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## NEWS

### Tetra's Gizmo helps actor fly

By Mark Hasiuk-Staff writer

Next Wednesday, the 10th annual Tetra Society of North America's Gizmo Awards will showcase the many ingenious inventions created by local engineers and technicians to give disabled people more fulfilling lives.

Tetra is an organization founded 19 years ago by Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan that provides customized assistive devices to people with disabilities.

One of Tetra's more fantastic recent inventions is a "standing brace" custom-designed for Vancouver actor James Sanders, a quadriplegic who is performing in a two-man play called Skydive about two brothers on a skydiving excursion gone wrong. During the entire play, Sanders and fellow actor Bob Frazer will be suspended above the stage as they "freefall" from an airplane and engage in an animated discussion about their lives and their relationship.

"We want people to experience theatre like they never have before," said Sanders, a 36-year-old actor, writer and producer who has been confined to a wheelchair since he was 19. "They'll be looking up instead of looking down. It will be a real spectacle, but what's most important is that we tell a really good story."

The production took more than two years to develop as Tetra technicians went through much trial and error to come up with a suitable device for Sanders.

The original design saw Saunders, who has 80 per cent use of arms, strapped into a seat attached to an ES Dance Instrument-a long pole on a wheeled base typically used by dancers to create the illusion of floating. The seat was painfully uncomfortable for Sanders while the Tetra crew, which included physiotherapists from the G.F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre, worked on a new design using vertical bars and strapping.

Sanders said this design was even more uncomfortable than the first, so Tetra engineers developed a plaster orthodic cast that covered him from feet to chest. A mannequin made from the cast molding helped form a fiberglass shell that eventually fit Sander's body like a glove.



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The shell, which will be hidden under Sander's clothing, is attached to a brace that hangs from the ES Dance Instrument 16-feet above the stage.

"It's amazing," said Sanders. "One of the things I experience when I use my wheelchair to get around is that I'm always on a lower plane. With this device, it's not just a matter of pretending to be on an even playing field, but that I go beyond where anyone else is."

Duane Geddes, executive director of the Tetra Society, said the Gizmo Awards shed light on the volunteer work of Tetra volunteers around the country, including the approximately 35 engineers and technicians in the Lower Mainland who help disabled people become more independent. He said the standing brace designed for Sanders epitomizes the cooperative spirit of the Tetra Society.

"That is a real collaborative work of Tetra volunteers who all came together to make it possible for James to basically fly," he said. "I don't know if there is anything else that can demonstrate what Tetra is all about better than this project."

The Gizmo Awards are Nov. 1, 6:30 p.m. at the Rocky Mountaineer Station. Admission is free.

Skydive premieres Jan. 26 at the Push International Performing Arts Festival in Vancouver.

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