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Xclaim Dance Company's latest work explores the heavens on aerial silks

By [Bill Mayr](#) For *The Columbus Dispatch* Thursday September 19, 2013 8:19 AM

When she was 15, Kelsey Keller saw her future.

At a Cirque du Soleil performance in Cleveland, the teenager saw dancers performing above the floor while suspended from sheets of silklike fabric.

Her imagination was captured.

"I've been wanting to do (aerial) ever since," she said.

Now a member of the Xclaim Dance Company, Keller, 27, will do just that when the troupe performs its new production, "Ethereal."

The show will run Friday through Sunday at the Christian Assembly Activity Center on the North Side.

Xclaim dances in a jazz-fusion style. Keller has been working with silks for two years, while Xclaim's other dancers started training with them in the spring.

Silks are long lengths of specialty fabrics hung from rigging. Performers climb the silks to perform movements and drops. They control their movement through their strength and by the friction created by wrapping the silks around their limbs and torso.

Xclaim's aerial rig extends up to 25 feet.

"It's just you and the silk," said Mariah Layne French, Xclaim founder and artistic director. "It takes a lot of courage and concentration and strength. It's bold."

Working with the fabrics in midair requires hand, forearm and upper-body strength, said dancer Laura Schoessler.

"It's very much like acrobatics," she said. "We're fusing it with dance, and that's what makes it cool."

The concert promises to be exciting and intriguing.

"Ethereal" will explore "the dimensions of heaven, whether physical or spiritual. The work explores and challenges what those perceptions might be," French said.

Beyond the visual elements, the dances choreographed by French and other members of the company pursue the loftier goal of looking at heaven.

Schoessler choreographed a piece about angels, which, she said, often are viewed as "a little soft, a cherub kind of thing. But I also see them as warrior beings: powerful heavenly creatures. They are still good, but they are very strong warriors."

Dancers performing with aerial silks will add to the effect and serve as a suitable metaphor for humans exploring the heavens. Seven of the concert's 10 dancers will perform in the air; the concert will contain seven works that examine heavenly elements ranging from angels to satellites. The dances also address the physical space of the heavens, "the atmosphere, the orbit of planets," French said. "And that has a degree of mystery about it, as well. There are a lot of things we don't understand about the physical aspects of space."

Rather than preach, the dances raise questions.

"I would say it has been a bit of a philosophical quest," French said. "Kind of questioning the traditional church thinking about what the kingdom of heaven is."

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Kelsey Keller rehearsing for "Ethereal" on fabric hung from rigging