

ARTS & CULTURE

Painful, Dangerous and 'Liberating': Bay Area Aerialist Says Soaring Through the Air Keeps Her Grounded

Written by **Christina Campodonico**

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Veronica Blair performs in Zaccho Dance Theatre's "Forgiveness." | Austin Forbord/Courtesy Cultural Counsel/Zaccho Dance Theatre

Bay Area-based aerial choreographer Joanna Haigood was a student at Bard College in New York the first time she put her body at risk for her art. The young Haigood was working on an adaptation of Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* when it dawned

on her and her collaborators that they should take a dream sequence in the opera off the ground—and up in the harness she went.

“It was wonderful,” Haigood, now 66, recalled. But it was also painful. The choreographer explained that all forms of dancing—whether on the ground or up in the air—take a toll on the body.



Saharla Vetch performs in "Love, a State of Grace" at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral in Nob Hill. | Walter Kitundu/Courtesy Zaccho Dance Theatre

“It looks so effortless,” Haigood said, “but it's just incredibly difficult.”

Haigood, who co-founded and leads San Francisco's oldest Black-run dance company, Bayview's Zaccho Dance Theatre, hopes those who watch her Juneteenth-focused *Flying to Freedom* will walk away feeling unfettered. The performance—which will mix music and theatrics by local artists with Zaccho's artistic aerial acrobatics at the Bayview Opera

House Friday and Saturday—grew out of a prompt Haigood shared with her collaborators.

The query: “What does it mean to be liberated in a Black body?”



Aerial choreographer and Zaccho Dance Theater Artistic Director Joanna Haigood |
Courtesy Cultural Counsel

Haigood felt that Juneteenth, which commemorates the end of slavery in America and was recently established as a federal holiday, would be an appropriate time to explore this

question and expand upon themes explored in her previous work, *Invisible Wings*, which was inspired by stories of the Underground Railroad. One story that stuck with Haigood was an African American folk tale passed from generation to generation and retold in Virginia Hamilton's book, called *The People Could Fly*. In the story, enslaved Black Americans have the superpower to step into the air and fly to their freedom.

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“Some of that is thought of as being a metaphor for how one transcends the trauma and the oppression of that time, and some people believe that it actually happened,” Haigood said. “But I think that both of those ideas are so powerful, particularly with respect to what our ancestors endured.”

The piece also builds upon her pandemic-era meditation *Love, a State of Grace*, which soared through the high-arched ceilings of Grace Cathedral last year and contemplated violent assaults on sacred spaces, such as 2015's Charleston Church massacre, Covid's pathogenic grip on the world and the racial reckoning around George Floyd's killing.

“That was completely in response to what was happening on the planet, really, but particularly in this country,” Haigood said of the piece, which required her husband to make a 100-foot ladder. The prop was not only a nod to the biblical tale of Jacob's ladder but also the work and labor that goes into nurturing and maintaining love.






Veronica Blair performs in Zaccho Dance Theatre's "Love, a State of Grace." | Walter Kitundu/Courtesy Zaccho Dance Theatre

Ultimately, Haigood hopes that *Flying to Freedom* creates an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be liberated. The event is also admission-free, and audience members will walk away with a notebook to journal their thoughts.


As for Haigood, the choreographer said that all the pain, the physical danger and the long hours of set-building and

rehearsals are worth it in the end. "You have to push through a lot of different thresholds of pain, but once you get on the other side, talk about liberating!" she said. "It's really super, super powerful."

Flying to Freedom

 Friday-Saturday | 8 p.m.

 Bayview Opera House

 [zaccho.org](https://www.zaccho.org)

 Free

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