

The Dynamic Tensions Physical Culture Show

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In this piece, Broderick Chow, director and writer of The Dynamic Tensions Physical Culture Show, performed 13 October 2017 at the Anatomy Museum, King's College London, takes the reader through the piece's "surrogation" of the history of physical culture on the theatrical stage.



The Dynamic Tensions Physical Culture Show (DTPCS) stages a counter-genealogy of “built masculinities” by bringing to light the origins of *physical culture* (a movement prefiguring contemporary fitness) in the late 19th and early 20th century vaudeville theatres and Music Halls. The show is not a historical re-enactment, but rather an attempt to inhabit the uneasy space between sport and theatre staged in this forgotten tradition. Refracting notions of “authentic” acts of sport through the theatrical, the performance explores how men negotiate their relationship to the ideal of the strong, athletic, and muscular male body (especially with the knowledge that it can be destructive to self and others); how fitness can be seen as a form of self-expression and creative practice; and how men use fitness as a way of relating to self and others. These questions were motivated by a context of present and urgent conversations about masculinity, gendered violence, institutionalized sexism, homophobia, whiteness, and mental health. I propose that the methodologies of theatre and performance studies are well placed to explore other meanings and possibilities for inauthentic acts of gender performance (posturing, peacocking, “come at me, bro”) without resorting to assertions of true or “authentic” gender.

DTPCS argues that the muscular, athletic male body ideal is a cultural script, but it is no less “real”, produced as it is through embodied labour(s) of everyday performance. Acts of physical culture, like Carrie Noland’s reading of “gesture” in *Agency and Embodiment*,¹ are dialectical. Noland argues that gesture is evidence of the body’s conditioning along cultural scripts, but also produced through movement, creating a kinesthetic experience that is also the basis for variation and change.² Physical culture, similarly, exists in the “dynamic tensions” (borrowing the name from Charles Atlas’s mail-order programme of muscle-building) between the institutions, industries, and social structures of physical fitness and the participant’s individual bodily experience. The performance, in its own dynamic tension between representation and the real, reveals the dialectical construction behind the manly tropes of the strongman, the bodybuilder, the wrestler, the rugby player, and the weightlifter.

Physical Culture and the Theatre

Physical culture is defined in the *OED* as “the development and strengthening of the body, esp. by means of regular exercise.” Culture, in this case, is used in the older sense of “cultivation”, rather than the sense of “the distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period.” Although the idea of “culturing” the body or muscles has given way in English to “getting fit”, “getting in shape”, or, more colloquially, “getting swole”, or “making gainz”, it is preserved in non-English languages, such as the Spanish word for bodybuilder, *culturista*.

But of course, physical culture, in its expansive meaning, is *also* “culture” in the common sense—fitness culture has its own distinctive practices, ideas, imagery, customs, and so on, just as do other physical cultures we might think about today: gymnastics, circus, martial arts. At its origin in the 19th century, the culture of physical culture was primarily communicated in the theatre. Physical culturists, such as strongmen and women like Apollon or Minerva, early bodybuilders such as Eugen Sandow, and wrestlers like George Hackenschmidt often headlined major Music Halls and variety theatres on both sides of the Atlantic, and used theatrical performance to spread the message of physical culture and advertise programmes of exercise. The 19th century physical culture movement, in a sense, was transnational in a certain sense, as the message spread through the touring circuits of the British Empire. But while it was a tool of Empire, it was also a site of encounter, as subaltern subjects negotiated new relations to images of whiteness and masculinity through bodily practice.

This culture is established in the show by the first “turn”, performed by strongman Daniel Crute, aka Sir Leopold Aleksander, the Lion of London. Crute has been an established performer on burlesque and variety circuits in London and internationally for several years.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/iMJ5DUwnzDA>

CHAPTER 1: A CHALLENGER!, PERFORMED BY DANIEL CRUTE AND BRODERICK CHOW
DTPCS also refers back to the Victorian and Edwardian physical culture performances through the use of musical numbers. On the left, Adam Johnson, Phoebe Ransome, and Jack Robinson sing “The Strongest Man on Earth”, composed by Roden and Venton in 1889. The number burlesques a piece of physical culture history, when Eugen Sandow challenged strongman Samson to a lifting contest at the Royal Aquarium, an act that marked Sandow’s debut in London. On the right, Phoebe Ransome sings Marie Lloyd’s famous number “When I Take My Morning Promenade.” The song’s lyric subtly explores what “acceptable femininity” is (“do you think my dress is a little bit...? Just a little bit...?”), which is reframed by Ransome’s use of the barbell and kettlebell as props.

Watch
 Video At:
<https://youtu.be/Kz37f9zc70c>



Watch
 Video At:
<https://youtu.be/1QsxCJwP91M>



Posing Routine

In *The Interpretations of Cultures*, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz parses the multiple meanings of “culture”, which (drawing on Clyde Kluckhohn), range from “a way of thinking, feeling, and believing” to “a mechanism for the normative regulation of

behaviour.”³ Physical culture lies somewhere in between—it is a way of life, but also a mechanism for disciplining the body. Because it also *produces* the body, its disciplinary, normative, and regulative function seems all the more obvious. However, as Geertz says, culture is also a matter of systems of meaning—thus “doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’ a manuscript.”⁴ Thus, ethnographic work on physical culture, like A.M. Klein’s groundbreaking book on bodybuilding, *Little Big Men*, has treated physical cultures as “webs of signification”, communities of shared meaning.⁵

The second chapter of *DTPCS*, “The Gym and the Garage”, challenges this methodological insistence on a community of meaning, proposing that it potentially misses the dynamic nature of the individual’s embodied relation to such shared meanings. It is an ethnography with a sample size of one, but it is not autoethnography.

I met bodybuilder and actor Peter Moore back in 2014 when I started going to a gym in Vauxhall called The Iron Club, where he worked as a personal trainer. We started talking after I showed him the proper form of a clean and jerk, and we trained together a few times after that. In this turn, Peter reframes and listens to his own journey through bodybuilding while posing.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/xzFrtgamh3k>

CHAPTER 2: THE GYM AND THE GARAGE, PERFORMED BY PETER MOORE, JONATHAN HINTON, JACK ROBINSON, ADAM JOHNSON, PHOEBE RANSOME, AND BRODERICK CHOW
During the development process for *DTPCS*, my research assistant Jonathan Hinton and I learned to pose from Pete. The dialectical nature of this theatrical display (a set gesture that also produces intense kinesthetic sensation) enabled us to develop an interview technique where Peter would choose a pose, hold it, and begin to speak, reflecting on his life narrative.

Bodybuilders *signify*—many things: masculinity, excess, steroids and modification, violence, sexuality, and queerness. But their bodies also *do* things, labouring, acting. Bringing the bodybuilder into such close theatrical framing suggests the multiple and dynamic ways to interpret a body we may think is obvious.

Acts, Authenticity, and Wrestling

Wrestling in the late 19th and early 20th century might convincingly stake a claim to be a transnational spectator sport and physical culture. Like many physical culturists, George Hackenschmidt was an immigrant, a German-speaking Estonian who took up the mantle of “The Russian Lion” and became a celebrity in his adopted home of the UK.

Hackenschmidt faced a panoply of international wrestlers: “The Terrible Turk” Ahmed Madrali; India’s The Great Gama; and American champion Frank Gotch. He was an early example of the “fixed”, theatrical form we call professional wrestling, and his international tours were both an example of transnational exchange and xenophobia embodied in physical contest.

While pro wrestling’s nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies are well trodden territory, the form’s paradoxical theatricality enables other possibilities too. Wrestling is a theatrical form where two performers present a simulacrum of a combat sport. Yet, despite the fight being “fake”, the material conditions of the spectacle are quite real. The damage to the body, then, comes not from the intention to injure but rather to protect the partner. In Chapter 3, I engage in a kind of physical exchange through the technique of wrestling with former professional wrestler Philip Bedwell.

In the first section, Phil moves through a sensory map of these ghostly wounds over a recording of him remembering injuries sustained during his career. The fleshly, somatic exploration of the body is in strong contrast to the “match” that follows, where Phil demonstrates his embodied knowledge of the wrestling form while reflecting upon it verbally. The usually non-verbal form of improvisatory collaboration between professional wrestlers is exposed at the same time as violent combat is portrayed to the audience.

Watch
Video At:
<https://youtu.be/pQ89NtZ8AP0>



INJURIES/MATCH FROM CHAPTER 3: AN EDUCATION IN WRESTLING, PERFORMED BY PHILIP BEDWELL AND BRODERICK CHOW

Watch
Video At:
<https://youtu.be/sfna-Z3i1G0>



TAP-OUT FROM CHAPTER 3: AN EDUCATION IN WRESTLING, PERFORMED BY PHILIP BEDWELL AND BRODERICK CHOW

After retiring from wrestling, George Hackenschmidt became a philosopher. He was taken seriously in his time, writing several books and giving lectures and Columbia and Cambridge. Hack's philosophy was a way of coming to terms with a life lived doing real-fake violence in the theatre—what he was searching for most of all was authentic experience, or, in his words, action as an expression of cosmic rhythm and harmony. “Drilled’ or trained actions are the opposite of such authentic expression. In other words, it seems like Hackenschmidt was dealing with questions of theatricality and performativity. In the final section of Chapter 3 we explore test Hackenschmidt’s philosophy using the text of an unpublished manuscript and an embodied act—an arm-bar—with the potential to cause real injury.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/HZwYdW27yn4>.

TAP-OUT IN DEVELOPMENT, JULY 2017.

A Gentleman's Game

Physical cultures can be “webs of signification” or individual acts of *culturing* the body, but clearly many physical cultures also conform to Kluckhorn’s darker definition of culture: “a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour.”⁶ Starting from assistant director and performer Jonathan Hinton’s experiences as a semi-professional rugby player, this section explores the relation of embodied practice to formations of destructive in-groupings.



Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/Ktp4hyBC_Ng

CHAPTER 4: A GENTLEMAN'S GAME / GASTON, PERFORMED BY JONATHAN HINTON, BRODERICK CHOW, AND ADAM JOHNSON.

Personal Best



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/Uf3pxwbnNNA>

The final section of *DTPCS* turns the researcher's gaze inward. Where I had navigated the previous sections of the piece as an "authority" of sorts, making connections between the acts shown and their historical analogues, "Personal 45Best" reverses this power dynamic.

I invite my weightlifting coach Kristian McPhee to talk through a demonstration in which I will attempt to break my old personal best (PB) attempt and snatch 85kg (or bodyweight).

View this post on Instagram

60 kg snatch and 80 kg clean and jerk at last session of @beachesbarbells London Olympic Weightlifting Weekend @bruneluni. This is the easiest these numbers have ever felt

A post shared by Broderick (@dangerology) on Jan 17, 2016 at 2:09pm PST

View this post on Instagram

Annnnd finally a decent 75 kg snatch! This is the same as my old PB but without the massive run forward, stumbling feet, general clumsiness #olylifts #olympicweightlifting #snatch #fit #gym @kristianandkilos

A post shared by Broderick (@dangerology) on Jul 10, 2016 at 9:42am PDT

View this post on Instagram

#PB alert! 80 kg snatch off floor on Saturday at the @dynamic tensions event @bruneluni @brunelwl. As always, gratitude to the best coach, @kristianandkilos who is much more effusive here! #olympicweightlifting #olylifting #snatch #lecturerswholift

A post shared by Broderick (@dangerology) on May 2, 2017 at 8:03am PDT

As these videos shared on social network Instagram demonstrate, weightlifting has always been a performance shared with an audience, even when I am training alone and that audience is merely imagined. This act, a milestone never to be repeated and certainly not in this format, was an attempt at moving towards a relational reading of physical culture. The spontaneous intergenerational relations between me, my coach Kristian, and his coach, the three-time British Olympian Michael Pearman, further evidences the possibility of physical culture as a mode of relating to others. By reframing something that might appear banal in sporting competition as a moment of shared experience, vulnerability, and triumph, the gap between the institutional form, rules, and indeed, culture, of physical culture, and the individual embodied act, is prised open.

But no sooner had the sweat dried than the questions began. *Was that really the heaviest weight you'd ever lifted? Did you miss the first attempt on purpose, so we'd be more impressed? Are the weights real?* One audience member asked to try to lift the barbell as we cleared up the space. Not wanting to disappoint, we let him pull it a few inches from the floor. *There must be some trick to it*, he muttered, as he walked away.

Like theatre, fitness attempts to show or represent an image or ideal, but it does so through the manipulation of material, real, things, and the live sweat and labours of the performer. By understanding the nature of the work of self-fashioning in an everyday practice we often take for granted, we can also understand that the association of fitness with destructive or “toxic” aspects of masculinity is not a given.

Response from Dr K lina Gotman, King's College London, and Q&A



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/zmWr7BMPr7c>

Full Documentation

The full documentation of *The Dynamic Tensions Physical Culture Show* is available below.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/2szHkMngJpM>

Credits

Director/Writer/Performer: Broderick Chow

Assistant Director/Performer: Jonathan Hinton

Performers: Philip Bedwell, Daniel Crute, Adam Johnson, Peter Moore, Phoebe Ransome, Jack Robinson

Coach: Kristian McPhee

Musical Director:, Sally Goodworth

Technical Manager: Jelmer Tuinstra

Technical Assistant: Jamie Russell-Curtis

Technical Manager (KCL): James Hare

AHRI Producers: Laura Douglas, Vicky Bowman, Madeleine Ryan

Weightlifting Equipment: Courtesy of Kristian McPhee

Wrestling Mats: Get Set Hire (GSH)

Post-Show Response and Discussion Chair: Kéline Gotman

Videography and Post – production: Alexandros Papathanasiou

Additional Camera Crew: Ozgur Karakaya, Seref Ozdemir

Broderick Chow is Senior Lecturer in Theatre at Brunel University London and was Principal Investigator on the AHRC-funded project Dynamic Tensions: New Masculinities in the Performance of Fitness. He is co-editor of Žižek and Performance (2014) and Performance and Professional Wrestling (2017). Broderick is a competitive weightlifter and coach.

Notes:

1. Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). ↵
2. Noland, p. 3. ↵
3. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretations of Cultures* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), pp. 4-5. ↵
4. Geertz, p. 10. ↵
5. Alan M. Klein, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993). ↵
6. Geertz, pp. 4-5. ↵