

## metro stage

# Hangin' tough



Assume the position ... *Spiral Rhythms'* elite dancers make strenuous moves look effortless.

Photo: Edwina Pickles

she competed for the ACT and nationally until stopped by an injury at 16. She later coached gymnastics for 10 years and worked as a nationally accredited judge for eight years.

"When I stopped, there wasn't really anything to do – nothing like this – where I can use my skills as a gymnast," Phan says. "I did pole dancing at hen's nights and I loved the skills. But I wasn't interested in doing it in a traditional form."

Gymnastics gave her the ability to know the angle of a limb and recognise which muscle groups were needed to reach a specific position but the strength needed for pole dancing has lifted even her fitness level.

"It looks easy because, from the performance element, you've got to make it look flawless," Phan says. "If we were struggling and grunting to show you how hard the skills are to perform, it wouldn't look very good."

Judging by last year's show, which featured the women as superheroes, the deception that hides the difficulty is successful.

This year's program promises to, as Critelli puts it, take things up a notch. Three guest choreographers – Rani Seckold, Melisa Gowen and Shari Veitch – have been brought in to add polish to a show that will mix the arcs and lines of ballet while incorporating the artistic licence enabled by the addition of poles.

The program also includes more complex shapes as the dancers perform in tandem.

Accompanying the women will be three divers from the Royal Australian Navy and another former gymnast. Despite their fitness, the men found the athleticism of pole dancing a challenge, Critelli says. For a move called a "flag", the dancers' bodies are horizontal and held aloft by their arms alone.

"When they'd seen us do flags on the pole, they kind of sidled up to the pole, trying to see if they had the strength to do it as well."

At least initially, they didn't.

**SPIRAL RHYTHMS**  
Tonight and Saturday, 8pm,  
CarriageWorks, Eveleigh,  
1300 723 038, \$60.

Pole dancers are taken to their physical limits in *Spiral Rhythms*, writes **Conrad Walters**.

Forget about the Cross, its sticky-seated clubs and the high heels that strut around a spotlight stage.

Pole dancing has outgrown the bleary-eyed descent as Friday night stumbles into Saturday morning.

Less than a decade ago, the dance form sashayed down Williams Street and into gyms as the latest health craze, one that merged sexiness with fitness. Today's elite pole dancers hold their limbs taut around the chrome-coated bar and lift their chins high for art.

You might say pole dancing has

evolved, which explains the name of Jennifer Critelli's Pole Evolution Dance Company, 18 female dancers and gymnasts who will assemble at CarriageWorks in Eveleigh tonight for the first of two shows.

The 2010 event – the group performed in 2008 and last year at the same venue – is closer to Critelli's original vision for a show that merges the strength of pole dancing with the fluidity of modern dance.

"Five years ago, pole dancing was coming out as a new way to get fit," Critelli says.

"Between then and now, the

standard has become quite elite, so now we're able to do more with the girls and the skills they have, so it gives more creative freedom."

Critelli, who is the company's founder, artistic director and a principal dancer, has a long background in classical dance. She has performed with the West Australian Ballet Company and has been a ballet teacher registered at the Royal Academy of Dance.

Similarly, pole dancing's shift from eyebrow-raiser to credible art form has taken time. The transition was helped in large part by popular television programs that showed

style without sleaze. One of those was *Australia's Got Talent*, in which three Brisbane pole dancers drew a standing ovation from judge Dannii Minogue. Minogue told the nation, "I went to do a [pole] fitness class and it was so hard – you have no idea." (Fellow judge Kyle Sandilands was temporarily speechless.)

The members of Pole Evolution Dance Company are the elite from Critelli's fitness centre, Studio Verve, says Thuy Anh Phan, another of the company's principal dancers and its associate artistic director.

Phan is a former gymnast who specialised in horizontal bars when