



PRESENTS **ABBY Z AND THE
NEW UTILITY**

**Doris Duke Theatre
June 26-30, 2019**

CHOREOGRAPHER	Abby Zbikowski
REHEARSAL DIRECTORS	Fiona Lundie Jennifer Meckley
DRAMATURG	Momar Ndiaye
COMPOSER	Raphael Xavier
LIGHTING DESIGN	Jon Harper
COSTUME DESIGN	Abby Zbikowski Karen Zbikowski
PERFORMERS/COLLABORATORS	Alexa Bender Serena Chang Shaela Davis Roobi Gaskins Alex Gossen Gabrielle Loren Fiona Lundie Jennifer Meckley Benjamin Roach

PROGRAM

abandoned playground (2017)

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Program Notes
This work has emerged out of a two and a half year period of obsessive and tedious practice, both physically and compositionally, to disentangle and comprehend the layered meanings of the infinite components in play that construct both our doing and understanding of dance as a cultural phenomenon in its different manifestations. Like many of my works, *abandoned playground* pushes into the tense space between dance being utilized for its abstract formalist elements, and recognizing dance forms as highly functional systems of communication that are a direct expression of the culture and individuals from which they originate. The physicality and choreographic frame of *abandoned playground* are infused with the ethos, energy, and sense of rhythm and space gained from years of practicing tap, hip-hop, and West African dance forms, stripped down to their bare bone functionality in a punk tactic of dealing with form and a guttural need to take it to the hyper-physical edge of the bodies’ possibilities. The performers/collaborators and myself have come to understand this work by doing it. And doing it and doing it and doing it and sweating. Doing it gets us all through it. As a result of our premiere run of this work in April 2017 at the Abrons Arts Center, I was the honored recipient of the 2017 Juried Bessie Award for choreography.
-Abby Zbikowski

Acknowledgements
Endless thank-you’s to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign Campus Research Board and Department of Dance for grant and space support, Jodee Nimerichter and the American Dance Festival, my dedicated crew of performers/collaborators because they are the hearts, souls, and motors of this work, and to Momar Ndiaye, Jack Ferver, Juliana May, Tere O’Connor, Raphael Xavier, Carlo Antonio Villanueva, Jessie Young, Justin Faircloth, Ali Herring, Evelyn Sanchez Narvaez, and Beth Gill for their feedback on this work along the way. And another heartfelt thank you to Fiona Lundie and Jennifer Meckley for investing so much in this work for so long, and for taking on additional roles as rehearsal directors and company administration.

Jacob’s Pillow is committed to providing an environment that cultivates the celebration of the art of dance and its positive impact on community.

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We are so glad you are here. Enjoy the show!

ABBY ZBIKOWSKI (Choreographer) is a Bessie Award-winning choreographer. Zbikowski created her company Abby Z and the New Utility in 2012 with core company members Fiona Lundie and Jennifer Meckley to experiment with the potential and choreographic possibility of the body being pushed beyond its perceived limits, as well as to create a new movement lexicon that works towards triangulating dancing/moving bodies across multiple cultural value systems simultaneously. Her work has focused on reclaiming the brutal rigor that goes into the practice and performance of hyper-physical dance forms by shifting the mindset of the labor away from product and repositioning the choreographic work as a vehicle for transformation that welcomes failure as an inevitability on the path to growth. The company has been presented by Gibney Dance Center, Movement Research at Danspace Project, Abrons Arts Center, the 92nd Street Y, and more. Zbikowski is a current 2017 Choreographer-in-Residence at the Lewis Center of the Arts at Princeton University, an Assistant Professor of Dance at the University of Illinois, and on faculty at the American Dance Festival. She has studied intensively at Germaine Acogny's L'École de Sables in Senegal and holds a B.F.A. in Dance from Temple University and an M.F.A. in Dance from The Ohio State University, where she worked closely with mentors Bebe Miller and Vickie Blaine. As a performer, Zbikowski has worked with Charles O. Anderson/dance theater X, Vincent Mantsoe, and the Baker & Tarpaga Dance Project. She has been on faculty at The Ohio State University and has taught technique and creative process abroad at the Academy of Culture in Riga, Latvia as part of GPS (Global Practice Sharing) sponsored by Movement Research. More info at abbyznewutility.org

FIONA LUNDIE (Rehearsal Director & Performer) is a movement artist and cognitive scientist interested in what is vital about how and why we move, what form that movement takes, and how it shapes our perspective. She holds a B.A. in Cognitive Science from Dartmouth

College and an M.F.A. in Dance from The Ohio State University. She has performed with Abby Z and the New Utility since its inception in 2012, became Rehearsal Director in 2016, and Business Manager in 2017 as the company has grown. Lundie also teaches PopAction and Flying Trapeze at STREB in Brooklyn and has performed with the STREB Extreme Action Company. She has had the pleasure of performing with Abby Z and the New Utility at Abrons Arts Center, the 92nd Street Y, Movement Research Festival at Danspace, and DoublePlus Series at Gibney Dance Center in NYC, as well as The American Dance Festival in NC, the newMoves Contemporary Dance Festival in Pittsburgh, the Fusebox Festival in Austin, TX, and the ICA Boston.

JENNIFER MECKLEY (Rehearsal Director & Performer) is a modern dance artist greatly inspired by the hip-hop culture and aims to spread knowledge of street dance in academia. She obtained a B.A. in Dance from Slippery Rock University and an M.F.A. in Dance from The Ohio State University. Meckley has previously taught at West Chester University, Cuyahoga Community College, and Northampton Community College. She currently teaches at Ball State University, The University of Dayton, and actively pushes the boundaries of physicality through performance as a member of Abby Z and the New Utility since its founding in 2012 and as Rehearsal Director since 2016. She has performed at well-known venues and dance festivals including The American Dance Festival in Durham, NC, Bates Dance Festival in Lewiston, ME, Judson Church Movement Research in NYC, DoublePlus in NYC, newMoves Contemporary Dance Festival in Pittsburgh, PA, Inhale Performance Arts Series in Philadelphia, PA, Abrons Arts Center in NYC, and the ICA Boston.

ALEXA BENDER (Performer) was born and raised in a small town in Ontario, Canada, where she began her early dance practice. She moved to New York in 2012, where she received her B.F.A. in Dance Performance from Marymount Manhattan College. Additionally, she has trained privately with California-based Master

Teacher Paula Morgan, and is also a certified teacher in the Paula Morgan Technique. Bender met Abby Z in 2016 where she began training in her distinct movement vocabulary. She continues to expand her movement language and understanding through teaching and choreography, as well as a variety of other cross-training practices to keep life interesting and confront new physical challenges, in the pursuit of never settling for what is comfortable or familiar.

SERENA CHANG (Performer) was born and raised in Ohio, earned her B.F.A. in Dance, B.S. in Molecular Genetics, and minor in Chinese from The Ohio State University. During her time at OSU, she was able to study under Susan Hadley, Bebe Miller, Abby Zbikowski, and Jimmy Ortiz. Chang is currently dancing with Abby Z and the New Utility, Third Rail Projects: *Then She Fell*, and BodyStories: Teresa Fellion Dance, and has worked with freelance artists such as Michelle Thompson Ulerich and Second Best Dance in New York. She is a recipient of the Pelotonia Cancer Research Fellowship and Columbus Dance Theater Fellowship for her choreography. Chang continues to create work in New York with a focus on multidisciplinary collaborations, accessibility, and research. She is eager to spread opportunities for choreographers and serves on the artist committee for National Choreography Month (NACHMO).

SHAELA DAVIS (Performer) is a dance artist/teacher/choreographer in the Greater Baltimore area. She received her B.F.A. in Dance Performance with a K-12 Teaching Certification from Towson University. She performed with the Towson University Dance Company as well as choreographed/performed for the 2013 American College Dance Festival in VA. She also trained on scholarship at the American Dance Festival where she performed in repertory by Vanessa Voskuil and Abby Zbikowski. Davis has taught for Towson University Community Dance and the Jewish Community Center of Greater Baltimore, and currently teaches at Morton Street Dance Center. As well as being a dancer with Abby Z and the New

Utility, Davis is a dancer with Full Circle Dance Company. Davis is excited to be “doing the thing” with Abby Z and the New Utility.

BENJAMIN ROACH (Performer) is a movement research artist and educator based in Queens, NY. He has danced with Dance the Yard, eSKay Arts Collective, Rosie Herrera Dance Theatre, and is a current company member of Josh Pacheco Dance Theatre. In 2019, alongside Caitlin Morgan, Roach co-founded Piug Dance Theatre. The dynamic interdisciplinary duo has presented work at various venues including LATEA Theater, The Craft, The Actors Fund Art Center, and Mark Morris Dance Group. In 2018, Roach received his B.F.A. in Dance Performance and Choreography from Ohio University. While attending OU, he had the opportunity to dance for David Dorfman, Jasmine Hearn, Kendra Portier, Meredith Lyons, Gladys Bailin-Stern, Ani Javian, and Travis Gatling. His own choreographic work has been presented at the Patricia N. Nanon Theatre, Big River Dance Festival, E. Turner Stump Theater, and the 2018 American College Dance Association East Central Gala Concert.

JON HARPER (Lighting Designer) is a NYC-based lighting designer and also the Director of Production at Abrons Arts Center. He has worked in the past as the lighting supervisor for Pilobolus, Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, and Aspen Santa Fe Ballet. Other recent designs have been with Target Margin Theater, Dylan Crossman, Brian Rogers, Lisa McKee, and Julie Atlas Muz & Mat Fraser/ ONEOFUS. He is married to Madeline Best of the Chocolate Factory Theater, with whom he shares the distinct joy of parenting two amazing toddlers.

MOMAR NDIAYE (Dramaturg) is an internationally recognized dance artist from Senegal who has taught and toured his work both in the States and abroad. He received his M.F.A. in Dance from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where he taught contemporary and traditional African dance forms. Since 2010, Ndiaye has danced for internationally acclaimed choreographer Andreyu Ouamba in the Dakar-based company Premier Temps and was selected as

a Dance Web participant at Impuls Tanz Festival in Vienna, Austria, in 2012. He has been developing work with his own company, Cadanses, since 2004 and in 2015, his evening length piece *Toxu* was a finalist laureate in the Danse L’Afrique Danse (Africa and Caribbean in Creation) Festival in St. Louis and Senegal and toured to Europe as part of the Belluard Festival in Switzerland. In 2016, Ndiaye was selected to participate in two intercultural projects, Shifting Realities, supported by Tanz Haus and Hellerau in Germany, and 1space, a collaboration between KVS Brussel, Exodus in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and Alkantara Lisbon, Portugal. More info at lacadanses.com

RAPHAEL XAVIER (Composer) is a musician, choreographer, dancer, painter, photographer, and polyvalent artist who created the soundscape for this work. Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for choreography in 2016, Xavier has been a breakin’ practitioner since 1983. An active alumnus of the world renowned hip-hop dance company, Rennie Harris Puremovement, Xavier has gone on to forge an exceptional approach to improvisation, creating new ways to expand the vocabulary of the dance form.

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Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group; photo Greg Nesbit Photography

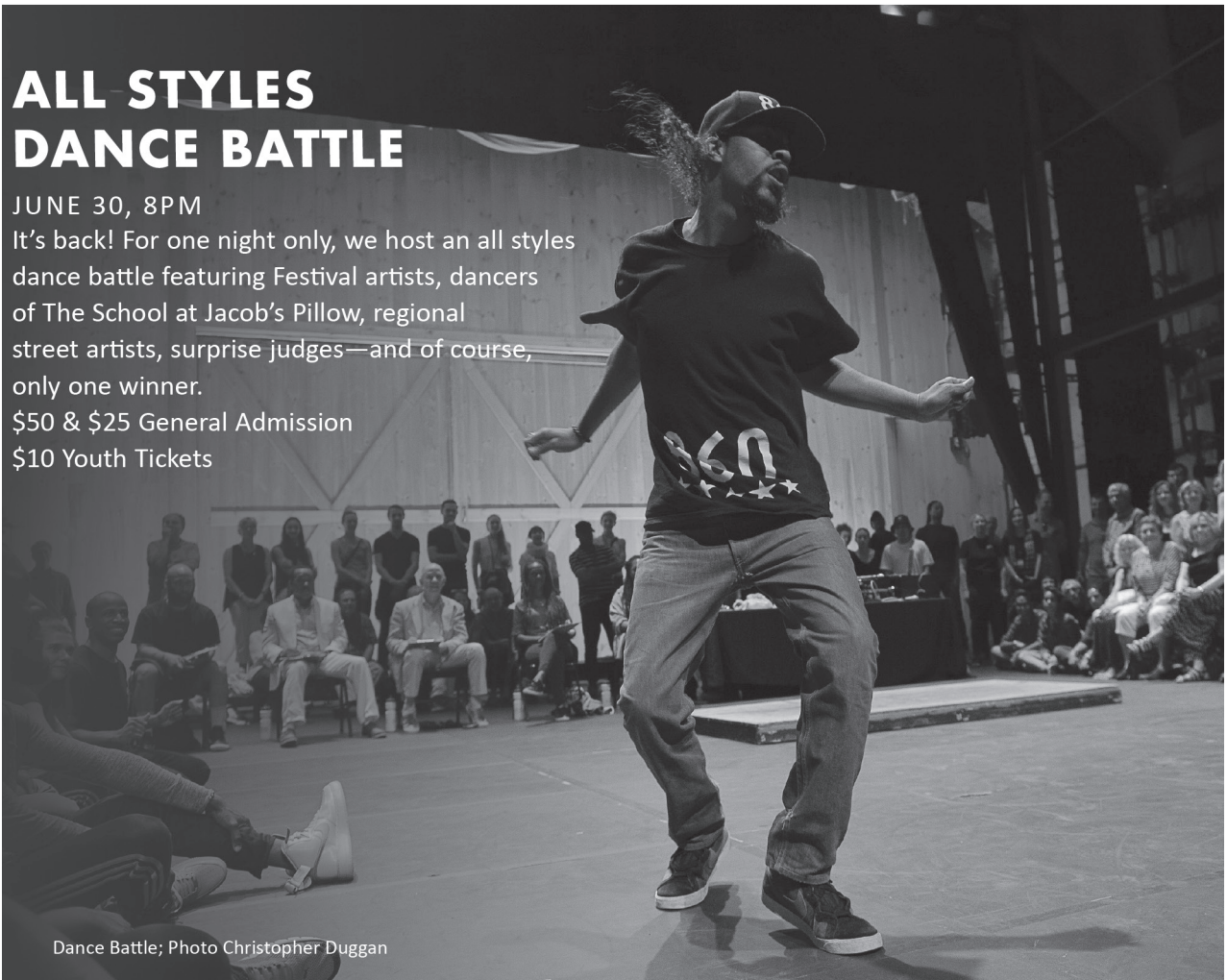
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Dance Battle; Photo Christopher Duggan

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PILLOWNOTES

by Maura Keefe

The PillowNotes series comprises essays commissioned from our Scholars-in-Residence to provide audiences with a broader context for viewing dance.

“For spectators at this event, being in a place where divine and heroic presence converged through athletes’ performance, in an uncannily beautiful landscape, was the most ecstatic and transcendental experience that their lives had to offer.”

-Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

Nine people in the center. The rest of us all around them. They wear shorts and sneakers. Kneepads to protect themselves. Rhythmic stamps, tumbling turns, an occasional grunt. Tossing, throwing, stomping. More rhythmic, this time throughout the bodies. Grounded, powerful. Is it a game? What are the rules? A solo here, there a pair move unison, now comes the collective. A formation organizes the space. Two pause at the edge to watch the others, yelling encouraging words. With endurance and virtuosic recklessness, the dancers of Abby Z and the New Utility invent a world over and over again, the world of *abandoned playground*. This is a world of action. Even when a dancer is still, the momentum of energy and tension presses forward. As the physical feats astound, their power accumulates. It stuns.

Abby Z is Abby Zbikowski, a choreographer and dancer, whose ferocity for dance comes from an intriguing assemblage of physical training. A white woman, she trained with African American choreographer Charles Anderson and South African-born dancer and choreographer Vincent Mantsoe while an undergraduate. She also counts among her influences her mentorship from African American contemporary dancemaker Bebe Miller; training in hip hop with dancers from Rennie Harris/Puremovement; studying contemporary dance in a white Western tradition at Ohio State; intensive training with Germaine Acogny at L’École de Sables in Senegal; and, her involvement in the punk scene. While she inhabits all of those movement forms, she also fundamentally trusts movement and dance. As she explained in an interview with *thiNKiNgDANCE*, “I’m going back to these really primal needs to move—I learned to survive through the practice of dance.” How that manifests is a supercharged, hyperphysical, rigorous investigation of movement that calls to mind the training of and execution of action by athletes.

Sports and dance have often performed an odd duet; partners in athleticism but competitors in endgoals. Artmaking and winning can twirl around one another, dipping and curving together, but in the end, the partners separate for individual pursuits. To win a game. To create an evening of art. But then they come back together, to be both dancers and athletes, or to be the subject matter of dances, or—for spectators—to identify the physical connections between the worlds.

The history of U.S. concert dance performs a version of this duet, particularly in inviting men to dance, beginning with Pillow founder Ted Shawn. In the early 1930s, Shawn recruited college athletes to train as dancers for his new company of Men Dancers. A generation after that, choreographer Paul Taylor was at Syracuse University on a swimming scholarship when he discovered dance. A generation or so later, David Dorfman put down his catcher’s mask at 20, and used dance as a “physical endeavor,” as he terms it, to replace his years playing sports. Sports then became the inspiration for dances such as Shawn’s *Olympiad* (1936), Gerald Arpino’s *Olympics* (1966), and Dorfman’s *Out of Season: The Athletes Project* (which included former Yankees pitcher Jim Bouton and young men who were high school athletes from Berkshire Farms for Pillow performances in 1997). Choreographers count on the association with sports to celebrate a virtuosity and strength typically associated with men. And athletes? Beyond their powerful virtuosity, the most sublime of them are venerated for their grace by both sportswriters and dance critics alike. (See, for example, *Washington Post* dance critic Sarah Kaufman’s recent piece, “Why Roger Federer is the most graceful athlete of our time.”) We know what grace looks like in sports: it looks like Jesse Owens running, Michael Jordan jumping. We also know that in Western concert dance, grace frequently suggests a kind of refinement and serenity.

Where then is the place for a highly physical woman who digs deep into movement’s power and potentiality for dance? Zbikowski’s work is guided by her practice of what she terms Afro-Diasporic dance forms, but also her desire to make dance that honors tactics of survival and to recognize “life in turbulence.” For her, those sources of embodiment and creative ambitions can’t result in a refined, restrained piece of high art. Rather, as she explained in the same interview with *thiNKiNgDANCE*, “I position my work more like folk art meets soccer, rather than a proscenium modern dance piece.” That current of sports shows up in the action. As *New York Times* dance critic Siobhan Burke wrote in her review of the work, *abandoned playground* “pits these dancer-athletes against the limits of their own strength and endurance, and they triumph.”

In addition, for Zbikowski, the sports connection is more than a metaphor or subject matter. As she explains her creative process with the dancers, “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.” Zbikowski joins other action-driven women artists and athletes who challenge how women can act, appear, perform. Tennis great Serena Williams’s pounding relentlessness, choreographer Elizabeth Streb’s action mechanics, Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s release of a workout regimen, and the nine young women soccer players in the Pulitzer Prize-nominated play *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe. All these women come to mind. And they share what dance writer Eva Yaa Asantewaa identified as a commonality among the performers in Abby Z and the New Utility: “the attitude of being ready for anything.”

In his book *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht celebrates (men) athletes and contemplates the aesthetics of their performances. He could have been commenting on Zbikowski’s work when he wrote:

this unexpected appearance of a body in space, suddenly taking on a beautiful form that just as quickly and irreversibly dissolves, can be thought of as a kind of epiphany. Such epiphanies are, I believe, the source of the joy we feel when we watch an athletic event, and they mark the height of our aesthetic response.

Unexpected, bodies in space, beautiful form. A source of joy. And abandon.

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Dance writer Maura Keefe has led audience programs at various venues around the country and is the Associate Director of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, where she was named the Dorothy G. Madden Professor of Dance in 2018.