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Extreme Physicality: An Interview with Abby Zbikowski

by Carolyn Merritt

*Carolyn Merritt chats with Abby Zbikowski, director of [Abby Z and the New Utility](#), following the recent premiere of her evening-length work, *Abandoned Playground*, at Abrons Arts Center in New York City. Raised in southern New Jersey, Zbikowski holds a BFA from Temple University, an MFA from The Ohio State University, and she is currently Assistant Professor of Dance at University of Illinois. Drawing on her practice of tap, hip hop, and West African dance forms, Zbikowski creates work that pushes dancers to their physical limits, again and again, in a relentless exploration of the body's possibilities. The result is a brutal celebration of human resiliency.*

View the trailer for *Abandoned Playground* [here](#). Read reviews of the work from Siobhan Burke in the *New York Times* [here](#) and Eva Yaa Asantewaa [here](#).

Can you start by talking about your journey from Temple [BFA] to Ohio State [MFA] to University of Illinois [Assistant Professor] and some of your influences along the way?

At Temple, I was just beginning to understand what dance could be. [Charles Anderson](#) was one of my first teachers. I still talk to him and may perform with him this summer. I worked with Charles and [Vincent Mantsoe](#) on *Tar* in 2006, and trained in Mantsoe's technique, a form that was about spirit, resiliency, and pushing your body to do highly rhythmic, athletic, coded materials drawing from [South African] township social dances, Zulu traditional dances, martial arts, and Martha Graham. That was one of my first professional dance experiences and it opened me up to a whole world of contemporary dance from Africa. Then I went to Ohio State for graduate school, where everything was pretty white—not cookie cutter, but very serene, cleaned up in a very particular way—and I worked with [Esther Baker-Tarpaga and Olivier Tarpaga](#), and we traveled to Madagascar. There's a spirit, a philosophy, an energy that I've always connected with in African dance forms. Even though my work looks different, there's a similar heartbeat.

I've also always had a punk influence, from working with [George Alley](#) in undergrad. Working with George and Charles laid the groundwork for my understanding of aesthetics and what was considered "other" [in particular, in terms of race and gender] in dance. I also trained with [Puremovement](#) dancers, and I did Illadelph Legends festivals at Temple.

But I didn't know what I could do or what dance could be for me. Everything I was exposed to felt very modern- or ballet-based. At Temple I saw [Elizabeth Streb](#) speak on a panel about politics and bodies. She showed a video of people running with the bulls, and of her sister-in-law (I think) working in a factory where she was the only body small enough to fit into this dangerous crevice to work on a part. I began to understand intersectionality—the similarities between class and race and gender, and how bodies are handled in dance. I started making work because I didn't have a home or anywhere to go as a dancer.

Your work is incredibly physically demanding. How do you prepare your dancers and yourself for this?

I don't think I prepare myself. I'm trying to lean into a space where my body and my subconscious have always been, but my conscious self didn't know there was value in it. I'm going back to these really primal needs to move—I learned to survive through the practice of dance. I can't put my dancers on full blast right away. It can't be for me. It has to be for them, so it's crucial to create a communal environment where they know that they need to be there for one another.

I'm just as physical as they are in the rehearsals. The work can be physically rigorous and it can be dangerous if not done correctly, so I would never ask somebody to do something I wouldn't do myself. I'm in it with them, and this creates a democratic space. The initial rehearsals are like training sessions, and throughout the process my role shifts towards life coach or athletic coach, because there's a psychological preparedness that needs to take place. It can be so dramatic to continuously initiate from this deep guttural space. A lot of emotions come out. There's a great deal of tears from everybody. They get to know their bodies in new intimate ways, and to understand the effects of physicality on emotions. You have to dig deep and use those interior muscles, and you have to shed the superficial because it's no longer efficient to use. That's a layer of the work that takes shape over time. The personality of the work emerges through this long, intense practice. And it's about practice, surviving the practice.

Siobhan Burke wrote about your work in the New York Times. Were you happy with this piece?

She really got the philosophy of my work, how it can be a metaphor for life in turbulence. I think it will take people a while to understand the physicality. My sense of timing and how I leverage my weight has been so shaped by Afro-diasporic forms, and there's a lot of footwork. But it's so much more than just a vocabulary. There's a sense of how dance should exist in the community. I position my work more like folk art meets soccer, rather than a proscenium modern dance piece. But it's not meant to be violent. It's not about beating the shit out of yourself. It's an exploration of what bodies can do. It's about keeping your composure while doing extreme things in a way that is not outwardly motivated, but there's a real meditative state happening internally.

Will you continue to work with this group?

We have some offers and I'm interested in continuing to show this. Because it is a hybrid work [with elements of sport and folk art], it can live in a lot of different communities. I wish I had enough money that people didn't have to pay to see it. Because I came from not understanding art. I came from that family, that world. There's something of perceptual interest, spectacle, that's new to look at, that people can't necessarily look away—in my work. I would like to interact with a range of communities that have different relationships to art, to the body, to dance. I'm interested by what continues to divide us.

That's a problem of dance. Well, the world in general, but also dance.

That's something I've always been interested in, the function of art in people's lives. What art does for me is like what riding my bike did for me when I was little—things just look different. Sometimes we get hung up on what stuff looks like, without being able to see past it to the full dimension of what it's doing.

When we talked briefly before Abandoned Playground, you told me about your schedule over the past 8-9 months, as you commuted on weekends from Illinois to New York to develop the work. Can you discuss your decision to do this? Was the work commissioned? And how did the physical toll impact you and play out in making the work?

I've been working on this piece for two and a half years. It was commissioned by the Abrons Arts Center after a colleague introduced me to Jay Wegman, the former curator there. Fiona Lundie and Jennifer Meckley, the two dancers I've worked with the longest, live in NYC and Philly, respectively. I knew I wanted to work with more people and to do that the new dancers would need to train consistently. We agreed that Fiona and Jenn would have extra training sessions during the week and on any weekends I was unable to travel to the East Coast. Also, it was cheaper for me to do the extra traveling than for them to do it. A generous Campus Research Board grant from the University of Illinois allowed me to fund the work, and in order to make everything happen, I had to work full time and travel on the weekends.

My schedule: I teach five days per week at the University of Illinois. On Friday I teach in the morning, I might have a faculty or undergrad meeting in the afternoon, then I would drive to Chicago, fly to Philly or New York, get in super late, try to get a couple hours of sleep before rehearsing six hours Saturday, sleep somewhere—maybe on a floor or a couch—wake up the next day and rehearse from at least 10:00 to 2:00 or 3:00 and then fly out of New York or Philly to go back to Chicago to then drive to Champaign. I tried to get in 11 hours of rehearsal on the weekend. I would get back to Champaign at 1:00 a.m. Sunday and then teach at 11:00 a.m. Monday. You feel my fight in the piece, even though it's not literally there. I was so driven to make the work because this group of people was so inspiring and giving. At some point when I had a weekend off, I thought, "Why am I doing this to myself?!" I love what Siobhan Burke wrote: "To stop would be to lose precious momentum." To take a break in the process, even for a weekend, would be a cop-out and it wouldn't be serving what we know we're capable of.

You talk a lot about dance as a survival strategy. Without getting too personal, or you can if you want to, what were you up against that dance helped you to overcome?

I grew up in a pretty violent environment, both emotionally and often physically. I internalized all of that, and from a young age dance was a way to release that tension. I was able to repurpose that tension into something less negative. I've suffered from pretty bad depression for most of my life, and dance was the way I was dealing with that stuff. I put a lot of pressure on dance to be the positive thing in my life. I know not everything is going to be positive all the time, but my living revolves around dance.

Your description of the preparation sounds almost similar to a vision quest, putting your body through an extreme physical process that is both about the process but also about a transformation. Does that resonate in any way?

On a biological level, there are endorphin rushes that are happening, taking us higher and higher, to be able to do the thing and not shut down and decompose emotionally and physically. But I think it is more related to my dance training, to a lot of the West African dance forms that I've studied and practiced, and also working with Vincent [Mantsoe]. I'm not a religious person, but I believe in human spirit and resiliency and energy, and I do believe the physicality releases that into the space in a palpable way.

How do you take these ideas and this way of working and thinking about dance into your own future, over time?

I don't know, it's a lot on the body and it's a lot on the emotions. But I think people want to keep working with me, they don't feel abused by it. Because there is a transformation that takes shape, and I think people are then curious about "well, what else can I do?" I'm also like a soccer mom in rehearsals. I bring oranges and juice boxes. I try to keep a lightness in the space. I try to support the dancers in a way that will allow them to push and feel safe in pushing, and feel like it's not because I'm demanding something of them that they don't want to do, but they feel like active participants in making the work. I'll list everybody that I ever work with as a collaborator because there's just so much of their DNA, their matter, soul, and guts in the work.

Abandoned Playground, Abby Z and the New Utility, Abrons Arts Center, New York, NY, April 13-15.

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