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Dance troupe is game for some heavy lifting
From left: Dina Fanai, Jil Stifel, Jeff Davis, Peter Kope, and Michele De La Reza in 'Games of Steel.' From left: Dina Fanai, Jil Stifel, Jeff Davis, Peter Kope, and Michele De La Reza in "Games of Steel."
By Terry Byrne
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A collection of playground equipment, including a seesaw, a slide, and some jungle gym pieces, forms the unlikely set for the twisted dance/rock opera "Games of Steel."

"We started with the idea of using Archimedes's simple machines," says Michele de la Reza, co-artistic director of Pittsburgh-based Attack Theatre, which brings "Games of Steel" to the Cutler Majestic Theatre tonight through Sunday. "Then we gathered our musicians and dancers together to brainstorm. Our neighbor here is Red Star Ironworks, and we thought we might work with them on props. Our philosopher in residence [University of Pittsburgh history and philosophy of science professor Peter Machamer] was explaining

game theory to us, which he says is not about who wins, but about who loses the least. Suddenly that became a great metaphor for a story about a game show, for relationships, everything."

Whoa. A dance company with a philosopher in residence? Choreography that involves Archimedes's simple machines and uses heavy steel pieces as props? A game-show story? Who are these people?

"Ideally, we're a mix of theater, dance, and rock music," says de la Reza on the phone from her studio before heading to Boston for a residency at Emerson College. "In our company's 14-year evolution we've leaned toward what we like to call an image narrative. We have 20 versions of a script for a work that has no words, but the music's lyrics help lead the story for the dancers."

In "Games of Steel," three contestants compete in games involving a ring toss, a lever, an inclined plane, and a balancing act on a seesaw. Peter Kope, Attack Theatre's co-artistic director and de la Reza's husband, plays the manipulative show host, with support from a four-piece rock band, in a game that's been described as "Mad Max meets urban 'Survivor.' "

"I didn't expect the Mad Max comparison," Kope says with a laugh, "although we were going for a kind of end-of-time look, and with my spiked hair I was thinking more like Billy Idol or the Heat Miser [from the animated film 'The Year Without a Santa Claus']."

Attack Theatre is part of a dance/music theatrical wave that includes Blue Man Group, "Stomp," "De La Guarda," and "Squonk," for which de la Reza and Kope created the choreography. But Kope says the company's interest in grounding music and dance in a story makes it a little different.

"I think it's important to anchor the audience in a level of narrative," says Kope. "Not that it's crystal clear. Everyone sees different things, but the story line, the dance, and the music all have to work together to create a dangerous edge," he says. "The games have that gladiator perspective where the stakes are high and if you lose, you die."

The company's ability to alternate between the silly and the sinister comes through in little touches, Kope says. "A lot of our movements and narrative emerge out of the steel pieces, and we've built in lots of subtle references to the process of making steel," he says. "We live and work in Pittsburgh, which has such a tradition of steel. Economically the city may have moved beyond the industry, but steel is part of the soul of the town. . . . When the metal is molten and hot, it listens, it's passionate, but when it cools it becomes quite strong and stable. It's a wonderful metaphor to work into the dance."

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