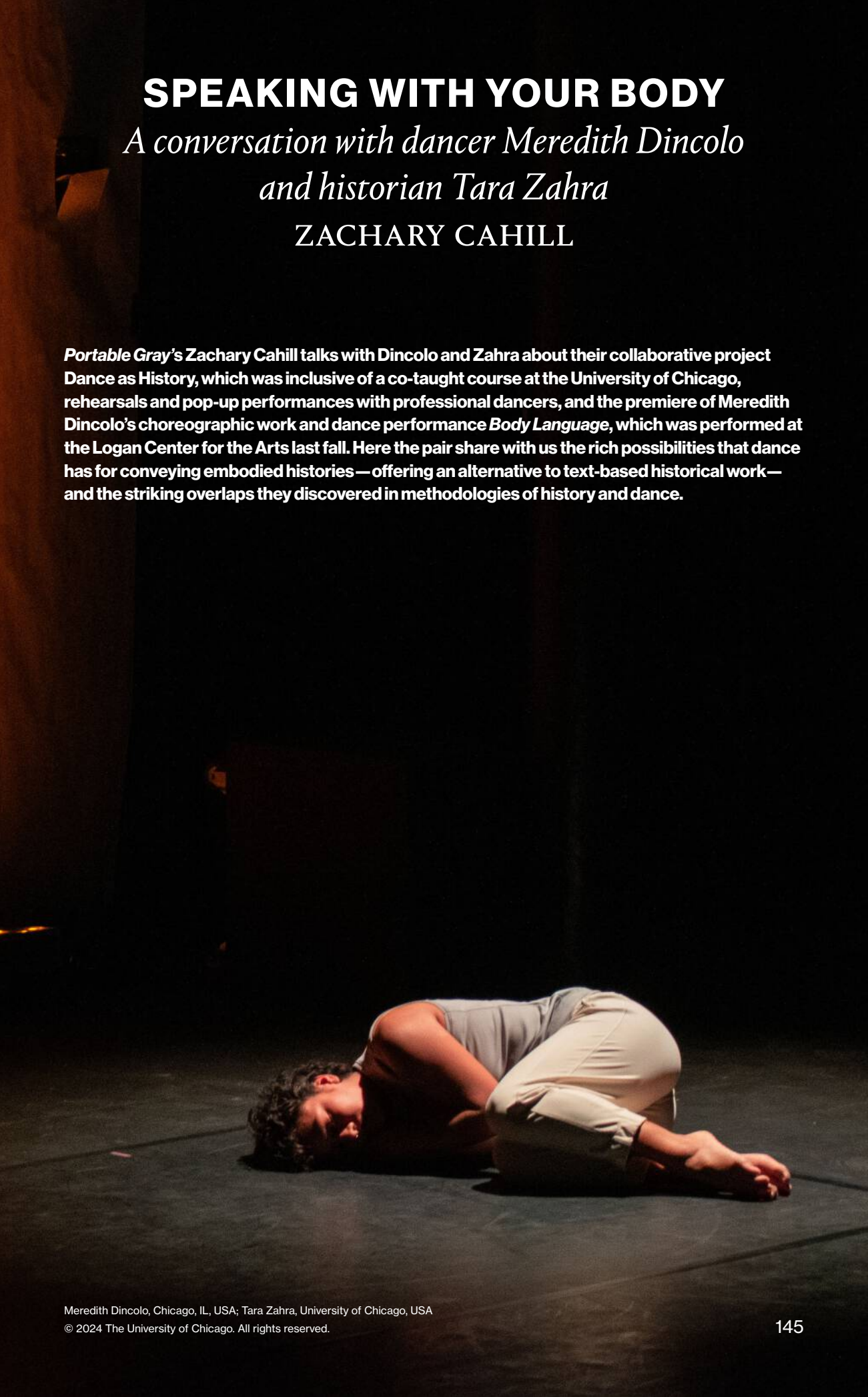
 Photo: Cassie Haas

SPEAKING WITH YOUR BODY

A conversation with dancer Meredith Dincolo and historian Tara Zahra

ZACHARY CAHILL

***Portable Gray*'s Zachary Cahill talks with Dincolo and Zahra about their collaborative project Dance as History, which was inclusive of a co-taught course at the University of Chicago, rehearsals and pop-up performances with professional dancers, and the premiere of Meredith Dincolo's choreographic work and dance performance *Body Language*, which was performed at the Logan Center for the Arts last fall. Here the pair share with us the rich possibilities that dance has for conveying embodied histories—offering an alternative to text-based historical work—and the striking overlaps they discovered in methodologies of history and dance.**



Meredith Dincolo, Chicago, IL, USA; Tara Zahra, University of Chicago, USA

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ZACHARY CAHILL — One of things we are thinking about in this issue is other modalities of learning, traditions of pedagogy, and practices that have been historically excluded from, elected to remain outside, or have been dismissed by the academy. It seems to me your project, Dance as History, and your work together have some sympathy with this proposition. Do you think that is the case with the work you all are doing?

TARA ZAHRA — Do you want me to start with that? Because I'm the person in the academy. There are lots of people within the academy working on dance, and we drew on a lot of that work in making our syllabus. But I think in terms of history as a discipline, there's dance history, which I don't think is integrated into the center of the history field. Like, if you're a dance historian, you're going to have a hard time getting a job in a history department. But I was interested in precisely what you said, dance as a form of public history, as a way of representing history or embodying history. And historians and the academy in general are pretty skeptical of anything that's embodied.

ZC — Why is that?

TZ — Well, there's the mind-body divide and that goes back so far; the mind is superior to the body or the mind is to overcome the body. Of course, there have always been more complex uses of that concept, but if you look at the University of Chicago in particular, anything that involves the body has always been pushed to the sidelines, more or less. I think that's true of a lot of universities, actually. I think now more people are interested in the material world and the body and the environment than they have been.

ZC — I want to come back to that because that's an interesting switch, Meredith, is there a similar, how should we say, prejudice in dance toward the mind? As a field, is dance all about the body?

MEREDITH DINCOLO — I think a while ago I would've said yes—perhaps in a more classical context, which relies on very studied and established techniques that are documented. There's Italian technique, there's French technique, there's Russian technique, there's the Balanchine technique. There are methods that codify movement. They tend to be more in classical dance. There are also the

Photo: Meredith Dincolo

theoretical methods of Labanotation, of how you record the sentiment or emotion that is in a movement. But I think for dancers in the studio, that's not prioritized. The physicality of being in the studio and doing the thing in the moment, trying things out, talking about it, that kind of discussion and experimentation is more of the kind of experience that dancers pursue.

But I also think that without knowing it, there is a lot methodology and theory that comes with that sought experience. Now that we have different ways of recording movement, we don't have to write it down. We film it and it's there and we can pass it on. We seek to preserve the embodied experience. The ephemeral nature of embodied practices in the past may have taken away from their historical significance because it was up to someone else to remember how it happened. We now have ways of subverting this because we can preserve through video, through archiving differently, not just through memory.

There's also something very personal about the physical nature of dance and I think the physicality of it is still, at least for many dancers, what they as artists are pursuing, versus where will this be in the archive of dance. But there's also significant crossover now. I have colleagues who probably 15–20 years ago would not have been in academia, and they have found ways to enter that world by getting a degree or even getting credit toward a degree through their professional careers, which wasn't what happened before. So they are now qualified, they meet the requirements of the academy to be up there at the front of the room. And they're also bringing their experience, that crossover of theoretical and physical experience, to a lot more people. It's starting to work its way into the world of dance in a less divided way.

ZC — I wonder if there's a connection there between recording the dance archive, on the one hand, for dancers and then this interest in physicality and materiality.
TZ — I feel like it also goes back to 2008. Like, that economic crisis made people start thinking about capitalism again and material conditions and then the environmental catastrophe . . . I would say, people started thinking, "Oh wait, the environment isn't just a thing that we act on. It also acts on us." And I think in some ways bodies are similar, they're not just discursively constructed.

 Photos: Meredith Dincolo

ZC — Yeah, you bleed when you're cut.

TZ — Bodies exist in history and they do things that are sometimes beyond human control. I think, for me, one of the things that was great about this project is that, as a historian, you're always thinking about time. You're always thinking about how the past influences the present or thinking about the present in terms of the past with this kind of long durée perspective.

And then dance, at least for me, the appeal of it was that you're in the moment, you can't really think about anything else if you're concentrating and moving. So there's that dichotomy. But then if you take a step back, of course, what dancers are doing in the studio and on the stage and in society also has a history to it. I mean, the dancer might be in the present, but it's not just abstracted with nothing around it.

ZC — Well, I guess that was a question I had for you, Meredith. Could you talk a little bit about your connection to history? It seems like dance, if not history, has a huge connection to memory, both in terms of muscle memory, rote memory of learning it over and over. But I wonder how you think about history and memory and the relationship to dance.

MD — Well, there is narrative dance, particularly works that try to tell a linear story or history. Within these works, there are flashback scenes, there are dream sequences that allow that non-linearity to start to come in, even in a classical, full-length ballet. And then in much of contemporary dance, that non-linearity is the norm; you're bringing different aspects of the story into the environment you're trying to create. I don't know that you need to spell out overtly what has happened in the past and what has led up to this moment. There are implications, there are fragments of narrative. The viewer interprets the work through their own perspective and experience. Look at the non-story ballets of George Balanchine and that historical moment of rejecting the linearity of story ballets and narrative ballet of the Russian tradition as early examples . . .

I think maybe it was because of this project that I became very aware of the history that is inherent to a dancer's experience, if that makes any sense. Looking at the dancers that we brought into the

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project, and the differences in how they approached the process, how they came in every morning, I thought, "Wow, this is a very different group of dancers than we might have had in the studio eight years ago, five years ago," with where they were all coming from, how we selected them, how we got to know them. Their personal histories became a lens for interpretation.

Also, the way we built the piece became important, the abstract nature that the piece took on because we didn't want to tell the audience what to think. We wanted the dancers to reveal themselves in the work as it developed through the embodiment of the themes we were researching. So I felt like I was very aware of the moment and of the constantly evolving shape of the work, since we were not bound by linearity. Some of that experience was also new for me, having been often in the room but not at the front of the room, not making those choices. It was a bit overwhelming at times, that new perspective.

ZC — What did you like about it?

MD — I truly enjoyed analyzing the process and learning about historical methodologies from Tara. We would often talk about certain ideas and she would teach me, "That's how we do personal histories or oral histories." Then I would see that what was happening in the studio was parallel to these methodologies, and I liked that we landed there naturally. I thought a lot about how we were collecting fragments of information and making the work.

TZ — That's one of the things I loved about the work itself. I mean, Meredith didn't have a particular historical subject. She wanted to investigate. And I could have tried to find a choreographer who was in their work thinking about the themes that I work on in my research, and I didn't do that. But what was great was that ultimately the piece sort of reflected the methodological dilemmas that historians deal with. And if you were to think about body language as a kind of historical source, it's fragmentary. It doesn't have a clear narrative. The viewer or the historian has to make that up. And you can see it differently depending on your perspective, in the audience or as the dancer.

If you listen to the interviews, you might have a different perspective and you might have different perspectives also

 Photos: Meredith Dincolo

generationally, depending on where you're coming from, in terms of what Meredith was saying about the process of making dances and how that's changed and how dancers have changed. And then I also love that she chose to work with dancers from different generations. Dance is not the most welcoming field for people who are over 30, honestly. So the fact that she had dancers who were 23 and a dancer who was 47 and somebody who was in the middle, I thought that was great because you also got those different perspectives somehow in the movement and, for me, was really interesting to watch.

ZC — Well, maybe we could talk a little bit about the choice of the title, and, if you don't mind, describe the piece a little bit.

MD — I feel like it's not a very abstract title for a piece that could be seen as pretty abstract. The work is non-linear and does not have a strong narrative, but there's something that develops depending on the audience, and what they know about the dancers or what's happening on stage. It was kind of mid-process when we landed on the title of the work. It acknowledges the physicality and the corporeal part of dancing, of being a body on a stage in a space. A body trying to express ideas or even information about the dancers or about the relationship that was happening in each section, that being the language. Each dancer has a vocabulary that comes through from their interview, from getting to know them better, from observing how they move and what they do when they're not paying attention. Even how they speak with stutters and fillers or very clearly, that all comes out. The piece starts with voiceover—the excerpts from the interviews we recorded early on—so you get a little bit of that information, but it's highly edited. And there was something about that . . . I was going back and forth because by editing their words, I, as the choreographer, was crafting what the audience experienced and shaping what they knew about the dancers.

A choreographer does that with movement as well. There was a lot of editing of the phrase work. Things that started as very clearly, like, "You're doing this and this and this," morphed into aesthetically very different things. So I just felt like the title was . . . Not obtusely, but very obviously embodying and incorporating the ideas that we were investigating. This work also

 Photo: Cassie Haas

came very much from the course that we were teaching since they happened at the same time. So some of the ideas that we were talking about and discussing in the classroom really informed the work in the studio.

ZC — And did the lens you guys were using for the course and for the project in general, dance as history, affect how you returned to the material you created together? Did it change the way you were thinking about it?

TZ — I mean, for me, it was a very different way of watching dance because I think as somebody who had danced or as a fan, I was always mostly thinking, "Wow, these dancers are so great. Their technique and artistry are so beautiful," or "The choreography is interesting. I haven't seen that before," thinking about both the dancers and then the choices that the choreographer made. I can't turn that off, but to focus more on how to situate the work historically was different. I remember one of the moments that was interesting was when we watched the original version of, was it *Agon*? Balanchine's *Agon*. And then we watched a clip of it being performed a couple of years ago. The differences in the dancers' bodies, like the way they moved from the original version to the 21st-century version was striking. And I'm not sure that's something I would've been thinking about had I just gone to see the performance or even just watched one or the other clips. Reading that book about Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* gave me a different perspective on that work that I've seen many, many times.

MD — We took our class to see performances to see how dancers move. Dancers are trained differently these days. Some dancers are very accomplished but they're not classically trained. They are self-trained or they come from different dance vocabularies and they're beautiful movers and they're the ones you remember. So we saw that manifest itself on stage and in our viewings . . . be it Balanchine, Jiri Kylian, even Cunningham. You come to a company today and those dancers are going to move differently than the dancers it was created on or the dancers who last performed it. And that is somehow historical in itself, how the works evolve through restaging and interpretation.

Allowing for that difference is something maybe a bit more modern, rather than just replicating exactly how it was at its creation. Allowing it to evolve in approach to movement, fluidity in the body, musicality, and things like that. There's still a lot of information that is preserved and respected there. We took the class to see Akram Khan's *Jungle Book Reimagined*, and the quality of movement that was required and expressed by the dancers was well beyond a classical vocabulary of speaking with their bodies and in synchronization with narration. I loved it in a very fundamental way of seeing the articulation of the body. But also I recognize that these dancers, they're different than my generation and how we were trained and what was expected and coached through movement. That perspective comes in a lot now when I am in the audience. I think that is historical, but in a very contemporary way. I notice it all the time now, and I love it. I think it's great even when you go to see a classical company or classical work that you see more expressive and liberated movement.

ZC — Wow, that's great. I've been thinking about this in preparation for our conversation: is there such a thing as a collective muscle memory? I know sociologist Maurice Halbwachs talks about collective memory. And I guess I'm hearing from you, Meredith, that maybe those differences might account for a kind of muscle memory or a collective.

TZ — There are many ways to answer the question, which I think is super interesting. But Meredith found a listing of all the pantomime gestures that are used in classical story ballets, and then asked the students to come up with gestures, modern gestures that would be recognizable to an audience, a modern audience, but that would express different ideas because the old ones are all marriage, death, I don't know what else.

MD — Beauty.

TZ — Beauty.

MD — Royalty.

TZ — Right. And some of the things that the students came up with, I think do reflect almost a collective muscle memory. Like, if somebody was going like this, you know what that is, right? (Holding up a cell phone to take a selfie) So we do have collective muscle memory in society, like the way we walk in the streets, the gestures we use that are unique to our time and would not be recognizable to somebody 50 years ago. And then there's the way dance has changed and dancers have changed. I don't know if you would call that a collective muscle memory; it's kind of generational.

MD — Yes, we talked about the "choreography" of the pandemic, of COVID, that suddenly we were all aware of our proximity to one another, how we were interacting. I mean, some of it was very extreme, but now we take some of that with us. We're aware of our distance from someone, or if they offer a hand to shake or not, or if we can hug or not. We ask about physical contact for many different reasons.

Those kinds of things, I think, are maybe a current muscle memory. In the dance studio—how people interact with each other has changed, even though it's a very physical and pretty intimate experience. And maybe that is not even a dance muscle memory, that's kind of a human muscle memory.

I think there are also things that you can look to as cross-referencing, I mean, other physical practices and somatic practices like yoga or Pilates or even breath work . . . There are things about oppositions that occur in your body like the way you walk down the street. How you stand up and how when you're on the subway and it jolts, you brace yourself to stay upright. Or how you get down to the floor. We studied that as well, getting down to the floor and getting back up. It's interesting to observe, sometimes 14 different ways to do something (we were 14 in the class). Sometimes a very similar way to do something emerged that reflected a common muscle memory of how we get from one shape to another.

TZ — I would add that most of the students had either no dance background or very little. And so in some ways, they were, I felt, even more interesting to watch in terms of the choices they made. They were a little bit, I don't know, unpredictable sometimes. It was a real diversity of students . . .

Photo: Cassie Haas

MD — . . . Embodying themselves.

TZ — Embodying themselves. I felt like I got to know these students much better than I do in a normal class by watching them move. Something about their personalities really came through.

MD — Whether it's just being physical in the space and your natural movement and your speech patterns, your phrasing of things. Whether you're nervous, or you're confident, it all comes out physically, it comes out vocally. It's so revealing that maybe that embodiment was not always given its value.

TZ — Well, also, yeah, I mean, this goes back to the body-mind question. I wish every student had to take a course like this in a way because it highlights not so much a body-mind hierarchy, but different kinds of intelligence in a way. I still remember even being in high school as a dancer, and I was known to be good at school and teachers would be like, "You're so smart at school, why can't you remember the combination?" But there are different kinds of intelligence, and I think dancers do have this incredible embodied knowledge. And even watching the students in the class thinking about how to put phrases together and how to move across the room and how to get up, I felt like they were forced to think about . . . intelligence is maybe the wrong word, but different forms of knowledge and creativity than the ones that are just valued every day in the classroom.

ZC — Yeah, definitely. As you guys are talking, it makes me think it teaches students how to pay attention differently. Even how your body moves or your hand gestures has meaning and significance. I could imagine it helps them see the world with different eyes, different tools. Both your practices, one could say, are very much time-based. And I was thinking a lot about space relative to the work you guys did. Both having seen the popups, that's one kind of space, seeing it on a stage is another kind . . . The space between, how you're choreographing. There are so many beautiful gestures between the dancers that I thought was just really powerful. So I guess how you're thinking about space or how you've thought about space, both in terms of dance itself, but also as a historian as well.

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MD — Well, I think that the choice to present the piece in a theater, really acknowledging the distance (or lack of distance) from the audience, that they were going to hear them breathing, see them sweating— that proximity was intentional. The positioning of the audience was intentional also. We could have done it in the round, we could have made a site-sensitive work. We chose a very specific setting: a dark space that allows the movement and the lighting in the space to be designed. It was very different than the pop-up we did in the atrium of the Booth School [of Business], which has sunlight, there's noise. There are people not paying attention, there are people paying attention. There are security guards coming to kick us out. There are lots of things happening that you cannot control. And sometimes that is part of the piece, that noise, that response, maybe somebody actually gets quiet when they realize what's happening, versus we've all come here to see this and we're going to be quiet now. I kind of wanted both of those experiences. Those were intentional choices.

TZ — Like, you didn't want to be in the Logan Center's big theater.

MD — Right. Even the distance of the audience from the stage, the size of the audience, the feeling of filling the house. All of that was very intentional and it all worked out, but I think that's not always our expectation when we go to see a work. So designing the experience was something we discussed.

ZC — Well, as a viewer, I found that really powerful. I don't think . . . unless I was in some sort of rehearsal myself, having a dancer's leg come so close to me and then hearing them breathe, seeing them sweat, it just changes it from something that's almost purely visual movement. A lot of other senses come to bear on it, for sure. I guess I also wanted to talk about the writing in the piece because . . . So for at-home audience, there are moments in the piece where the dancers would write their name on the wall-papered wall. How did that choice come about and how did you think about it relative to the physical movements?

MD — It kind of developed as an idea . . . a little bit of literally leaving your mark, that with the ephemeral nature of live performance, once it's done, it's done. You have a memory of it and already you're kind of filtering it. But the words are the words, they're not changing. They changed from performance to performance, the way that they were written, and they then became physical remnants of the performance and of each dancer, literally making their mark, but in their own way. I didn't coach them on how they had to write their name or even what they had to write. I think it just became a crafted environment . . . Maybe a little nod to the significance of text in history.

TZ — Right, to the text.

MD — The significance of that.

TZ — One of the first improv exercises we did in the class was when Meredith had the students write their names with their bodies. And there's a way in which I felt like what they did in *Body Language*—both the improv to their own stories and then the use of the written text in the back, echoed that in an interesting way.

Photo: Tara Zahra

ZC —It's frustrating to hear about the mind-body split in academia because as you point out, writing is a physical act. And I guess, I don't know if I have a fully formed thought or a question, but I wonder if you could speak to that impasse of why . . . Not why it exists, but what kind of vista that opens up when you move beyond. It feels so problematic in all sorts of ways. And more than just being a problem, it inhibits knowledge, actually.

TZ — I think so. I don't know if I have the solution to it. I do think people are thinking about this in much more complex ways, even in academia now. I've been doing some work on the history of mental health and the way in which people think about mental health and illness, and the relationship between the mind and the body has really changed, with the acknowledgment that you can't separate them.

One of the articles we read for the first week of class was about writing history as an embodied practice because it's not just writing that is physical, but also sitting in an archive . . . I mean, this is what's lost maybe with the digitization of archives, but sitting in an archive, opening up these dusty boxes, and going through the material stuff is part of what you do as a historian. Even the way these bundles of old documents are often tied together with these elaborate knots that I could never retie. So you can always tell, usually when you get a box, if somebody else has looked at it based on how the knots are tied.

MD — We talked quite a bit about how people conduct historical research now, most often at a keyboard. Leaning in, with a crooked posture that you might not even realize. A crick in your neck from being hunched over. In the past, perhaps moving and carrying heavy books, turning pages, taking extra care with a delicate document, climbing up a ladder to reach an old volume.

TZ — They don't let you climb up the ladder, usually.

MD — But lifting things, and the physical nature of research and writing. Early on, in the classroom, we talked about how you could make a dance work about the physicality of being a historian. There's a real physicality in the writing of history. We also talked about oral histories, that these are conversations, these are recordings that then become text. But these methods may be less practiced ways or less acknowledged ways of recording history and archiving. We wanted to explore the embodiment of an oral history, how we could take those fragments and make dance.

TZ — And most people, I think, don't get their history through books anyway. They get history through TV shows and movies. I don't know, maybe dance is also part of that, kind of how museums, how popular history is actually made and communicated. Very few people read history and even fewer read academic history. But we did have one student, going back to the physical work of the history, who for her final project . . . went from her experience as a dancer with an injury caused by repetitive movements to a project that was about the repetitive movements of factory workers, Taylorized factory workers. And I thought that was clever. I thought it was great how somehow it was from her experience as a dancer and her knowledge from her other history classes, that she found a way to bring the two together.

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