolve issues with animating in 3D?

From 2013-2016, I collaborated with Paul Siegel, from DigitalDouble in Washington State, to author a 'language' of poses that could then be used in creating longer phrases. We documented aerial poses using motion capture and then designed, in Maya, 186 aerial poses constituting a portion of our library. They contain a myriad of actual performable movement paths when linking one pose into another. Some can only be performed in the air, some near the ground with one member touching the ground, and others go from the ground to the air and vice versa. From 2016-2019 utilizing that library of poses, we further developed 25 choreographic sequences.

In the spring of 2020, NYU Shanghai faculty and students in the disciplines of Interactive Media Arts and Dance spent 10 months creating the animated 23-minute piece using the Unity gaming software. During this period, we coded to generate the flow and mass shapes of the entire piece. Then, we key-framed the piece to give it the appearance of naturally occurring flows, curves and ebbs, as seen in nature.

It is worth noting that none of the 25 Maya-generated sequences could be utilized to inform the final model created in Unity.

These three aerialists based in Shanghai and seen in the film, Beings of Light, learned all 25 of the choreographic sequences. Donning the NP suits, they enabled us to document and preserve the choreographic sequences for later use and input using Unity.

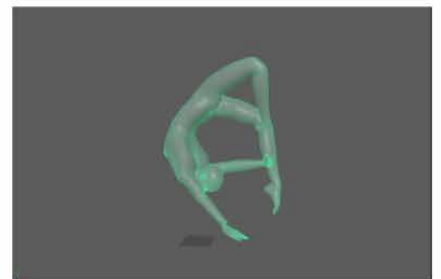
Where does the project stand now?

Currently, the entire 23-minute piece has been set with 'capsules,' representing each dancer's position mid-air and synchronized to Eric Harper's composed music, in Unity. We are inputting the individual dance sequences for each performer now. In designing this animated piece, our focus is on the overall sculptures created mid-air throughout the piece, the synchronization of the moving points with the music, and the individual choreographies of each performer on their own suspension line.

Once completed, we will test this final version using TAIT's Navigator System, train the aerialists with our tool, and perform a section of what has been animated.

Why did you choose the gaming software Unity?

We chose Unity because it allows us to move entire sections, replicate and alter sequences, copy and paste morphing combinations easily. Unity is a software that provides a platform for not only coding, but also key-framing when necessary. It allows us to design in consideration of all viewing angles, assuming the audience surrounds the stage.



How was the choreography constructed step by step?

The live show has four parts: Sound, Light, Movement, Flight. I'll speak to the last act, Flight. First, we used motion capture to construct our library of poses to create all choreographic sequences. But that data was not usable within Unity. So our three aerialists in Shanghai learned those sequences and we captured the data using the Neuron Perception suits. We skinned those models dancing all 25 sequences to replace the capsules in the full animation.

The red capsule version and the final version with individual choreographies implemented will be sent to TAIT. They will convert our Unity program into their Navigator Program which will download all 138,00 positions (23 min *60 seconds *100 performers). This informs the placement of each winch lifting and lowering each performer throughout the entire piece.

Then each aerialist, in their home locality, will learn their individual choreography for the 23 minutes. We then will bring all 100 aerialists together to practice their sequences, in harnesses, with the winches moving along the designated points outlined in the full animation. That becomes the finale of the One Show.

What are your criteria for selecting the 100 aerialists?

They must have incredible core strength, can spin without experiencing nausea, fly with grace, be flexible, demonstrate good kinesthetic memory, be team players, know how to encourage each other, be able to change their breathing, and understand how important each of their own personal journeys are in creating the foundation of oneness. You know they come from so many different cultures and backgrounds, and many have chosen to become an aerialist after overcoming many personal challenges in life. It is not just about flying; it is their collaboration which also creates a world-first. They empower me to push through barriers and stand up for what I believe in. I know their stories and talent will inspire others, too.

Compared with traditional choreography, what difficulties and challenges do you think aerial dance choreography encounters?

When we are on the floor learning dance, traditionally, we feel the weight of our bodies and are acclimated to working in that sphere. We also hear the music and respond rhythmically. We feel those around us and are supported by their movements, naturally. We are accustomed to being upright and walking on the earth.

When we go aerial, the sphere of reference and gravity is altered. We are spinning upside down, must keep our spine relaxed in many positions, pelvis tucked in, and core engaged, while dancing. The center of gravity, and therefore spin, is determined by the positions and breathing of the flyer. The body and mind must create new bearings in order to fly well, for such a long period of time, within a group moving 360 degrees around them.

Every single aerialist needs to keep their own choreography in order for the mass morphing choreography to be realized in an ideal fashion. Ensuring each aerialist can learn their choreography in relationship to the music is important and challenging.

Also, the amount of space we need to dance is significantly increased. Each aerialist can sustain a funnel of up to 5 m in width in the horizontal plane with being suspended in the vertical plane. That is a huge amount of space needed to safely rig, suspend, and move 100 dancing aerialists.

At what stage is the One Show progressing? On a global scale, is there a similar aerial performance in the past?

We have completed auditions, mass morphing in Unity, completed the individual choreographies and done smaller scale rehearsals in Shanghai and New York. We have selected very capable and inventive choreographers who understand the themes of our show. We have composed the music, engineered the stage and its production elements. We have the rigging and suspension and decided who will execute it.

I personally do not know of a show that has done the same thing in the past. It is not just about the number of souls mid-air, it is about what they symbolically represent, how they move in the air, and why they are coming down to us.

When will the One Show be staged?

It will be staged when the investors invest. All the components are ready.

What attracts you most about aerial dancing?

Freedom. I feel alive and free as a human being when moving fast through the air. I feel interconnected and masterful when dancing with others mid-air. It speaks to me as a multi-dimensional creature. Our divine nature, so to speak. Dancing within a two-point harness is challenging to the body, but being in the air, dancing, is a metaphor for possibility, for lifting oneself up and out into the ethers. Our spirits and energy are big, although invisible. Aerial dance on a two-point harness is a manifestation of that energy with movement, intention, and beauty. Maybe you could say, for me, aerial dance in mass is about our collective future and moving in harmony with it.



Combining tech and art, what concept do you want to convey through The One Show? What kind of visual shock does it bring?

The One Show is a symbol for what the future needs- cooperation, a celebration of our diversity, a platform for community where we listen and respect one another, where folks are trained in every city we perform in. It is a platform exploring the concept of unity in diversity, the power of collaboration, moving beyond tolerance into interconnection and interdependence. It is not only about entertainment, but also the difficult process of creation itself, on many levels.

We are creating a new art form using technology, but I would not say the show is about the technology. We utilize technology to create tools for use by a myriad of individuals from very different backgrounds and skill sets who live all over the globe.

The show can also be filmed using Virtual Reality cameras which capture everything in 3D for experiencing each facet of the dances and musical performances by individual viewers. If audiences cannot see it live, they can watch it using VR goggles.

So we have touched on the suspension and technology, can you also discuss the exhibition?

Yes. Inspired by the aerial rehearsals seen in the film *Beings of Light*, we also created a physical installation of hundreds of 3D printed unique poses, carefully suspended from rotating grids to appear as moving shapes when seen from afar. It is an exploration into the hundreds of curves, twists and turns embedded in the moment of each movement, mid-air.

What is the meaning of the name?

Beings of Light. We are all beings of light, however you want to interpret that. The incredible complexity of human forms aligns with the light that shines invisible yet intrinsic in each of us. And this lightness is so tranquil and subtle that the aerialists seamlessly flow, opening a continuity of endless transformations and evolutions.

We crystalized time to examine each of these curves and angles, stretching this second out to fill up the entire space of two rooms. Each suspended translucent pose, in this installation, is 'performing' a unique set sequence, and the overall choreography is interwoven to create a sensation of continuous flow. If you trace the stream of her movements and connect to the adjacent dancers, you will discover a variety of themes and variations.

These movements are all captured from actual aerial movements seen in the screendance *Beings of Light*.





The One Show almost happened in Central Park in New York City. What happened there?

We called it ONE at Central Park and the year was 2013. It had tremendous energy behind it. Discovery Channel wanted to document the process. Godaddy wanted in as a sponsor. BBC wanted in. Huffington Post ran an article. We held auditions and aerialists, pole dancers and modern dancers came from Italy, Australia, Germany, Canada, and from all over the United States. We selected our 100. Central Park Conservancy was on board and gave the green light. Our sponsors were in too-- if we could raise \$100,000 on our own. People pledged online via Kickstarter from all over the world. And many of those folks we did not know and had never met. We had raised \$99,065 via our campaign and were in the final stretch with 3 days to go. Our interns had started to celebrate and I told them they could take off as it was nearing the fourth of July weekend. I said, "We have pledges lined up for our last several days. Go party."

But something unimaginable happened. Sarah Guyard-Gillot of the Cirque-de-Soleil show, Kà, plummeted to her slow and agonizing death during a live show June 29, 2013 in Las Vegas. She was not one of our aerialists, but the aerialist global community is quite small. There had not been a death or accident like this in 32 years. We cried and felt so depleted by this news.

Our kickstarter campaign had 3 more days left and our sponsors wanted out due to optics. Everyone was horrified that a seven-step safety system could fail and what was considered safe was now not. I was sleepless for days. I knew what had to be done, but I could not bring myself to do it. I would have to relinquish the Kickstarter campaign because we had promised all those who gave \$100 or more free entrance to our show and for those who gave \$1000 or more VIP tickets plus backstage access.

I had to let it 'fail.' I thanked our sponsors for their time, relinquished our contracts for the October 2013 show in Central Park. It was over and I needed the grace to walk away. But it was like sacrificing your child to God. I could not bear it. And yet, there was no way forward in our project at that moment.

We have discussed the many challenges for the show, but what about you personally?

"No daughter of mine is going to be a dancer."

My dad made it pretty clear I could be a doctor or lawyer, and if I really did not want that, I could get a PhD. I wanted to go to Julliard when I was 10 and my dad and mom nixed the idea. I did pre-med in college, majored in Psychology--- but still managed to fill my time with West African dance, ballet, contemporary, jazz and choreography. I performed in the dance concerts and just loved it. When I moved to China in 1997, the conversation of graduate school was put on hold until I was to supposed to return in 1998. But I did not return to the USA. I auditioned at the Beijing Dance Academy, got in, and my father cut ties with me for many years.

What is the end game with choreography?

Dance and choreography are, for me, expressions of creativity and the soul. Once you start dancing, it is hard to stop. It is the power to create from your one unique body, mind and spirit. These three aspects working in harmony create a flow or a channel for perspectives, for narratives, for whatever comes through at the moment. With choreography, you have permission and trust of others to work with their unique bodies and minds and may I say, spirit? Sometimes, we just stay present and create from that moment. There is no end game, but we can set the choreography and embody it. And that communicates intuitively and quickly without too much intellectualism getting in the way.

Can you talk about some of the catalyzing forces shaping your own multi-cultural experiences? Why is this aspect so important for you?

Two months before graduation from high school Up With People came to Galveston, Texas to perform. It was a magical experience. We hosted some of the performers and also got to witness their rehearsals. My parents would not let me leave with or join Up With People, but I wanted to. After graduation, I spent the summer in Mexico where I had the opportunity to perform with a Bahá'í Song and Dance group called Paz Mueve (Peace Moves). We travelled to Merida in the Yucatan and stayed with and performed with the Mayan Indians near the pyramid sites. It was at this moment, something clicked in me. How easy it is to be close to others in this way!

After college, I was invited to choreograph for Ocean Waves, where we traveled throughout China's northeastern provinces and performed with local dancers in huge public arenas. And in the summer of 1997, I moved to Guizhou, China, poor as ever, and had the chance to embody the history of the Miao ethnic minority while performing their dances with them. You know they don't have a written language and all past significant events are communicated through dance? This opened the doors for applying to the Beijing Dance Academy and later to dance professionally in China.

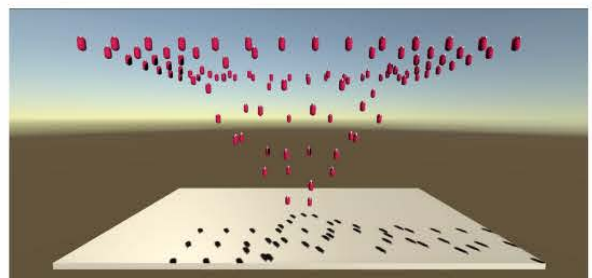
In 2007, I was invited to teach at New York University where my students and I got to travel to, learn and perform dances with local communities in Cuba, the United Arab Emirates, and China. I also visited Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Madagascar and South Africa to document and observe their dance forms.

We do not need to speak each other's lingual languages. We speak body. Secondly, it is easy to communicate in this way and people remain open and vulnerable with each other when moving and making movement.





Yes, we have arrived at a time in history, when we can connect to anyone using technology. But it does not and cannot replace experiences had with people in real time. What we do with our own bodies, make with our bodies, and demonstrate in our bodies is powerful. Why are we moved when we see or participate in live performances? Because we feel everything.

Where does the One Show play into your personal goals?

I would say it is the number one goal. The time is now. And the world needs this.



The One Show & Beings of Light

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