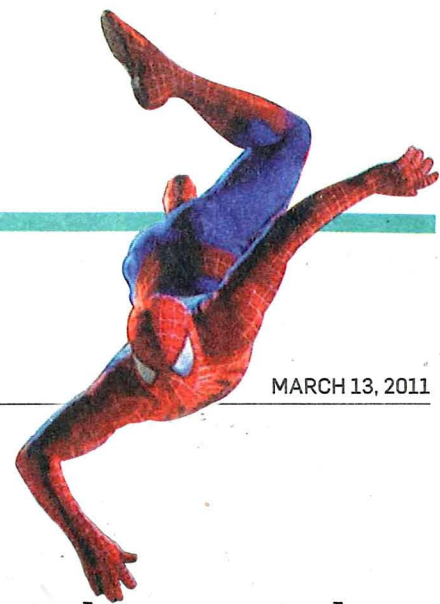


## ARTS + ESCAPES

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THE SUNDAY STAR-LEDGER

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### STAGE

# Spinning 'Spider-Man'

Choreographer created show's stunts and dances

By Robert Johnson  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

NEW YORK — Daniel Ezralow's father hoped he would become an accountant.

But a career as a CPA probably wouldn't have been nearly as exciting, or as challenging, as designing the web-slinging choreography for "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark" on Broadway.

"It's been a wonderful experience doing 'Spider-Man,'" says Ezralow, 53, who grew up to be a choreographer, not a numbers-cruncher — and whom original director Julie Taymor imported from Los Angeles to stage the spectacular aerial stunts in the \$65 million production.

The show has had its official opening delayed six times, most recently last week, when the show's bow was pushed forward from Tuesday to sometime in June, and director Taymor pushed out of the production.

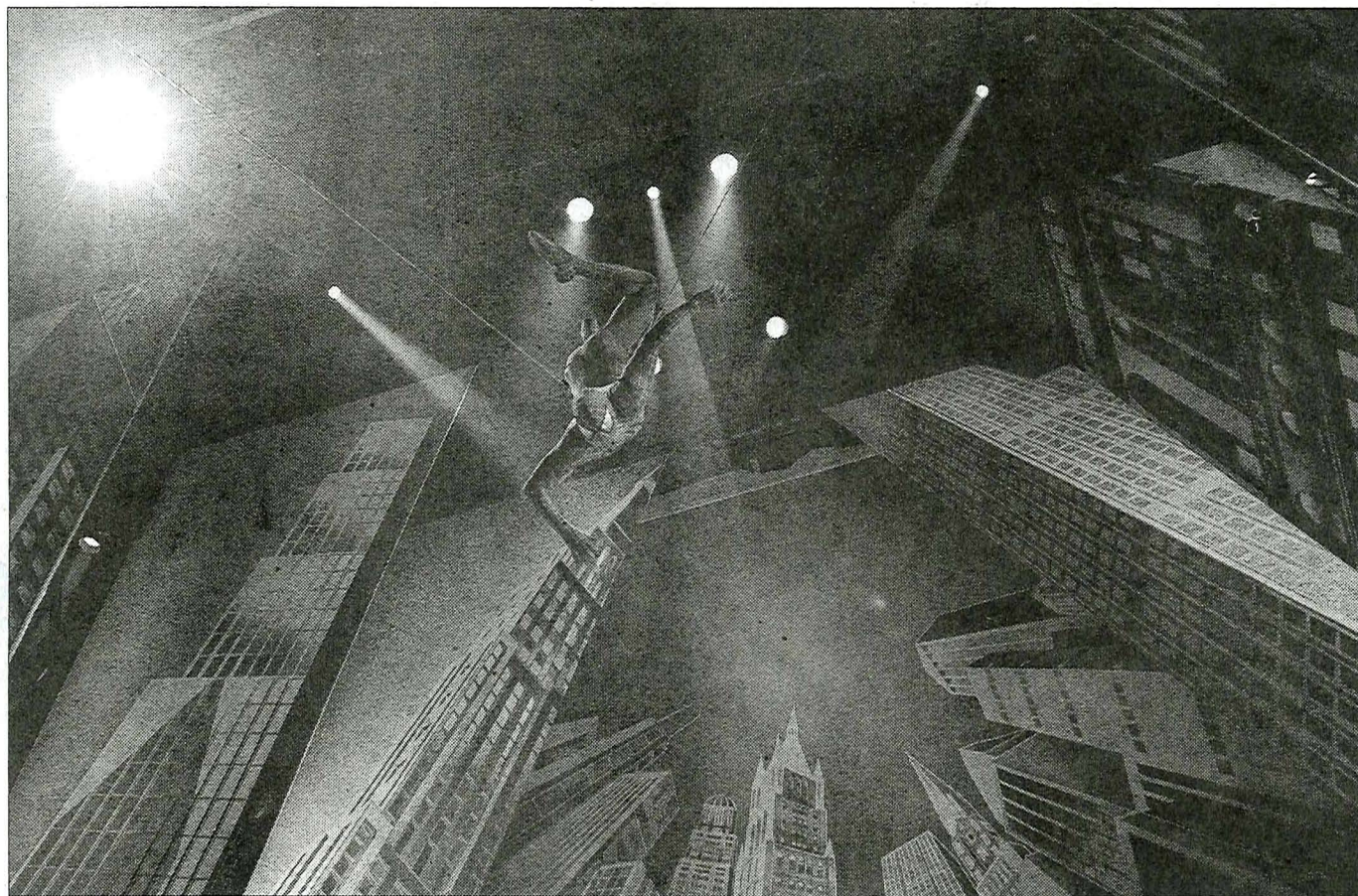
But Ezralow will stay with the production — and its choreography and stunt designs that have been seen as the show played more than 100 "preview" performances to packed houses since November. Whether or not it's officially open, "Spider-Man" is already the biggest show of Broadway's spring season.

Thousands have already seen the aerial stunts Ezralow created, as well as the relatively tame dance numbers in which the actors get to keep their feet on the ground.

Citing the thrill of working again with Taymor, with whom he worked on the 2007 film "Across the Universe," Ezralow goes on to praise the stimulating collaborations that are typical of Broadway. He mentions Eiko Ishioka (costumes), George Tsypin (set design), composers Bono and the Edge, and flying buddies Scott Rogers (aerial design) and Jaquie Paquin (aerial rigging). "These are all really fantastic people at the top of their game," the choreographer says.

Ezralow has been working on "Spider-Man" off and on for nearly five years, and this has not been just any old project, he adds.

"This has been a life-changing experience," he says. "It has taken me to a new level in my art and creativity."



A scene from "Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark." Choreographer Daniel Ezralow, below, is staying with the troubled musical.

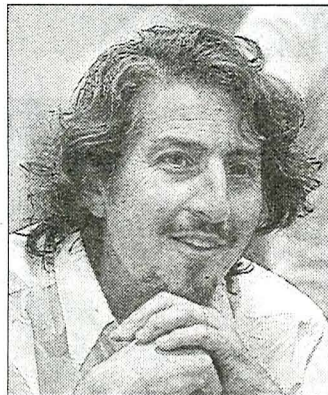
As for the accidents, Ezralow says, "They're horrible. They're always horrible."

During "Turn Off the Dark's" extended tryout period, one stuntman, Kevin Aubin, suffered a pair of broken wrists, and stunt-double Christopher Tierney landed in the hospital with multiple injuries after he tumbled nearly 30 feet from an extended platform into the orchestra pit.

#### HUMAN ERROR

Speaking of Tierney, a close associate for many years, Ezralow says, "It's a tragedy that I will never forget." But he adds that what happened to Tierney was the result of human error, not a flaw in the production's design. "It was this ridiculous, freak thing that someone didn't connect a line," Ezralow says. And the choreographer vows that Tierney will recover — and return to the show.

Ezralow is no stranger to aerial work. A veteran of the physical-theater companies Momix and ISO Dance, he says that another dancer, Jamey Hampton, was a mountain-climber who taught him to rappel. Harnesses and bungee cords were a part of



ISO's repertoire in the 1980s, used in works such as "Night Thoughts," "Captain Tenacity" (a solo with a comic book theme) and "Light of a Beautiful World."

"Every opera house we'd tour to in Italy, we'd try to find a balcony to rappel off of," Ezralow says. The choreographer used bungee cords again, and introduced a stuntman's "twisty belt" when he staged the finale for singer Ricky Martin's "Cup of Life" world tour.

During his own performing career, Ezralow reveals, he suffered injuries both common and uncommon. He tore the cartilage in his knee while dancing with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, and during a performance of the bungee

cord piece "Night Thoughts," with ISO, an errant pulley caught Ezralow's long hair, ripping out a patch of his scalp. During the same, ill-fated event, the rig struck him and bloodied his face. Another time, while demonstrating a "helicopter" lift in class, Ezralow's partner failed to pull in her elbows, and the resulting gash in his forehead required nine stitches.

"Dancers are constantly out with injuries," Ezralow says, comparing them to star athletes. "I mean, look at Kobe Bryant: The guy is iced from head to toe after every game."

Ezralow says that nothing quite prepared him for the challenges of the aerial work in "Spider-Man," however. Scott Rogers, who had coordinated the stunts for a couple "Spider-Man" films, suggested adapting the system that allows TV cameras to zoom to any point in an NFL game. In the theater, this "four-point" rig allows actors to fly at high speed in any direction, and used in conjunction with additional flying tracks, it permits the choreographer to create layered effects.

We're a long way from Mary Martin, that pixie-ish

projectile who flew across the stage from wing to wing in "Peter Pan," and even from the swooping, Tarzan-like descents of the stage troupe De La Guarda.

"We're doing something much more sophisticated," Ezralow says, explaining that "computer software determines the tension, the speed and the accuracy of all those four lines that are coming from four different points in the house. Up-down, right-left, forward-back, whatever you want to do, we can place you on a dime," he says.

#### BODY LANGUAGE

Working with the flying rig was only part of Ezralow's task, however. As the show's choreographer, he also needed to develop Spider-Man's body language, which meant adapting the two-dimensional world of comic books, where anything is possible, to a three-dimensional space where the laws of real-world physics hold actors in thrall.

Ezralow had to invent novel shapes and movements, but subtly, so he wouldn't betray the image familiar to thousands of Spidey fans. The vocabulary would include

Spider-Man's typically elongated crouch, plus detailed movements such as "how he used his fingers, how he used his elbows, and the arch in his back," Ezralow says.

Chris Daniels, who acted as Tobey Maguire's stunt double in the Spider-Man movies, came in to demonstrate poses; and in addition to reading hundreds of comic books in the Marvel Masterworks series ("A lot of grown men read comics, you know that?" Ezralow says a tad defensively), Scott McCloud's text "Understanding Comics" taught the dance maker how a comic book story carries from frame to frame.

But you can't really call yourself a choreographer until you've created a dance for a woman with eight legs — make that a whole ensemble of Spider-Women. That's what happens when the minions of Spidey's nemesis, Arachne, come scrambling in a second-act number called "Deeply Furious." Ezralow also staged the astonished reaction on crowded city streets, when Spider-Man appears overhead, plus a disco number and the fashion show for Super-Villains on parade. He also created the threatening military march when the Pentagon seeks to enlist the services of mad scientist Norman Osborn, soon to become Spidey's arch-enemy, the Green Goblin.

All this, plus more traditional Broadway fare, such as the dance for secretaries at "The Daily Planet," who roll across the newsroom in their desk chairs, and the aggressive stepping, à la "Stomp the Yard," of the schoolyard bullies who threaten milquetoast Peter Parker before a radioactive spider bite puts some muscle into the young man's life.

"After Momix and ISO, I decided that the only kind of dance company I really wanted to have was a project-based company," says Ezralow, explaining why he opted for the freelance life. "The idea that I could go to Broadway, and I could do opera, and I could do film, and I could even do television and commercials, and come back to the concert stage really appealed to me," he says.

Certified public accounting? Not so much.

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