



Jen Norris  14 hours ago 6 min read

Review: Zaccho Dance Theatre and Dancers' Group present 'The People's Palace', City Hall, San Francisco, May 9 -12. 2024

"I want to live in a community where people are curious about me, instead of creating boundaries," this phrase, drawn from Joanna Haigood's latest show, summarizes her impactful career as I've observed it over the past decade. She and her company Zaccho Dance Theatre (ZDT) engage audiences through aerial and apparatus-based performances inspired by the places they are made. Interrogating social histories and social justice themes, her work is consistently rigorous, thought-provoking, and honest.

It is a warm Thursday evening and the line up the granite steps of San Francisco's City Hall is substantial, widening at the top as people, approaching from numerous directions, amiably merge. *The People's Palace* (a Co-Production of ZDT and Dancers' Group) is set to begin in a few minutes. The anticipation for Haigood's site-specific installation, in this majestic Beaux-Artes building, is palpable. We come to be inspired, to learn, and to bear witness. But first, we must pass through metal detection operated by uniformed Sheriff Department employees.

Attendees sit on the floor and stand in clusters around the base of the Rotunda's grand marble staircase. Under the stars of a projected galaxy, Gregg Castro, cultural director of the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone and Zaccho collaborator, chants a welcome and/or a blessing. For the balance of the piece, the Marcus Shelby Quartet offers an original jazz composition by Shelby, transcendent in its inclusion of a harp and a flute, alongside the more typical sax, bass, and trumpet.



William Brewton Fowler, Jr. amid in City Hall part of Zaccho Dance Theatre's The People's Palace; Photo J. Norris

While *The People's Palace*, deploys four movement groups, the architecture bathed in color and projection is also a full character in this drama. The awe-inspiring vaulting space tends to dwarf our humble human forms. It is not possible to take in the whole show from any one vantage; so repeat viewings, and varied points of view are required. As the 30-minute show reoccurs in a seamless loop, I watch four cycles, enjoying the altered perspectives from the surrounding upper-level balustrades.

Tableaus, processions, and dance play out along the palatial center stair. A dozen members of The Skywatchers Ensemble, a Tenderloin-based performance company, wend their way up the staircase in a shared cadence. Bending, gathering, pulling arms to chest, they rise to drop one arm and look purposefully over their shoulders at us, before taking the next step. I picture them as field workers. The protagonist, a Black male dancer, William Brewton Fowler, Jr., weaves among them as “That which stood before us, now flies with us,” flashes above. The collective, with Black Power fists, raised reaches the top landing. As their hands open, the supertitle changes to “WAKED.”



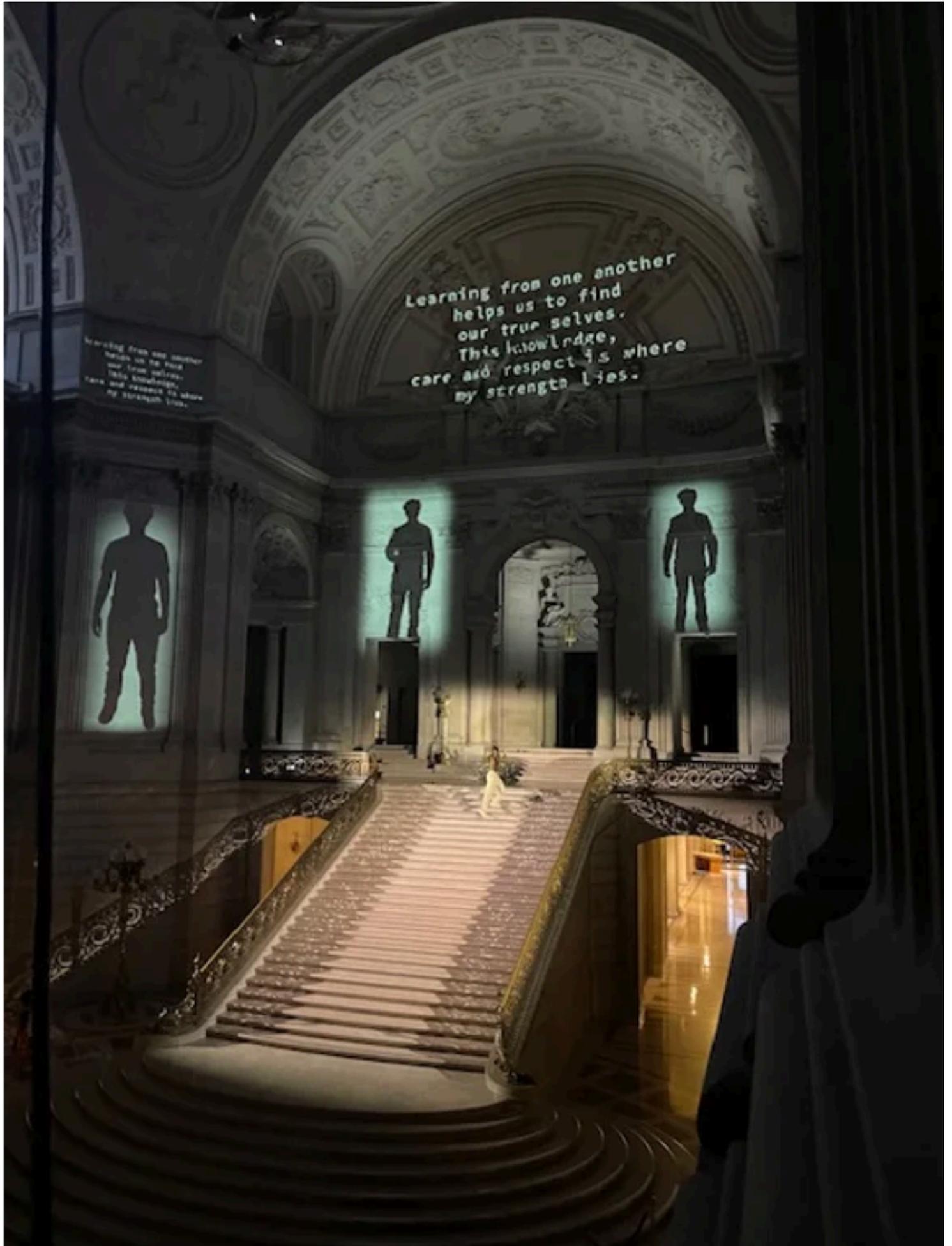
The Skywatchers Ensemble on the grand staircase in "The People's Palace" Photo J. Norris

The text, which runs throughout the piece, is weighty, but difficult to prioritize or absorb in a single viewing. Phases rise: "Naked," "Becoming unafraid," and truths such as "Because of my color, I must represent myself as if I am not a threat, I don't want others to feel scared of us," and "Others need to feel what it is like to be a person of color in the world."

Meanwhile, from the start on dizzyingly high cornices, two pairs of brightly clad women dance. Separated by the gulf of the dome, the duos craft pictures with their bodies, as they manipulate a reflective golden fabric panel. Twisted into a rope it becomes the yoke with which one pulls the plough of another; draped over shoulders a shared shawl, a cape, which unfurls its yardage for several stories. Free of the material, their bodies make waves, echoing across the space. Seemingly unaffected by the height, they balance on a leg, extending the other behind in resplendent arabesques.

Returned to the lower landing, Fowler offers a sinuous solo as the energy rippling through his torso, hips, thighs, and ankles lifts him to the balls of his feet. Whisking his hands away from his face, as if to see more clearly, he launches up the stair and noodles down once more. During one, he light-heartedly grabs here and there, along his way, as if catching fireflies, feet prancing in joyful, carefree play. In his various descents, he approaches with

aching vulnerability, palms up, reaching beseechingly to the audience, making eye contact, hoping for connection.



William Brewton Fowler, Jr. amid in City Hall part of Zaccho Dance Theatre's The People's Palace; Photo J. Norris

Arms spread, Fowler is a bright living star safe-harboring within a sepia photo mosaic of “family photos.” Portraits of graduates, business people, armed service personnel, wedding parties, and posed families, display the polished and accomplished lineages of American citizenry whose ancestry extends to Africa, Asia, South America, and Southern North America, become morphing wallpaper upon the cavernous multi-story architecture. The scale of the enterprise, to amass and curate such an inclusive community of images is dazzling. The projection’s impact increases as the sunlight through high windows wanes with nightfall. Correcting the long-perpetrated wrong of absence and removal, 30-foot silhouettes of Black men fill the walls, and giant cameos of People of Color overlay the architectural medallions of Civic Values (representing Learning, Liberty, Strength and Equality) which frame the space.

As the women from above, Saharla Vetsch , Tristan Ching Hartmann, Nina Sawant, and Jocelyn Reyes, come down from their lofty perches to perform a cooperative quartet on the stair, we have the opportunity to realize the full richness of designer Dana Kawano’s costumes. Each is dressed in colors, textures, and shapes which represent their cultural heritage. Reyes sports ruffled layers of bright blue and 3-dimensional white satin roses in homage to her Latin American roots, while Vetsch, a Somali-American, wears a beige tunic and harem pants in the orange of the traditional Banadiri material.



Saharla Vetsch (orange), Tristan Ching Hartmann (red), Nina Sawant (fuschia), and Jocelyn Reyes (blue) in Zaccho Dance Theatre's The People's Palace; Photo J. Norris

The finale features an aerial duet by circus-trained performers Veronica Blair and Ciarra D'Onofrio. They dance on a small acrylic disc hanging 40-feet in the air, in the center of the room. By carefully controlling their ropes and harnesses and maintaining a complicated equilibrium between them, Blair and D'Onofrio execute gravity-defying feats of grace, strength, and athleticism. With bodies parallel to the ground, they walk in tandem around the edge of the platform, switching directions before D'Onofrio cartwheels over Blair like astronauts in zero gravity. I thought I had heard that the disc represents a 5th medallion, Equity. As I watch these two, one Black and one White, balance each other's weight, I feel anew how one's success is dependent on the cultivated ability to work in harmony with each other and the environment.



Veronica Blair (silver/far) & Ciarra D'Onofrio (gold/near) in Zaccho Dance Theatre's The People's Palace; Photo J. Norris

The “People’s Palace” feels like a gift to the city, offered free-of-charge and open-to-all. The production values are consistently strong, and the collaborators world-class. Once again Haigood and friends create art which addresses the historical erasure, relentless discrimination, and on-going marginalization of people of color in America, while leaving room for hope.



Veronica Blair (silver/far) & Ciarra D'Onofrio (gold/near) in Zaccho Dance Theatre's The People's Palace; Photo J. Norris

Review by Jen Norris, published May 13, 2024

Production Credits:

Presented by Dancers' Group & Zaccho Dance Theatre

The People's Palace a performance installation

This performance is dedicated to Robert Henry Johnson, the visionary and bright star. We are grateful for the gifts he's left us and for the presence of his guiding spirit during this process.

Conceived & Directed by Joanna Haigood In collaboration with

Composer: Marcus Shelby

Visual Artist: Mildred Howard

Scenic Designer: Sean Riley

Rigging Designer/Lead Rigger: David Freitag

Design Consultant & Fabricator: Wayne Campbell

Lighting Designer: Krissy Kenny

Projection Designer: Aron Altmark

Costume Designer: Dana Kawano

Indigenous Culture Bearers: Gregg Castro & Jonathan Cordero

Assistant to Artistic Director: Aya "Fi." Shani Williams

Performing Artists: Veronica Blair Tristan Ching Hartmann Ciarra D'Onofrio William Brewton Fowler, Jr. Jocelyn Reyes Nina Sawant Saharla Vetsch

The Skywatchers Ensemble: Joel Yates, Anne Bluethenthal, Shavonne Allen, Nazelah Jamison, Shakiri, Sarah Morrisette, Shanan Noya Liu, Chassity Gantt, Dot Com, Lauren Swiger, Noelle Castro, Maurice Hudson, Regi Meadows

Marcus Shelby Quartet: Darren Johnston (trumpet/vocal) Destiny Muhammad (harp/vocal) Marcus Shelby (bass/kalimba) Phil Vieux (alto saxophone/