

Bord(hers) Around Bodies_ Prof...h Describes the Power of Dance

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SPEAKERS

Eva Dale, Lucille Toth, David Staley

- E** Eva Dale 00:00

From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences, with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.
- D** David Staley 00:31

Lucille Toth is an Assistant Professor of French at The Ohio State University Newark Campus and holds a courtesy appointment in the Department of Dance. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Toth.
- L** Lucille Toth 00:43

Thank you, hi.
- D** David Staley 00:44

I'm very interested in your recent project, which is called "On Board(hers)", and I want to make certain I spell this out for our audience, that's "On Board, B,O,A,R,D" and then in parentheses, "H,E,R,S", "Board(hers)". So it's an all-women dance performance that you've choreographed. Tell us about "On Board(hers)".
- L** Lucille Toth 01:03

Sure. Well, it's a project that was born in November 2017, actually, when I first moved to Ohio, and I first started my appointment here at OSU. I was invited to be part of women performance, basically, at the Angela Meleca Gallery, downtown Columbus. And the topic was repetition.

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David Staley 01:25

Repetition?

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Lucille Toth 01:26

Repetition. So we were five artists, different mediums. Some of us were painters, some of them photographers, and I was a dancer. And as an immigrant - so I'm from France originally - and as an immigrant, repetition is really key, is really central to the journey of an immigrant because, you know, you need to repeat every year, your date of birth, your country of origin, your name over and over again, you know, it's part of the process of renewing your visa. And so I started to create a solo piece about this idea of repetition as an immigrant. And while I was working on this, what was interesting is that I realized, I mean, I knew already, but I kind of realized that I had really privileged status - white cisgendered, straight, French academic - I'm really not a target of current immigration policies. So once I did that performance, and the reception was really great, like a lot of people came to see me on the show, they could really connect to this, and it was, seemed really important for them. So I decided to open the conversation and bring more female immigrants into this project, and so that's how I started to think about how I could find more female immigrants that were maybe more isolated than others, and what could I do with them. So basically, "On Board(hers)", that's a series of workshop. We meet once a month, only women and immigrants, or what I call immigrants, because legal version of immigrants, there's a difference. But for me, as long as you are, you identify as a woman, either you were born or not as a woman, but as long as you identify as a woman, and you were born outside of the U.S., you qualify to be part of the project, basically. So I created a space, and since I'm a dancer, choreographer, for me, the movement takes over when the words are limited, or cannot express everything. And I work a lot on something that, you know, I develop, which is the memory of the body. So the memory of the body, the body has a certain form to, certain way to remember traumas and experiences that's very different than your brain or your culture, or, you know. So, I'm trying to work on those memories of the body that we usually shut down and we're not really encouraged to hear or to listen to in our current culture. And I want to work on those memories of the body and try to transform them through movement. So we basically move around, follow my lead. I recently built a wall, you know that, the wall that everybody talks about? So, I built it.

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David Staley 04:10

You built the wall? Downtown, at CCAD.

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Lucille Toth 04:11

I mean, I didn't build it myself, I asked someone to do it. It's Ian Ruffino from the Beeler Gallery, we rehearse at the Beeler Gallery. Exactly. They are curating the whole thing and producing "On Board(hers)". So he built the wall, the vision of the wall that I had, and now we have a

"On Board(hers)" - So we built the wall, the vision of the wall that I had, and now we have a moveable wall that we play with. And we're trying to, you know, change the narrative a little bit, the narrative that's really put upon us as immigrants, female immigrants, and how can we rethink that relationship we have to that physical and symbolic wall in a way? So yeah, that's a long explanation of what is "On Boarders".

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David Staley 04:52

So, I understand this is difficult in the medium that we're working in right now, but could you give the audience a sense of what they might experience when they see "On Board(hers)", can you put the choreography into words?

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Lucille Toth 05:04

So it's not a choreography per se, it's based on improvisation techniques. I give prompts, for example - let's play, let's do it together. If you had to imagine a movement, when you cross the border, the last time you crossed the border, or the last time you went through a security checkpoint at the airport, let's say - what movement would you do to represent your physical relationship to the border? What would be the movement? You know, so what, so I'm going to try to describe, if you do something, I'm going to try to describe it. For example, one of my, the immigrant women I work with, you know, when you cross the security, and you have to go through this glass machine, and you have to put your your arms up in a triangle way. And so that was her movement, you know, so it's really, everybody does it, there's nothing particularly significant as an immigrant, like, even if you're not an immigrant, you have to do it. But the thing is that as an immigrant, then you go through other things. Then, you go through a series of questions, then you go through pretty much a nightmare of policies that most of non-immigrants don't have to go through. And so, an example is that, this precise example of this precise gesture. Yolanda, she's one of the immigrant women I'm working with, she's from the Philippines. She's in her 70s, and when she was doing this movement in the workshop, she started to transform it into something else. So basically, once you repeat it, once you repeat it over and over again, then she started to just like stretch it, and that becomes just like two arms trying to protect the other women around her. The triangle became like spreading on the other, the two sides of your body, and just as a protective shield present, basically,

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David Staley 06:56

Lucille has her arms spread out wide, that's what I'm able to see.

L

Lucille Toth 07:00

Yeah. So I give prompts to the women, and we, they follow my voice, basically. So what you can see if you come to see "On Board(hers)", we'll be playing with the wall, carrying the wall, putting the audience into our situation. That's also the goal of it is to create empathy, to make people in front of us realize what we're going through and trying to find gentle, or not gentle ways, to put them in our situation, physical and also more symbolic, and you know, engaging into a conversation with them.

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David Staley 07:34

"On Board(hers)" is part of a larger research project that you're doing on borders and movement called moving bodies, moving borders, tell us a little more about this project.

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Lucille Toth 07:43

Sure. Usually when I work, in general, as a dance scholar, it's always complicated to see, do I need to start by creating or do I need to start with the critical work? So it's always kind of, you know, the primary question you ask yourself. Usually, I started with the critical aspects of my topics. And for this one, because I'm an immigrant, because I'm a woman, because I'm a dancer, I really wanted to start with this, I really wanted to start with the bodies, the actual people. So I really wanted to start with "On Board(hers)", with the dance project. But all of this has the trajectories really to produce a scholarly work. What I really want to see is, you know, being from Europe right now, this question of migration and movement is really at the core of pretty much everything you hear in the media, everything, everywhere, and being in motion means something now. Apparently, people that are in motion are kind of threatening right now, they're threatening everybody. Since when is being in motion is threatening? So we will encourage in a capitalist society to actually - so the goods can navigate and very freely, they can cross borders very freely, but somehow people cannot anymore or when they do, then they become a threat. And I find movement and dance being maybe able to reconcile the two sides of the border, in a way. So because it's a nonverbal form of communication, because when you go through the body, words have limits, in the sense that you cannot translate everything. You can translate, you can translate languages, but you cannot translate customs. You cannot always translate traditions. Somehow the body can negotiate this in another way, and what I find interesting is when I work with choreographers that actually cross borders, I think about... Faustin Linyekula is from Congo. I mean, he's a fantastic choreographer that crosses the border in a very political way. So all his dance, every time he presents a piece, he really wants to make sure that the piece say something about his tradition and confronts people on the other side of that border. And so what I'm trying to understand in this project is really how those movements, these motions that we see right now, the migration that we are experiencing right now, how can this be read as a choreography? And it's not naive to think this choreography, not in the sense that, you know, people anticipated and choreographed the way they're going to move, obviously not. But how can we see this movement as something more performative and as something less threatening, because choreographies can be political, and the body is political, you know, per se. So that's where I'm going.

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David Staley 10:39

How is choreography political?

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Lucille Toth 10:41

So many ways.

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D David Staley 10:42
Such as?

L Lucille Toth 10:43
Such as, when I think primarily, I think that whenever you talk about about it is political, because the body is so politicized that you cannot live without the policies that puts upon you, that makes you, you know? And as an immigrant, and as a woman, I know what I'm talking about in the sense that everything I do, just the very fact that I'm allowed to be here in front of you, that my body is allowed to be here in front of you, is political. Dance, also, was a very political medium in very specific times, for example, in the history of dance, I think about the AIDS epidemic, because I worked on AIDS a lot, soo that's what I have in my mind. It was very, very, very major in the way that AIDS was promoted, the representations of AIDS, and even influential, you know, in the ways that, like, dance offers different narratives, different possibilities to represent the AIDS epidemic.

D David Staley 11:42
And this is something I'd like to sort of excavate with you further, you used the word translate before. And so you're a dancer, choreographer, but you're also a scholar, you write as well. And I wonder, are you engaging in a kind of translation, I suppose? Are you bilingual, and that's - I mean, you're bilingual, obviously - are you bilingual between sort of words and movement?

L Lucille Toth 12:01
That's interesting.

D David Staley 12:04
And can one translate between words and movements?

L Lucille Toth 12:08
I mean, you can, obviously you can. You can say something and just put movements on it, or you can show a movement and someone can interpret, and that will be from a translation. But I don't think it has to be translated, I don't think words have to be translated into movement, and I don't think especially movement has to be translated into words. I think there's... it's another form of language.

D David Staley 12:32
Movement is another form of language.

L Lucille Toth 12:34

Yeah, I think sometimes it replaces moments when the words are not enough, or maybe it's saturated. For example, you know, right now there's these medical terminologies that are used to describe immigrants. People say we are parasites, we infest the country, we are the cancer of the country. So that's medical terminology that's extremely traumatizing and strong. And those words, you cannot I mean, it's really hard right now, to not think of the wall. A wall used to be just a wall, but now the wall is so charged, and so saturated. Maybe that's when we can use movement to overcome this and a way to cope, to reach the next level, or to just like feel, you know, to just like, go over the words that are saturated.

D David Staley 13:22

Let's talk about your scholarship. You are also working on a book, Virus and Its Movements.

L Lucille Toth 13:30

Yeah.

D David Staley 13:30

Thinking of that sort of medical terminology, which is my translation, the title is in French when I saw it. And in fact, the book is on contemporary French dance. Tell us a bit about this book project.

L Lucille Toth 13:40

Absolutely. So it's a book that will come out next year.

D David Staley 13:44

Congratulations. And give us the French name?

L Lucille Toth 13:47

Le virus et ses mouvements.

D David Staley 13:48

Thank you.

L

Lucille Toth 13:49

It's especially on the AIDS epidemic, and how AIDS influenced dance and dance influenced the narratives around AIDS. I go from the 90s, 1990s, to nowadays. And I think what's really interesting and what's... everything is obviously extremely interesting in this, in this book, but the major, I think, thing that's really new about the book is the contemplation of how it's, what are the residuals, what's the heritage now of AIDS? We are supposedly in this, you know, post-AIDS era, but is it really post, what is post of? AIDS still exists, especially in some parts of the world, you know, it's even like at the peak of the pandemics right now. So what are we post of? And so that's really the question of the book, and I'm trying to use dance for the reasons I just told you, to try to rethink today. Our bodies are still affected by the virus, not just the virus in a physical way, in the sense that I was born in 1983. So I was born the year that we actually understood that HIV was a virus. I grew up with the prophylaxis, I grew up with the prevention campaigns, I grew up with all of this, I grew up with everybody telling me, you need to protect yourself, if you don't protect yourself, you're a killer, or you are a terrorist. But so, even though I'm not physically affected by AIDS, I'm not an HIV positive person, but I'm still emotionally affected by it. Everybody is affected by AIDS in the sense that we all have this protectiveness, we all have this way to think sexuality, body interactions between people, that's based on what we've been taught about AIDS. So that's what I'm trying to, to examine, you know, in the book, and how does this new form of emotional immunodeficiency - and that's how I call it like, emotional immunodeficiency - how is this translated? See, I'm using the word, the word translation. How is this translated into dance, basically. So I'm trying to, there's different ballets that I'm analyzing, that really saw this shift between a physical immunodeficiency to a more emotional affect, emotional affection of the AIDS epidemics.

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David Staley 16:21

You're a choreographer, writer, obviously. I'm interested in excavating your creative process, in other words, from where do your ideas come? You've been describing lots of ideas, I wonder if you could give us a sense of where those ideas come from.

L

Lucille Toth 16:37

Sure. For "On Board(hers)", for example, I really based my work on this HIV-positive, African American choreographer, his name is Bill T. Jones. I'm pretty sure a lot of people here know him, the work that he did in this piece is still here. He gathered a lot of people, patients, terminally ill patients, for a different type of workshop, and he asked them, he prompt them, exactly how I'm doing with the female immigrants. So you prompt them, you give them sentences or words, and they had to come up with movements. And based on those movements, after months and months and months of workshops, he created a choreography that was danced by professional dancers. Differently than Bill T. Jones, my women dance their own movement. So that's the only difference that we have between what Bill T. Jones does and what I tried to do, so that's definitely something extremely influential. Also, once you a dancer and choreographer, and you did improv classes, there's the techniques that you can use in any context, basically, so that's also stuff that I'm definitely using. Faustin Linyekula, also, the choreographer from Congo, I just told you about definitely a big influence, especially on the ways he negotiates the voice, he includes his voice, the spoken voice, into his movement. And that's something that contemporary dancers do often, but not always in a successful way, and I think he does it in a beautiful way. So he writes his own words, and he says his own words while

he's dancing. So he's like the Beyonce of the contemporary dance. But that's something that's a technique, you know, that has to be taught, that's not something that you can do so easily. And I work a lot with the women I'm working with on writing as well, and I make them write, and I make them say in an native language. So we really also work on how to negotiate the difference between your English, which is a second language, and your first language and the language of the body and the language of writing.

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David Staley 18:47

You're also involved with the MA and Medical Humanities program here at Ohio State, teaching a seminar as I understand it. Tell us about what you'll be teaching.

L

Lucille Toth 18:55

Yeah, so I'm currently teaching... A graduate seminar, it's called "From the Art of Medicine to Medicine in the Arts". Especially in Francophone culture, but not only, we do so many things. We just read, for example, Susan Sontag, which is pretty much the Bible of the medical humanities, her essay, *Illness as Metaphor*. We read like major scholarly works about medical humanities, but also we watched a lot of dance, obviously, they have to, they have to learn. A lot of, we're starting the AIDS literature. Medical humanities is really, it's not new, but it's new as a field.

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David Staley 18:58

Currently teaching. Give us a quick definition of medical humanities.

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Lucille Toth 19:16

It's the imagery and the representations of medical body - medicalized bodies or ill bodies - into culture, arts literature. So it's not medical treatise, per se, it's not a clinical approach, we don't pretend to be a doctor. But it's really about how the medicalized body or how the medical gaze affected our way to perceive the body, for instance, you know. So in my seminar right now, we're working on the journal of a French author, Hervé Guibert. He was an HIV positive author, and he brought his journal while he was hospitalized, at the very end of his life. So we are working on his journal as a data, as an actual piece that could, and should, be used by medical professionals as something that... it's actually testimony that says so much about the emotional trauma that is the illness. We also watch, for example, Anna Halprin, she's American choreographer, she had cancer. And she did this extra- I mean, I have no words to describe the beauty of this piece. But she just screams for 20 minutes, she just screams, you know. Because I mean, sometimes that's all you can do even physically, you know, that's, that's how far you can go in a performance, just like screams and, and show the audience that, good for you for being able to go home right after, but I'll stay with that scream and I'll stay with that pain. And thinking about the pain in modernity, pain is something very anti-modern. We're not supposed to experience pain, we're not supposed to suffer physically. So when you face, when you read, when you see pain, what does that change for you as a modern citizen? This is part of things we can work on through medical humanities.

D David Staley 21:37
What's next for your research and creative practice?

L Lucille Toth 21:42
I would like to expand "On Board(hers)", and expand it to rural America. I want to create an archive that shows how local and global immigration is really the history of contemporary world. There's a lot of voices that are lost because of migration, because nobody follows those people, and I want to create an archive of voices and movements that will really just give a chance to those people to be part of the history that we're trying to trace.

D David Staley 22:16
Lucille Toth, thank you.

L Lucille Toth 22:18
Thank you very much.

E Eva Dale 22:20
Voices from the Arts and Sciences is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug Dangler. I'm Eva Dale.