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Five Questions with Rebecca Rossen

by

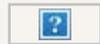
American Studies

Today we're pleased to feature an interview with another one of our incredible affiliate faculty members, **Dr. Rebecca Rossen**, professor of dance history in the Department of Theatre & Dance and Performance as Public Practice. Dr. Rossen has just published her first book, **Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance** (Oxford). We recently sat down with her to talk about her scholarly and artistic background, her new book, and her future research and

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teaching.



What is your scholarly background and how does it motivate your current research?

Before I was a scholar I was a dancer and choreographer in Chicago. I did that for the decade after I graduated from college, my entire 20s. I went to graduate school to get a PhD, expecting to continue on making dance, but the experience ended up transforming me into a historian. I would say that as a scholar I'm a dance historian whose work focuses on identity, ethnicity, and gender representations in performance. Methodologically, I bring together my work as a dance historian with my experience as a performer. Those two threads are not only present in my research but are also present in the classes that I teach and how I teach them.

What has been your favorite project to work on so far?

As a scholar I've worked on one main project (with multiple side projects) for a really long time, which started as a dissertation—as many of our projects do—14 years ago. It was finally birthed as a book last spring. It's both my favorite project as well as something that I have sometimes referred to as “the beast” because it was *the* project. **Dancing Jewish** has been an



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extremely involving endeavor. The book looks at how American Jewish choreographers, working in modern and postmodern dance, represent their Jewishness. I show how, over a 75-year period, dance allowed American Jews to grapple with issues like identity, difference, assimilation, and pride.

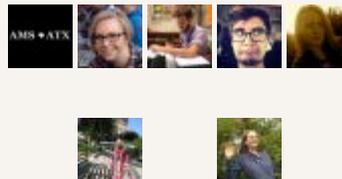
What projects are you excited about working on in the future?

Dancing Jewish considers various themes that are repeated in dances over time, like nostalgic depictions of Eastern European Jews or biblical heroism as a response to World War II or Jewish humor and stock characters. Because the book focuses solely on Jewish-American performances, it's definitely an American Studies book. I'm interested in the next book in looking at representations of the Holocaust in performance, not focusing solely on American artists but including European and Israeli artists, and not just focusing on Jewish artists but also including non-Jewish artists who have responded to the Holocaust in interesting ways. The next project is a natural extension of the first one but takes a more global perspective and moves beyond considering just the work of Jewish artists.

How do you see your work fitting into broader conversation in dance history or American Studies?

Dancing Jewish is certainly an American Studies book, because when you are talking

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about Jewishness in America, you are talking about how a group of people balanced a very specific ethnic identity with their Americanness, which generally—especially in the earlier part of the century—was conceived as not-Jewish. There are some very interesting tensions that get worked out in these dances between Jewishness and Americanness and how choreographers are choreographically trying to balance these identities or converge them. It is ultimately a book about American identity with a specific lens looking at Jewish identity. But it is also a work of Dance Studies, so if you are interested in dance and performance, it's a book that considers how identities are performed physically. Because of that, and because of my background as an artist, I think one of the contributions it makes is its use of embodied scholarship. I spent a lot of time in the archive, I did dozens of interviews, and there is analysis of photographic and video evidence and live performance. But I also use embodied methodologies, which means that at points in my research, I had physical and creative dialogues with my subjects. For example, I asked two of my subjects to “make me a Jewish dance,” and even though I didn't have any money and they didn't yet know me, they said okay. That process was a very interesting entre into my understanding of their work, because I didn't just learn about their products on stage, but I also learned something about their processes and what Jewishness meant to them.

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There are a number of ways in which my experience as a dancer/choreographer influences my research. Another example from the book is that I was a dancer in a piece called *Breathe Normally*. It's a very abstract piece; it was loosely about a family who has immigrated from the old country to the new country where they are very successful and lose touch with the past. The word Jewishness is certainly never mentioned in the performance even though there is text in the piece, but because I was in the room with those people as it was created, I am able to talk about how the piece is about assimilation. I would say that embodied scholarship is something that Dance Studies brings to the table and something that is not often found in American Studies or History scholarship. And there's consideration of gender in *Dancing Jewish* as well, because you can't really talk about ethnicity and stagings of ethnicity physically without talking about gender. So it's pretty interdisciplinary.

What has inspired your research and teaching? What people, texts, things?

There's a dance historian named Susan Manning who is my mentor and who wrote a book called *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, which looks at American dance and the ways in which race informed what we call modern dance. Her work is very influential. So is the work of Sander Gilman, who looks at the *Jewish body* as a

concept. More specifically, there are some really interesting theatre scholars who look at how Jewishness is represented in American theatre. Harley Erdman wrote a book called *Staging the Jew* which looks at ethnicity in American theater in the late 19th century and early 20th century, an era when a lot of Jews immigrated to the U.S. It's a very rich book. Another important work is by Henry Bial called *Acting Jewish*, which looks at representations of Jewish identity in popular American performance, specifically theatre and film in the mid-twentieth century. He has an idea called "double coding" that was really useful to me and considers how different audiences read and analyze a work differently. For example, a Jewish audience would get different messages from a performance than a non-Jewish audience. I found this useful in talking about works where other scholars or critics overlook Jewishness. Because I'm able to read the codes, I'm able to read Jewishness that's been assimilated out of a piece, abstracted away.

Bonus Question. How would you define American Studies in one sentence?

American Studies is an interdisciplinary inquiry into what it means to be an "American" that tries to understand how Americaness is represented and who gets to represent it and how.

Rebecca Rossen (Ph.D., Northwestern University) is a dance historian,

performance scholar, and choreographer whose research interests include modern and postmodern dance, stagings of identity in physical performance, and the relationship between research and practice. She teaches courses in dance history as well as undergraduate and graduate seminars that focus on identity in dance and interdisciplinary performance. Professor Rossen is a faculty affiliate in the Center for Women's and Gender Studies, the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies, and the American Studies Department.

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