

Performance Matters

Love: A Research Practice

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Love: A Research Practice

Megan V. Nicely



Saharla Vetsch in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Walter Kitundu, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

Outside San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, to the right of the entryway and embedded in the pavement, is a large labyrinth, beautifully modelled in subtly contrasting textured stone. The ancient archetypal choreography of its spiral pathway leads the walker on a journey to the circle's centre and out again as a metaphor for psychological and spiritual transformation. Labyrinths are tools for embodied research and personal contemplation. The simplicity of the task they invite—walking to the centre and out again—supports a far less goal-oriented endeavour: opening to what is simultaneously outside and also inside of each of us. Many spiritual and religious traditions speak to practice as an opening to love, and this might ultimately be the labyrinth's intended contemplation. As my companion and I take in the view atop Nob Hill, we are soon motioned toward the cathedral door for the performance we are about to attend: *Zaccho Dance Theatre's Love, A State of Grace*. We step forward and enter.

Megan V. Nicely is an artist/scholar whose teaching and research integrate theory and practice. Her scholarship brings together experimental choreography, critical dance and performance studies theory, philosophy, cultural studies, and physical practices, including modern/contemporary dance, Japanese butoh, yoga, and other somatic approaches. Her group Megan Nicely/Dance has performed on both US coasts, in the UK, and in Europe, and her writing has appeared in *TDR: The Drama Review*, *Performance Research*, *PAJ*, *Choreographic Practices*, *InDance*, and others. She received her MFA in dance from Mills College and her PhD in performance studies from New York University. She is associate professor and chair of the Department of Performing Arts and Social Justice at the University of San Francisco.



Helen Wicks in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Joanna Haigood, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

Zaccho's thirty-minute site-specific aerial dance piece, created by artistic director Joanna Haigood in collaboration with composer Walter Kitundu, scenic designers Wayne Campbell and Sean Riley, and others, provides a model for how to remain in practice. The work includes three movement scenes, presented as a recurring loop over the course of three hours. Audience members can wander in the space and stay or leave as they wish within this timeframe. The printed program offers a series of guided meditations and small rituals that audiences can follow as they walk in the space, designed by artist-theologians Yuhana Junker and Cláudio Carvalhaes. These contemplations reflect on "how to intimate and love our places, our bodies, our communities, our land and otherwise." Community conversations that met outside the actual performance were also part of the overall event.



Helen Wicks, Veronica Blair, and Saharla Vetsch (L to R) in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Bryan Gibel, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

Once inside, grounded on the tiles in the cool alcove, we find ourselves on the edges of a second labyrinth. Our attention is drawn to the nave at the far end, which houses a stunning stained glass window and the altar. The pull of our trajectory toward the altar is paused by three dancers immediately in front of us. They embrace, then one, tethered to a climbing harness, begins to ascend a crooked ladder that extends from floor to ceiling, roughly 156 feet above. We head further inside, keeping to the periphery and clear of the central pathway, and look up to see a figure on a large swing attached to the ceiling, suspended at an angle. Poised, my companion and I watch and in an instant, the strings are cut. The adrenaline rush is enormous. We see—and feel—the swing’s massive arc. The dancer is propelled into a fall and recovery motion. As the massive swing continues to glide back and forth, the dancer rides the momentum, standing, reaching, balancing, letting go, and catching, time and again. The feeling of letting go, and of suspension, is what I as an audience member practice throughout the evening—the swinging figure serving as an anchor.

We make our way down to the altar and join other audience members, finding a place to settle and take in the spectacle. The swinging figure glides overhead and out before us (performed alternately by Suzanne Gallo/Helen Wicks), and the dancer ascending the ladder can be seen at the far end, slowly making their way toward the ceiling high above (performed by Ciarra D’Onofrio/Saharla Vetsch). Having adjusted to the scene before us, we soon notice, to our left in the north transept, a third dancer. This scene is serene. The dancer is suspended from the ceiling over an hourglass-shaped metal sculpture, and their trajectory is rotational as they circle above, mirroring the sculpture’s curved edge (performed by Veronica Blair/Nina Sawant). At times the dancer is lowered by the rigging and uses the structure’s top surface to guide their footsteps and cartwheels along its edge. At others, this dancer creates forms like a seated lotus position, which circles in the space.

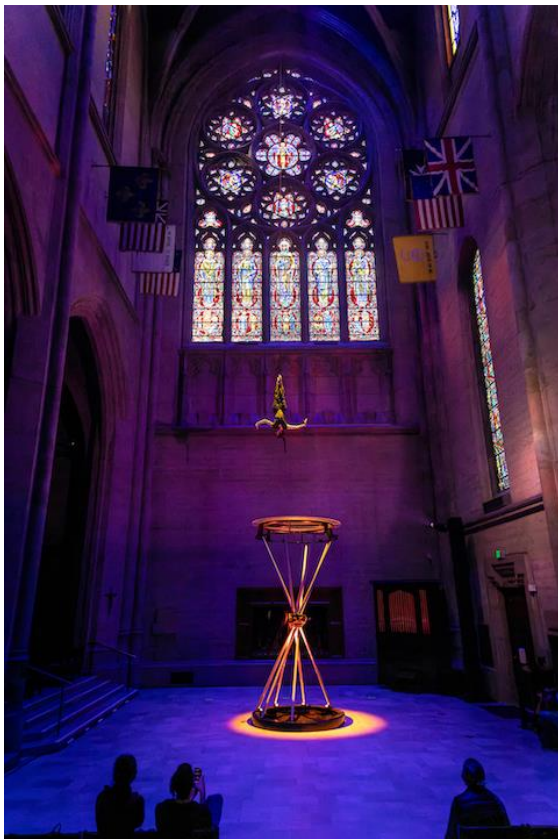


Helen Wicks and Ciarra D’Onofrio (L to R) in Zaccho Dance Theatre’s *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Bryan Gibel, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

Each of these three moving image scenes captures a different kinesthetic—and emotional—sentiment. The ladder ascension (titled *The Striving*) is aspirational; the swing (titled *Surrender*) is liberating; and the rotational path (titled *The Quieting*) is calming. Each scene’s repeated movement trajectory provides an opportunity to notice subtle gestural variations, and I am called to consider

how daily tasks are similarly repeated with slight differences. Repetition provides familiarity and an opportunity to take risks, backed by constant support. Risk is a key feature in this performance as well, and it is not undertaken alone. The dancers are attached to harnesses, and the coordination between a dancer and a rigger is a critical part of this performance collaboration. Designed by rigger David Freitag and performed by a crew who remain largely unseen, the risk of the unknown is palpable for the audience. A dancer and rigger communicate through the tension of the rope, a choreography that relies on the slight delay and degree of tension and slack that connects them. Audiences hold a similar tension, tethered to others in the space, albeit less literally.

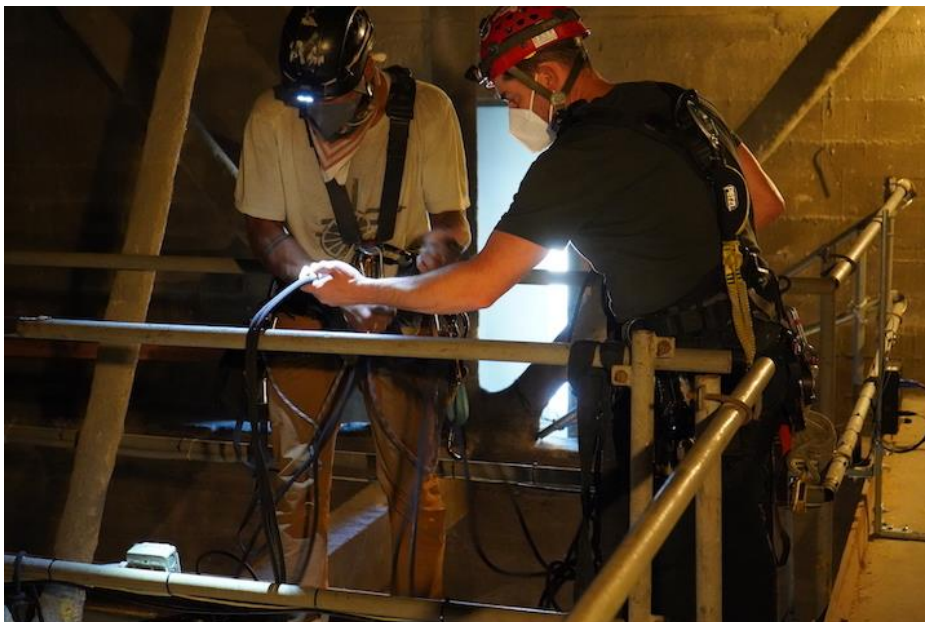
Haigood is known for the kind of risk and connection that large-scale, site-specific aerial work demands. Locations such as Fort Point, the Ferry Building Bell Tower, and the San Francisco International Airport inspire awe in their beauty and scale. Her choreography adds to the overall picture, allowing a viewer to pause to take in the larger field of vision. However, these are not just pretty pictures or tricks to keep one on the edge of their seat. Haigood's works are social and political, bringing past historical moments of racial oppression and resilience into current conversations around these ongoing themes. *Invisible Wings* (1998), inspired by the Underground Railroad, was presented at a location that once served as a station for those fleeing to Canada during the mid-nineteenth century, while *Dying while Black and Brown* (2011), presented in a structure that serves as both a prison and a home, speaks to mass incarceration and its impact on the lives of Black and brown bodies. Haigood's studio is located in the Bayview Hunters Point area of San Francisco, a historically Black neighbourhood, and community conversations with its residents have influenced many of her pieces, including *Love, A State of Grace*.



Nina Sawant in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Walter Kitundu, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

Haigood's pieces do more than represent a theme. They convey living histories through kinesthetic and emotional feeling that in my audience experience lingers in the body long after the performance has ended, demanding response. As the late bell hooks, known for her critical thinking on race and pedagogy, writes: "The practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside our control" (2018, 153). *Love, A State of Grace* asks audiences to take a risk to open to a state in which gravitational and social forces beyond our control act upon us, yet we are not helpless in finding ways to navigate these forces. The dancers show us what is possible through acts of surrender and uplift. Haigood realizes these sensations choreographically by limiting the number of forms and gestures so that *motion* is what resonates. In *Love, A State of Grace*, the movements are in many ways simple. The dancers reach out, turn, and suspend their bodies in beautifully executed forms, yet it is the momentum of their particular movement trajectory that guides them, and we as audiences might practise following a moving trajectory as well. I am most struck by the dancers' attention to take-offs and landings. As Haigood describes, technique in her work serves to create a feeling: "What does it actually mean to climb and how much weight are you actually taking, and where's the balance between the struggle and the support? What is that moment of take-off and how do you integrate that feeling of the reach of the leg to that landing back onto the swing?" (2022)

For Haigood, creating this work at the current moment of pandemic lockdown and racial reckoning has been life-changing. Initially incited in response to violence at sacred sites in the US, and as a way to understand the nature of religious wars when faith practices are anchored in love, the recent uprisings and outpouring of ancestral grief in the US took the project into broader territory. While Haigood is inspired by boldness and adventure, she found making this work demanded a quieter approach "in order to experience more fully where we are and who we are in relationship with and to. . . . We experience [union] with the breeze or in that moment of contact with an animal in the forest or with each other. . . . That magic, that's something that comes through love. Love is an expansive experience, it's something that cracks you open and facilitates that union" (interview with author, February 25, 2022).



Sean Cotton and Dave Freitag in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Thomas Konicke, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

As a practice, love requires cultivation, attention, care, curiosity, and acceptance. Finding ways to enter into, remain, and deepen this practice—which is at times awe-inspiring and at others painful or difficult—is an ongoing act of collaboration and ethical consideration needed more than ever in our current world. And as lawyer, filmmaker, and educator Valarie Kaur puts it, “If love is sweet labor, love can be taught, modeled, and practiced” (2020, xv), and on this evening, my companion and I engage a practice of attention that gestures toward Kaur’s words. We stay for three rotations of the piece’s three scenes, and a week later, I return to stay for four. As the piece winds down, the swinging figure dismounts gently and, as the live organ music crescendos, the dancer on the ladder reaches the top and disappears into the rafters. Yet this is not the end. We are left with the quietude of the figure in the nave, circling. The piece concludes here, with a return to this figure, and to ourselves. Not wanting to leave, I linger with other members of the Bay Area dance community I know, and others I do not. I carry a state of exhilaration, tenderness, and connectivity with me as I depart. As Haigood says of the experience performing aerial work: “You don’t take anything for granted. You have a very deep focus and attention to every possible detail. You’re feeling everything, you’re feeling the wind on the hairs of your arm, you’re very hyper aware, and that’s a wonderful state to be in. And it can be found anywhere, it’s just simple things, like the little fish in your pond.” Or walking a labyrinth. Or embodying daily tasks that we repeat, and engaging with others, as a way to practise opening to love.



Altar in Zaccho Dance Theatre’s *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Saami Bloom, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

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