The Dynamic Tensions Physical Culture Show / Broderick Chow. London, United Kingdom, 2017, Video, hdcam, colour, 105:17 min.

Performed at: Anatomy Museum, Kings College, London, 13 October 2017; https://doi.org/10.17633/rd.brunel.5835813.v1 (Accessed 5 Mar 2020).

The Dynamic Tensions Physical Culture Show was performed on 13 October 2017, at the Anatomy Museum, Kings College London. This one-off performance event brought together athletes and artists to explore the history of physical culture on the theatrical stage. This film, documenting the entirety of the performance, was made by Alexandros Papathanasiou.

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)
Videographer: Alexandros Papathanasiou
Post-Show Response and Discussion Chair: Kélina Gotman

Director's Notes by Broderick D.V. Chow

On 30 November 1901, the Congregational Memorial Hall in Ludgate Circus, Farringdon, EC1 hosted the Health & Strength Physical Culture Display, which promised to be "the finest and most interesting event of its kind." The performance featured exhibition wrestling, boxing, musical displays of exercises with dumbbells and Indian Clubs, the strongwoman act of Giantella, a world-record weightlifting attempt by 18-year-old J. Langhorn, and the finale, "a series of Classical Poses in an Illuminated Posing Frame" by Mr. Launceston Elliott, among a total of fourteen turns. Memorial Hall may be gone, replaced in 1969 by British Telecom's Caroone House, but the influence of such displays can be seen just a few yards away at the Farringdon branch of Gymbox, where boxers, wrestlers and gymnasts train alongside weightlifters, powerlifters, and bodybuilders, and where I find myself training at least five times a week.

The relation across time, even in a single site like Farringdon, London, between the physical culture display of the past and fitness culture in the present, is what drives the Dynamic Tensions Physical Culture Show and my current research. In September 2016 I was awarded an AHRC Leadership Fellows grant to investigate physical culture and the performance of masculinities. I had been involved with Olympic Weightlifting for a few years, and gym culture in general for much longer, and I had a hunch that there was indeed a link between theatre and performance and physical culture. Diving into the archives, I have found that theatre and performance is not only related to modern fitness culture, but is the site of its birth. As much as writers on fitness culture like to imagine some connection to the ancient Greeks, it was in the popular theatre of the 19th and early 20th century that many of our contemporary forms of training were invented, popularized, and disseminated. The Health and Strength Display of 1901 was not an outlier—the physical culture show was ubiquitous, from the weightlifting displays at local clubs, to the strongman turns of British Music Hall and American variety, the gymnastics and bodybuilding displays of Muscle Beach performers Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, Jack Lalanne, and Steve Reeves, to the world of professional wrestling. But this rich history has been almost entirely forgotten, on both sides of the fence. Rarely does the theatrical history of physical culture warrant more than a mention of "theatre strongmen" in the work of sport scholars. Conversely, Victorian and Edwardian theatre historians might sometimes mention Eugen Sandow, but mainly as a kind of curiosity, ignoring the fact that he a) was an artist, and b) invented an entire body culture.

This conspicuous forgetting of this sport/performance history is probably related to the non-overlapping magisteria of our Western disciplines, where being good at art means you're bad at sports, and vice versa. But I think it also signifies something deeper: the objective, scientific culture of heath and fitness is haunted by its history in the theatre, the place of fakery, illusions, and shadows. Fitness culture must disavow its association with the theatre, lest its prescriptions for ideal health seem like mere "performances." Furthermore, consider that physical culture, which is so often associated with a kind of straight, white, bourgeois masculinity, was born in a place and culture so often associated with femininity and sexual deviance.

The Dynamic Tensions Physical Culture Show is intended to bring this buried history back into public discourse, not by re-enacting the past, but by "flexing" memory, as it were. Working with a group of performers, each with a very different background in physical culture and sport, the company has created a practice-as-research methodology combining autobiographical performance, verbatim theatre, physical performance, dance, and live art. The resulting show, I hope, is entertaining (and at times, astonishing!) but also provides an embodied perspective on fitness and physical culture, which is so often surrounded in stereotypes.