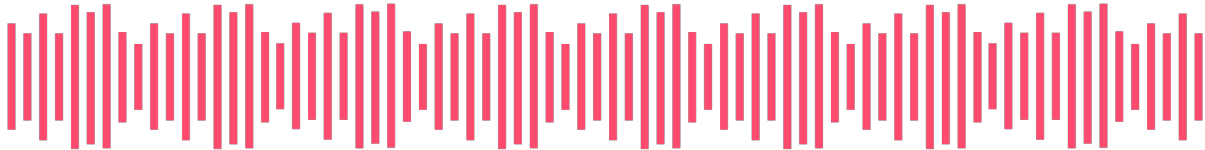


TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

Creating for a Digital Stage
S01 / E06

Episode Description

In this episode we talk to Rhiannon Faith and Ben Duke about their experiences of conceiving and creating dance film and we ask them, with the benefit of some experience and hindsight, how they are now approaching the use of technology and the digital experience as they conceive their next work.

We discuss the uncanny similarity between the themes at the core of Rhiannon's ready-to-tour show Drowntown and the filmed prologue Drowntown Lockdown she ended up making - and she lets us into a trade secret about how to get the best shots using apparatus borrowed from her 4 month old's nursery! Ben confessed to wondering 'what am I and what is this thing I do without an audience?' and admitted feeling reluctant to start making digital dance until the need to orchestrate pressure and deadlines to break the inertia of lockdown propelled him back into creation mode.

Together they discuss whether the digital outputs they created could replace the live experience, whether they were able to reach the kinds of audiences they aim to touch with their live work, the shift as we curate considered audience experiences rather than chase audience numbers and how we all, now, simply feel like beginners.

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Talking Moves is a Greenwich Dance production

Presented by Melanie Precious

Production by Carmel Smith, Lucy White and Melanie Precious

Intro

Melanie:

Hello, and welcome to Talking Moves a podcast from Greenwich Dance, where dance artists come together to talk about their work and practice the things that matter and the issues, which move them. I'm Melanie precious, and for this last episode of our first series, I talked with Ben Duke and Rhiannon Faith. Two artists whose work is probably best described as dance theater, art for live audiences presented in theaters, every performance unique in its own way.

Do you remember that?

Both responded to the challenges of 2020 and COVID-19 by experimenting with digital formats, Rhiannon and had been about to go on tour with a new production two years in the making called Drowntown. She channeled her team's creative energy into making a short film Drowntown Lockdown, which is a sort of prelude to the show which all being well we'll hit the stage next year.

Partly to cope with the tedium of lockdown, Ben gave himself the challenge of making a short, eloquent film about what it was to be part of an audience watching a show called, In a Nutshell, and the Argonauts whose project with Candoco and a cast drawn from four countries, also emerged in a digital format. But what's digital all about, can work on a screen ever replace the live experience, our discussion was longer than usual, and we came up, perhaps with more questions than answers, but I hope you'll enjoy listening. I started by asking Rhiannon and Ben, what they'd been enjoying online and locked down the first lockdown, that is.

Rhiannon:

Well, there's been so much out there. It's been wonderful to listen to a lot of the podcasts and the culture reset, talking about how we're going to survive as an industry, how artists are going to survive and what they need and how they can communicate in a thoughtful way with venues and how we can see moving forward this next couple of years, that's been really interesting. Of course, I watched, In a Nutshell, and I thought it was wonderful, It was really beautiful and brilliant actually. And yeah, there's been lots of online, there's been lots of classes. I did some in conversations with Gary Clark and I know a lot of artists have just jumped on board, the digital ship really, and just tried to put stuff out there. I'm about to do a festival with Lakeside Theatre this weekend. And yeah, there's lots of theaters that are just now asking artists to think about how they can reimagine their practice digitally.

Melanie:

And Ben how about you? What were you turning to in terms of feeding yourself, uh, with theaters closed? What was it that offered you a bit of hope or sanity or, space?

Ben:

Um, I guess probably like a lot of people, I was a bit reluctant to, to kind of go there to start with it. I've spent a lot of time being, not dismissive, but kind of just being a, what's the word, pledging my allegiance, I suppose, to the live and to the stage, and so I was like, there wasn't much that immediately kind of appealed out of all the stuff that felt like it was, people releasing recordings of stuff that they'd done stage and things, but I did eventually find some things, I mean. Rhiannon mentioned podcasts, I really enjoyed things that were kind of audio, so, I mean, I'm biased because I've worked with Raquel for a long time, her crash course in cloud spotting was one of the first things that I engaged with, and that was a half an hour

experience. And it came with this kind of booklet saying at this time, find a space, lie on the floor and listen to this.

So even though it wasn't live, it had that sense of like, I knew that other people at that time were going to be engaging with this thing, and I found that strangely comforting. But when it finished, so it was only half an hour and it finished and I was alone, you know, lying on the floor. I felt really bereft. I was like, oh no, this is, this is what we're all missing now, so we can engage with this. But so, so I really enjoyed that, and I enjoyed Rambert, did a live piece that, um, Wim Vandekeybus, choreographed for them. And again, there was something about it happening live, I realized that that felt important, even if it's an illusion, someone telling me that this is happening live kind of does something for me. So, um, yeah. And then, yeah, those were probably the highlights, for me.

Melanie:

It's interesting, isn't it?

Because I, I certainly know that my behavior changed, like I would never have really thought about watching dance on YouTube. I just never really saw the point and I found myself going, Oh, I can put YouTube onto my TV, so therefore I get this better experience. It doesn't feel like work anymore, it's not my laptop. So, there's something quiet, you know, we all sort of moved into a different era of exploration, didn't we?

So, you mentioned this just now, Ben about saying that you weren't resistant to digital, Rhiannon, pre COVID, what was your relationship with technology and the digital experience would you say?

Rhiannon:

Um, I'm pretty bad at anything digital, to be honest. I have to work really hard to do social media and things like that, that, um, is part of having a company and having a business. But yeah, my relationship like Ben was saying, I didn't really, like the idea of putting out shows that I'd done that were filmed because I'd never really filmed anything for that purpose. As well, in terms of budgets, arts council budgets, I have never really put in, enough kind of cash to really get something documented in a really excellent way, that's never been the priority, I guess. So, I actually struggled when we went into lockdown, it was around mental health awareness week, and I did have a film of one of my shows that was commissioned by Harlow Playhouse and the show itself, I talked to the clouds and they cry with me, was made for mental health awareness week, and I was asked whether we could share that as the footage of it, but it was done kind of thoughtlessly. So, I hadn't really had any time to make it feel like that was okay, but then at the same time, I was like, well, actually it exists. And the reason I made the show was to share it with people that were perhaps suffering from mental health issues or struggling and, uh, especially because of what was happening in lockdown down, it felt like, a good way to communicate with an audience that perhaps were feeling a little left behind. Um, so I, yeah, I said, you know, let's share it. And so I dunno, I had, uh, I've had quite a, uh, different I've gone through, uh, feeling like it was okay. And then feeling also like, I don't know, and that's why, I guess we make DrownTown Lockdown more as a creative response, rather than going back to the archives and sharing anything that wasn't meant to be seen in a digital format to actually create something new that had that process from the very beginning and therefore had a different, you know, became something very different.

Melanie:

I'm going to dig into that in a minute, because I find that really interesting, but Ben, before we do, pre COVID, had you ever filmed anything before, had you made digital content or were you feeling a bit like Rhiannon, he never sort of factored in those resources to do it in that way?

Ben:

Yeah. I think I felt the same. We'd recorded things as records and then kind of reluctantly shared those with promoters sometimes as a way of getting the work out there, but I'd never really enjoyed that, and probably that's why I hadn't prioritized it. It was always a last thought in a way, so it probably felt rushed and wasn't really considered like the camera work wasn't considered. So no, I haven't really engaged with it before now, and I think I was suspicious of it, and I think, like I said, at the beginning, I was also into this thing of it being live and quite low tech, I suppose, recently we've been doing work in rural venues, so the work is stuff that fits into all kinds of spaces. And so, it's been almost going the other way, it's going back towards an increasingly simple form of storytelling, I suppose, which feels like it pulls in slightly the opposite direction.

Melanie:

Yeah, I see exactly what you're saying there. It's interesting, isn't it? Because I'm not an artist, but as an organization, we would think in very much the same way as you, that digital was all about documenting, it's all about marketing, promoting maybe little trailers and things, but actually embedded in what we were creating or commissioning that hadn't really occurred to us. And of course, I know Sadlers Wells and National Theater putting things out streaming and live, but you know, we're talking big budgets over there, but they're like you said, when you're trying to pair back to your local audiences, it's been different. So, I find this conversation today really interesting, cause I think we're all really started from that very same place. So, Rihanna, Drowntown, I think there's something almost spooky about this subject, matter of the original show Drowntown, and the subsequent film that you created in lockdown. So those themes of isolation and uh, I'm just looking at the blurb that you had on your website. Drowntown holds up a mirror to society at tipping points. It's suddenly, that's where we were. Tell me about that, thoughts, that decision to make the film and then how you went about it.

Rhiannon:

It was very spooky actually. When we were making the show, it was probably a year ago, now that we're actually doing our first preview last November. Yeah, when we were making it, we were tapping into ideas of brokenness and loneliness. And actually, in the show, we have kind of metaphors of a, kind of, of a liquid that represents people's shadows and their shadow lives. And we were talking about how you can stand with your shadow and those things inside ourselves, like shame and regret or grief or loss that we hold, and we sometimes don't know how to live with those things, which then takes us into places of destruction or where we perhaps feel unloved or not valued. And all of those themes felt very kind of virus like in the actual show. There was this liquid that we have that we spit out, and, um, I dunno, it just felt very kind of like there was this dark virus, we're on the stage and I think sometimes loneliness can feel like a virus and those were conversations we were having in the creative process. And then for this all then to happen was really weird. And we kind of felt quite prepared emotionally because we'd spent so much time, you know, talking around the subject, matter of how to look after ourselves. I think feeling like we had to not just create something, not just

be creative, but I felt like I had the responsibility of trying to keep the emotional life of the show together in some way. So, to keep the performance together, I don't know Ben, if you feel like when you're making work, that if you have big breaks in the process that there are sometimes changes, in how you feel in that space together and like the emotional content that you're tapping into. And especially because I work autobiographically, I'm asking a lot of the performers to go into their shadow lives, a lot of the time, and to be open, to be able to access those emotions through their performance and through them performing them self in a way.

So, I guess if you're not in the studio together, there's a kind of loss and grief there. And I think just, um there was a decision to look after the creative team financially, as well as emotionally. So, you know, we had a responsibility to start a tour and the artists, the performers and the team were expecting to be paid for that tour. And so, we kind of thought, okay, what can we do? Let's not try and replicate the show. Let's try and think around the show. And we had finished it in some ways, there was still a bit of work to be done, but we had kind of got to a version of it that we felt we understood, and we understood who the performers were in that work. And so, we thought, okay, well, how do we live outside of that work? And how do we create something that keeps us all together? And so, we decided to do a kind of a prologue of the show, which then was something new and it meant that we could go into a different creative process and start to do tasks and start to yeah, create a new kind of performance.

Melanie:

It became an artwork in itself, didn't it? I'm going to ask you a bit more about how you created it and some of those choices, cause I've heard, they're quite interesting, but I just wanted to bring Ben in because I think there's some similarities with what I understand of the Argonauts being a full year project, Ben, that you'd been working on and suddenly the plans you had and the ways you thought you were going to be bringing that to a culmination changed, and so that decision to then create the film. Can you talk a little about that?

Ben:

Yeah, Yeah, I mean, lots of it sounds very similar to Rhiannon. I hadn't realized that Rihanna had started lockdown as a show. It seems so kind of connected to where we are now. I hadn't realized it was a project that had begun before all of this.

Melanie:

You know, I think you might have had a crystal ball in there, so

Rhiannon:

It is weird isn't it.

Yeah, it's a bit spooky

Ben:

Um, but yeah, I mean, so the Argonauts, I wasn't part of it for four years, so it was a project that Canduco and the British Council had been running with these workshops in these four countries in Ukraine, Georgia Armenia and Azerbaijan. And I came in at the end of that project when they decided that they wanted to create a performance with some of those

participants. So it was incredibly, I mean, it was amazing, but it was incredibly complicated logistically and uh, linguistically and, um, physically there were a kind of integrated company with a real range of, uh, experiences and the whole thing was kind of bonkers and by a strange kind of, well, it was luck and determination and generosity that the piece ended up, it was going to be part of the LIFT Festival, so they were going to come to the South Bank and um, yeah, so then that all just collapsed and it was kind of gutting because it was, it was a huge deal for me and for them, and, and, uh, it was all so exciting. And one of those rare projects where they were kind of gels somehow and the energy of the company was, was extraordinary and their excitement about the prospect of coming over to London, and, uh, so I felt, I just felt really sad about it all. And um, yeah.

Rhiannon:

Awww, that is really sad, so were they participants that weren't performers then?

Ben:

Uh, there was a range. So, there was, there was a company of 10 and there were three or four who were professional performers, and the rest weren't. So, they'd come together through these Canduco workshops.

Rhiannon:

That would have been really devastating for them, wouldn't it?

Ben:

I think so, I mean, I think, again, it's that thing of, you know, working with groups like that, you're reminded I suppose, of the thrill sometimes when we're working with professionals, not the professionals as cynical and jaded, but you know, it's the job and it's what they do. And so of course you, you slightly lose track of the thrill of it and of the, you know, going into these big theaters and the tech rehearsal, all that kind of stuff. And then to see it again through the eyes of people who hadn't had any of these experiences and suddenly remember how nerve wracking and exciting this thing could be. So anyway, yeah. So, then the film was just a, it was a way of keeping in touch with them and where Leo, Brian and Jemima Hodi, who I'd been working with on the project were both instrumental in going, let's just get in touch with them, let's ask them to make this, short video of themselves dancing. So, it was something for us and for them initially, and then you piece it together and you're like, yeah, let's share this with the world as well.

Rhiannon:

Amazing

Melanie:

So, you said you sent them tasks, did you, for them to record themselves and send in and then you wove it together? Was that the kind of process?

Ben:

Yes.

Yes, it was quite loose. It was to this track by Buffalo Springfield, which we'd been using in the show and, uh, the instructions, I mean the whole project was kind of plagued by Lost in Translation. So, the instructions with definitely, people sent back like just kind of the opposite, but it was kind of amazing. It's kind of took off. We went backwards and forwards many times and then we're like, yes, there's something.

Melanie:

And Rihanna, what was your process like?

Because both of you, I think have been very, very modest and said that you haven't had much experience of this, but both of your, subsequent works have got such high production values and the care and attention that you both took in Argonauts and are mostly talking about In a Nutshell, Ben, as well as Rhiannon's about camera angles and the decisions that you made, are really curated, and you both seem to me to be experienced filmmakers as I watched them. So how did you get that material Rihanna and from your company and was that you directing them so carefully and how did that all come about?

Rhiannon:

I can't take all the credit.

Melanie:

You should.

Rhiannon:

There was, uh, there's a brilliant film director called Adam Sheldon who works in Brighton with Big Egg films. And, um, I've known him for many years, and he started off, I think, like a DIY kind of filmmaker. And now it's just making like brilliant stuff, uh, for the community that he works in. So, he's really good at working with people and he's just very good at being supportive in the process of capturing a film. So, if I'm making a promo for a show, or if I'm working with participants in some way, I'm in the process of creation, I'll get him in. And he will not just take shots of people, but like really talk them through the process of what it's like to be in front of a camera. And so, I kind of knew he was perfect for the job because we were going to have to do it all via zoom and the level of working with video footage and filming yourselves, uh, was there a different in terms of the casts that we were working with. So, we have some very savvy techno cast members, but then we have some cast members that have very old phones that barely take photos. So, we had to kind of just navigate that, but we did it with his help. And I guess I just approached it by doing what I would do if I went into the studio. So, doing very task-based activities, I'd already kind of curated a narrative in some ways. Um, so I like to work through acts. Um, and so I kind of, with the performers, discuss the five acts that we would move through. And, um, I asked them to do things that would help that come to life. And then I'd work with Adam who would spend a day with each of the performers and I'd be kind of directing them in their acts. And then Adam would tell them what kind of shots he'd want them to try and achieve and where we might put the camera. And I think everyone had to download a specific app on their phone so that it looked at the aperture when we were getting the footage. And then we just did it via WhatsApp, actually we would. Yeah. So, we all had a WhatsApp thread, and the performers would go and do maybe

five takes of the same moment. And we would kind of see if in that shot, there was a coat in the background or someone had left a shopping bag out on their side and we'd like, just look and try and clean up every shot and then maybe do it again from a different angle and get some closeups and get some over heads. And yeah, we'd just try and think about how to make the shots the most creative.

Melanie:

So, was that in real time?

Rhiannon:

In real time yeah

Melanie:

Gosh ok, so you were literally cleaning up as you went along, you didn't just get sent loads of stuff that you had to sift through, you were curating along the way.

Rhiannon:

Yeah, Yeah, so me and Adam would sit together on the zoom and I'd say, okay, can we try that shot from, in the shower, from above the shower head? And he would kind of give the instruction then to the performer, had to get that. But we also had what I believe is an ingenious idea, which was that, when my baby was born, I had a mobile to hang over her cot. And, um, I can show you, I know the people on the podcast can't see this, but it was kind of like a selfie stick that has a kind of a bendy wire on it. And at the end of there's like a little grasp. Um, we sent one to each of the performers and this is what we got most of our shots from.

Melanie:

Wow

Rhiannon:

So you'd hang this on, um, like off the chair or on a rucksack or you could tie it to the shower and then we'd use this to kind of manipulate where the shot was taken from.

Melanie:

That's amazing

Rhiannon:

It's a selfie stick kind of bendy thing.

Melanie:

A bendy selfie stick.

Rhiannon:

A bendy selfie stick.

So that, that was my idea, so I'm taking full credit for that.

Melanie:

That's really interesting.

And Ben, so In a Nutshell, can't remember now, was that a single shot piece?

Ben:

Yes, it was. Yeah, I mean, I worked with Rachel Bunts who I'd worked with before on a rural touring dance initiative film. And the idea was that I was kind of by myself, so she set up the camera and then we had this strange conversation where I was like, Rachel, do you mind like not being here so that I can kind of have a feeling of loneliness? And she was like, yeah, I could do it. And then she was like, well, I kind of need to be here for the sound as well. So, then she was put on our headphones, but it was kind of hiding behind the seats so that, so that I had a feeling of being alone. So, it was kind of ridiculous, but, but yeah, she, she was there dealing with the technical side of it and then we were editing it together. So it was, it was a much kind of simpler thing, but yeah, I was interested in that idea of the relationship with the camera and what the camera does and, and yeah, I wanted that feeling of someone being by themselves. So, I didn't want too much kind of, maybe this is just an excuse for kind of technical limitations, but I didn't want too much kind of display of other people's engagement. So, kind of panning shots or zooming in or any of that kind of stuff.

Melanie:

And what flipped the switch for you, Ben, because you said earlier that you were resistant to making anything, what was it that suddenly went? No, actually I've got this thing to say.

Ben:

Uh, I want to say something profound, but I think it was just a kind of, uh, not, not exactly boredom, but a kind of, uh, just a lack of activity and a kind of frustration with the situation and with myself and recognizing that I somehow needed, uh, I needed deadlines. I needed someone to say do this by this date in order to feel motivated. I was kind of sunk in a, I dunno, despondent place where I was finding it very hard to feel at all creative and actually Daisy, the producer I worked with is, was kind of skilled at recognizing that and managed to orchestrate some pressure and some deadlines and some involvement from, from the place and from the rural touring dance initiative as well, so that there was expectation. And there was, yeah, there was a premiere date of, of, of sorts. And, and that then forced me to just, uh, try and form, form something.

Melanie:

That's really interesting. And that piece takes on almost a new meaning, I think as we go into this four weeks of lockdown now, you know, Sadlers Wells, BRB all this people have just been

able to wedge those doors open for a short time and they're all slamming shut again. That piece has a kind of profound resonance I think. I'm really interested both of you in the making of your pieces, perhaps not In a Nutshell so much as Argonauts now and the sort of in brackets, this is not the show and you Rihanna calling yours a prologue. It's a prologue, it's not the thing, it's not replaced, the thing I'm interested in that as a stance. How do you feel about that now? Is that to keep that show alive, because we believe it will be done.

Rhiannon:

Yeah. Uh, well, I don't know about you Ben, but I feel like, like, Drowntown, I've spent the last kind of two plus years making it, it's kind of existed in my conscious for a long, long time and it's had so much work put into it and is of its own, and you know, Drowntown Lockdown, I'm very proud of myself and my team for wanting to, you know, Ben was saying it's really hard to not feel or to be despondent in some way to feel like there's energy to do something creative, but we did. And we made a creative response and we let our kind of the dynamic of the team and the energy light take us forward into that. But it's not the show like the show we've been working on for ages, and it's, the show is something that we're really proud of. And it's a really hard show and it's really sad and, you know, you feel broken after watching it. And I didn't know if I could do that in this film. So, I guess a little bit of that was to protect me and the show in a way if I'm being honest. But I think, you know, also it was a creative response that had rules on it. Drowntown Lockdown, you know, we could only do it via zoom and we could only do it over a very small period because of the funding we had to do it. And I think we were grateful that we could share it on the Barbican platforms because that's where Drowntown is going to be premiered for its first run. And as far as we know, that's still going ahead in March, but you know, now with the new lockdown, it's just hard to really know. So, we are kind of in a state of complete and unsurety.

Melanie:

It's that keeping hold of hope and, and, and honoring all of that work and thought that went into the original, not tossing that out, but you know, creating satellites, something that's come off it. What's so amazing about your film, I think is that deep connection. It does have to the root of your show, but that it exists as an artwork in itself, which I think is wonderful. And actually, for me, inspires me to think about how digital could be used as we go forwards to enhance something. Because for me, that's been an almost perfect trailer to your show, but the word trailer doesn't do it any justice whatsoever. It's an artwork in itself that I've enjoyed, and when that show comes out, I will be there, but it's prolonged that experience for me. It's not just me getting a trailer in a taste and going, oh yeah, I might book a ticket. It's a kind of different part of the journey, which of course is more expensive, cause it's probably double the price you've had to make two art works, in order to get people to the first one.

Um, Ben, um, I know you said that the, the four-year project happened without you in it the whole time, but I also found it very interesting that it was very adamant in that synopsis that this is not the show. This is not the thing, it's what we did instead, are there plans to keep any of that project going or is that just the alternative ending?

Ben:

I don't know, I mean, yeah, I'm not sure. There's something around all of this, about the, yeah. I mean, Rihanna has spent two and a half years on a show and then, I mean, hopefully it will

happen, but, but what does that count for if it doesn't and what, you know, what, what is it, what is this thing that we do? And I found that really challenging, I guess, this idea that to suddenly go, am I just about the audience, not just about the audience, because you know that, you know, the relationship with the audience is kind of central, but what am I without an audience? And what is, what is this thing that I do without an audience? And I think that particularly with the Argonauts, it felt, cause it felt so important to put that group because they're marginalized in all kinds of ways to put them it's kind of center stage and to be denied that it's like, well, what is it then, I can't accept that this is just a waste of time and that we've just kind of, just gone around in circles for, for nothing. But I think that realistically, it was such a kind of moment in time and it, and it was such a kind of amazing alignment of scraping together the money to get them all over here. And politically, it was very complicated and now, I mean their performance from Armenia and Azerbaijan and that whole situation has got far worse since, since we were working together and the chances of them being able to appear on a stage together now feel really slim. So, there's so many things that seem to make it unlikely that that show will happen. So, I guess the, the film is a, I don't know, it's, it's a, it's a record, it's an echo, it's, it's something, uh, something that remains from that. But I guess I also have to work on, on this, uh, yeah. Kind of shift that idea of of what it is and to go that wasn't, that wasn't a waste of time, energetically that was a creative endeavor and, and it brought a lot to me and I hope it brought a lot to the other participants and maybe that's enough.

Rhiannon:

And I think when you work with participants as well, just being part of a creative process can be transformative for them in so many ways. And you know, it is devastating that they don't get that, you know, final kind of feeling of being in front of the audience and having their work, you know, appreciated. I would recommend that they will have received something very transformative anyway. And although it might be difficult now to recognize that I'm sure in the future, that will be something that stays with them.

Ben:

Yeah.

Melanie:

I feel really unfair. I feel like I'm being really unfair actually in my next sort of set of questions for you guys, because we've just explored your experience of creating and lockdown, which you had to do almost on a knee jerk. And I think we're now actually asking artists to really be thinking on their feet about the future. And we've had eight months of this new world and, and we really don't know what we're going into. And, and yet I'm asking you to think about some of these things. So, forgive me as I do. But one of the things that interests me is that we use the word digital, and we often just think about film, but I wonder whether you're starting to think about any of the other opportunities that these digital platforms might be offering us at this point. So social media, virtual reality, three 60 cameras. Um, I saw a gallery project on Pinterest. I wondered if anything's peaking you, as you think about, what your work might look like in the future, or perhaps you're not ready to be thinking about what your work is in the future. Where are you with that?

Rhiannon:

I'll let you go first, Ben

Ben:

Gosh, I don't know. I feel like I'm quite slow in all kinds of ways. I'm quite slow, and, and even, even this making of this short, quite simple film took a lot of time for me. So, there's a kind of, um, yeah, there's something and, and I was, I was reluctant to do it. I was dragging my heels about it and going, I don't want to do this. And, and I wonder if maybe that's going to be the kind of gradual approach to, to kind of other things. I find it hard to think about other things. I think, uh, I am just kind of old enough to have kind of missed the social media thing as part of my life and now resist it in all kinds of ways and find it. It's not, it's not part of how I engage with the world. So, I can't kind of imagine how I would use those things or even the kind of virtual reality which I can see has, uh, has a more, um, obvious appeal in that.

There's a kind of immersion, and there's a, I guess I like the idea that with virtual reality, you would be able to choose where you're looking and that, you know, those kind of choices that you have in a, in a live event, but I'm so far away from understanding those things. And that's the thing even about film, I was like, I really understand the theater space and how it works. I understand the fluidity of the stage and, and the kind of magic of the stage. And I don't really understand that with film. I mean, that's obviously why I ended up working in theaters cause that's the thing I'm into. So, I feel like a complete beginner and I feel interested in trying to understand that film space or the, or the space that the camera creates and ma, I mean, I guess like Rihanna is done with a, with a kind of prologue.

I was thinking about rehearsals for a new project and we had a week of research, which was just, um, to kind of, we had some research money, we were using that for this project. And I just said, let's invite a camera person, and let's just film everything. I don't know what we're going to do with it, I don't know if it's a documentary, I don't know if it's some kind of supporting material. I don't know if it's a separate project, but to just try and gather things and create options, so if this piece can't be shared live, there is still something that we can take from it. But I mean, I can feel in the way I'm talking, it's still, it's still secondary, it's still, I'm still treating it all as kind of secondary. And I, and I recognize that there needs to be a shift there to feel excited about the other ways of creating. I think it has to become, it has to move up the list.

Melanie:

It's hard, isn't it? We told you, you need to feel excited about something that has not been where you've been working, and we don't know how long we're going to be in this situation. For sure all fearing the worst at the moment, but yeah, I know we're asking a lot of artists and cultural organizations to figure this thing out. Rihanna, how are you feeling about opportunity? It, does it feel like an opportunity is other things that you're letting your brain tinker with or explore?

Rhiannon:

Um, yeah, a bit like Ben, I was resistant for different reasons. I was on maternity leave when lockdown happened. So, having to do that project, um, with a four-month-old and I was feeding her mid zoom directing and all of that kind of stuff that was quite chaotic. And when I look back now, I think just adrenaline took me forward really making that. And I guess it does pose the question of the pressure you put yourself under as an artist to get stuff out there and be responsive. And, you know, at the time I was just doing what came naturally, I think.

But like I said, I did have responsibilities, um, you know, having a company and trying to make sure that everyone was looked after. So yeah, they kind of all happened. And I can't really remember how now it feels a bit like a dream.

Um, but I think moving forward, I mean, I like the challenge to be honest, I don't know if I can really see myself getting really heavy into digital stuff, but I like the challenge of thinking about the artistic process with boundaries or different rules that I have to try and figure my way out of, I guess, that yeah. Makes my brain have to do a bit more work than maybe usual. I may go into different territory. It might shake things up a little bit. I quite like the idea, but I think I definitely have a new piece in my head that um, I'm starting to put down on paper now. And I think it involves thinking from the very beginning of how the audience is, how they can receive that work. And whether it's something that exists outside, like outside of venues, as well as being able to go within a venue if the time comes. Um, so I guess that's thinking about set and space and the logistics of it, I dunno, maybe creating, you know, a dance theatre piece within some architecture of some sort. Yeah. So, our next show has a kind of working title and we are about to go, go into the research period. I think because, you know, that's all I know how to do. And I think if I, if I don't do this, I don't really have anything else to do. And so, I, you know, this is who I am and what I, what I do, yeah.

Melanie:

I think it seems to me as I look at both of you, one of the challenges, which I think we share at Greenwich Dance is our commitment to the audience and those specific audiences that you're trying to reach. So, you've both had experience of rural touring. So, you know exactly what it's like to be in the heart of those communities and building, you wrote that lovely piece, Ben for the stage where you talked about that experience and the journey you went on. But also, Rhiannon you've been doing quite a lot of work with domestic violence charities as well. So really getting down into some particular groups and talk to Ben about the marginalized communities you've been working with through Argonauts and this something for me that poses a question about how, how do we in this new world, whether it's with live or whether it's with digital, whether it's with a hybrid, reach those audiences, you know, who was it that was consuming, the three pieces of digital work you put out there, I wonder, and where they the audiences that you're used to working with?

And if they weren't, how do we reach them through the tools we have at our hands now, poses a real dilemma for me. I don't know how you two are feeling about that.

Ben:

Yeah. I think it's really difficult. I don't know who engaged with the films. I mean, it was shared through the rural touring network. So, I imagine that there were some people who've seen Lost Dog shows who, who engaged with it. I guess that's one of the things about film, it does feel like it has the potential to reach a whole load of people who, who wouldn't come to a theater and who wouldn't, uh, seek out the work that I make. So, there's something in that. But again, I, I don't know. I'm, I'm curious to know about, of all this online stuff, whether it has reached people beyond the theater going public, whether people have suddenly found themselves going, I wouldn't go and watch this, but it's online or then I'll engage with it. I don't know about that. I think it's, it's difficult. But again, the problem is for me that, for example, with the rural touring, it's that engagement with the space. Maybe it's, maybe it's about the feedback. It's about understanding the feedback you have from a live experience that it's very hard to know online, and it's very hard to know how it impacts people and whether it can

impact people in the same way. Cause I think a lot of it is about it is about a sense of connection and a sense of people's sitting amongst their community and sharing an experience. And I don't know how that works. And I think that that needs more thought somehow, maybe it is about everyone watching something at the same time, or maybe it's really simple things like that, which give a sense of connecting us to each other, which is what we're kind of lacking. I suppose.

Melanie:

That feedback thing is really interesting because we interviewed Mathieu Geffré and Sarah Blanc

in one of our episodes and that's a topic of feedback came up for them. We'd commissioned them to create a film, as an immediate pivot to something that was meant to be live and they used community cast and what have you. And they were saying exactly the same thing, it goes out there, and then you can count views. You can maybe count likes, you can analyze web statistics and things, but it's not quite the same as having people applauding and an audience or being able to talk to that audience afterwards in your post show talks or in the bar. Or I know that was important to you Ben, in that, in that article, you talked really about how you were able to build those relationships with those individual members of your audience.

Ben:

Yeah, definitely. Definitely. I mean, it makes, it makes me sound very needy that I need that kind of feedback, but maybe I do maybe, maybe that's part of it that I kind of, uh, you know, you want that, uh, you, you want that engagement and I don't know yet how to kind of, um, what you can't replicate it, but I, but I don't know yet how to kind of have such a, such a, uh, what's the word I was going to say meaningful. I don't know if that is the right, how you can have something, a kind of meaningful engagement with an audience in the same way when you're separated by a screen.

Melanie:

So Rhiannon what do you think?

Rhiannon:

I think, yeah, Drowntown Lockdown, we did have a post-show talk. It was led by Rory Davis, who is the artistic director of Harlow Playhouse. And he already has a really good relationship with his local community. And so, there are people that are engaged with that venue that aren't necessarily people that would come and watch a Rhiannon Faith company show. Um, initially, but over the years of me making work there and now people that do access that work. And I think we asked him to host the Q and A, and we had our company psychologist, Joe Griffis there as well, who could talk around the themes of, of the film. And I felt like that really worked as a way for the audience to access the art and the film in a different way that wasn't just, you know, you're watching a show. Um, I guess there was something more pastoral around it and we did get quite good engagement and people were asking questions and, um, we were responding live to those questions.

So, you know, it felt like it was something, although, you know, of course it's not the same as having people clapping and you knowing how the work is sitting and then talking to them afterwards about it. But with Smack That we did that as well. We had Joy, she came to the venues and she was available for the audiences because the show, um, potentially was quite triggering in terms of the themes we're talking about. So, she was available for the cast throughout the whole process, and then she was available for the audiences at each venue that we went to. And I think just having her there has framed the work in a slightly different way. It's not just about what you see, it's about how you receive that and how you feel then and how you tap into, I guess, the mirror version of what you're seeing on stage, what that brings out of you. And then Joy is kind of there to talk through those, those things with the audience. And I don't know if that's necessarily the way it has to be, or, you know, but there's something that made me feel like that was the best we could have done in that situation. And I guess it's just about considering, you know, how to serve the audience, how to, how the work can serve the audience and how that shifts from different venues that you are working with at that time and what the responsibility of the venue is as much as what the artists can do, and the artist team can do.

Melanie:

Yeah, that's very true. For us I think we felt that we were about to take a show into a community center in a space that we'd never taken a show before. So, we really had no idea what sort of numbers we might be attracting. And instead, we chose to work with a small community cast and partner them up with a choreographer and they created a film together. And we sort of reflected on the fact that perhaps instead of 40 or 50 people, that if we'd been lucky, we would have got into the community center to see the work we'd brought an experience to perhaps 10 people that was richer and more prolonged. And in a way, this period has given us permission to not be chasing after those audience figures anymore, but actually chasing after an audience experience and valuing the experience of a handful of people above being able to report that your show got seen by X number, which funders so often one, which is heartbreaking.

Um I've got another dilemma and again, I, I turned to you, I recognize that you're grappling with this in the same way as me, but I've been really interested in your perception of it, which is about cultural inequality. So quite a lot of what we do at Greenwich Dance, if not, all of what we do is about trying to address cultural inequalities. And I think, I believe wholeheartedly, the two of you are doing very similar things. And one of the things that worried me at first was that we had a large number of particularly our young people that didn't have access to digital. And so, I wondered whether this sort of a division of equality had shifted across to the people. We suddenly went, Oh, great, we can do all these new audiences online, but actually we've left some of those people behind. Then contrarily I read Lynn Gardner's piece in the stage last week, I think it was where she was talking about the live. So, a number of theaters have been putting live work on and then streaming that. And she was talking about that digital experiences, that being a risk of that being the poorer cousin and the elite, the people that can be bother to go through that big, long process of temperature checks and surveys and whatever else to get into the live venue and pay the prices to be one of the few that can go into the live venue and everyone else gets left with the digital. So, I suddenly saw the problem from a different angle. And I wondered whether this idea of equality in our digital offer had crossed your desk, your brain, whether it's anything that you've been grappling with or thinking about.

Ben:

Yeah. I mean, I think that there's something obviously more democratic in a way about online stuff. Like it doesn't hold so many of the barriers. I mean, lots of it has been free. It doesn't involve the kind of walking into a theater and the, you know, there's people who just don't, you know, they, they don't go into theater. It's not, it's not something that they would do. But I guess, like I was saying before, I don't know whether the stuff that exists in this kind of sphere, the sphere of theater makers, making films. I don't know if there are examples of that stuff kind of crossing over into, um, something that would feel more mainstream. And therefore, I would imagine does reach a kind of wider audience. I know that Punchdrunk did that project, which I think was probably seen by a lot of people. But again, I don't know what it says about theater or what it says about kind of live performance or whether it's just a transferring into that, into that other world.

Yeah. Gosh, I don't know. I kind of feel like there's, there's so many things happening and that part of me thinks that the kind of small scale, I understand what you're saying about the large venues at the moment and the hassle and the cost involved in, in going through those kinds of entry requirements now, but that, but that actually, maybe we are going to be heading into a, you know, travel is going to be harder. Lots of organizations are going to have a lot less money. So maybe this creating work for audiences of 10 in a local community is going to become part of what we do. And maybe as part of that, we're going to have to get much better at finding, you know, I don't know, I live in a, not hugely densely populated part of the countryside and I don't know how many Lost Dog fans I would find here. You know, if I want to make work and I want to get audiences, I will have to get better at kind of finding people, inviting them into to engage with this, which feels the kind of opposite of what we're talking about. Cause it feels like that might not be digital. It might just be very, very small scale. It might just be as a kind of round the campfire equivalent version of performing. But, uh, yes.

Melanie:

That dissemination is interesting, isn't it? Because when you do have a digital offer, where do you put it other than YouTube, and then it goes into this vast vacuum of digital content and how on earth are you meant to expect somebody, as you say, Ben, who might not really have thought about going to the theater or might have not have thought of seeing Lost Dog, how would they find that in this vacuum of stuff? And I wonder if it will put more responsibility on venues to curate and platform some of that stuff, but then, like you say to that live experience, being for smaller groups of people, you know, rural touring, a layer down a layer down, stripping everything back, how are you feeling about that? Rhiannon? And you're looking very pensive.

Rhiannon:

It's really hard. I'm just thinking about what I've been saying. I don't know I've had different feelings about it. I don't know if this answers the question, but I guess like I watched the Battersea Arts Center, the beatboxing I think it was, How to Build a Monster and that's on Iplayer and that's brilliant and it's, you know, really excellent way of putting kind of art in a digital context for a younger audience who can access it. If they have a TV license, you know, like not everyone has a TV license, you know, if you're pretty poor, then that might not be something that you can afford. Even if you're online, there's kind of art. That's being put in the culture and quarantine and stuff like that, but not everyone can access that. I think YouTube is probably easier to access because you can access it from your phone, and you don't need

to have paid a paywall to subscribe. Yeah. I don't really have the answer. I mean, I used to save up money and pay for digital platform before all of this happened to watch plays and there wasn't that much dance in it actually, but it was mainly theatre, because I live quite rurally as well, and it was hard for me to get anywhere to see anything. And then I decided that I couldn't afford to do that. And so now I guess if I'm putting my work up there and now, I'm expecting people to pay, to see my work like you would, if you were going to a venue, I don't know. I, you know, I had to stop paying that monthly subscription because I'm an artist and I kind of live hand to mouth. So, it's quite complex. I think what Ben is saying about taking work into the communities, you know, that's always been the way forward, really the way that I think about it, that's exactly what we should all be doing is really focusing on the people around the venue that is giving the commission or the work and trying to bring them into something that they have never seen before, because the venue should be working on their behalf really to allow them to access the art in an equal way.

So, if they are working class or if they just don't know about it, they just don't usually access art. Um, then, then it's something that you put in front of them. And some outdoor festivals are really excellent at doing that. There was, I can't remember what it's called, the one in Great Yarmouth that I went to visit that does lots of dance outdoors, it's such a brilliant festival because people just like, if they're too shy to go out their house, they can see it from their bedroom window and they can access it that way. Yeah. I don't know. There's, there's lots of more thought that needs to be done before I start spraffing about it. I don't know. I just like saying off the top of my head.

Ben:

I think there is something really kind of obvious about this time as well, which is that it's made it really clear that there's, there's a lot of people who, who were kind of fine. They're fine without theater, there's this kind of feeding of like, and I have it a lot of, like, I think people would really enjoy this if I could get them in. I think they would really enjoy it. And then of course, as we're faced with, I don't know, what's essential or essential stuff at this time. It becomes very clear to me that there's a lot of, for a lot of people it's, it's not high up, you know, it's not, it's not something they're going to prioritize particularly now when things are difficult, and health becomes the kind of primary consideration. And I don't know. I mean, I find that kind of maybe that's, I find it useful in a way to think about that and to think that I don't need to be kind of completely evangelical about this, but I do want it to exist in a place where if people want to engage with it, they can. And I don't know. I don't know. Yeah. I don't really know how to do that right now. Cause it feels like we're kind of we're shrinking and the YouTube thing, I don't know, because again, if you're watching something in the kind of short form or, you know, I was certainly encouraged not to make anything over 15 minutes because it was like people weren't engaged with it. So, these kinds of short form things do they translate, do they make people go? I really enjoyed that. I'm going to now go and watch an hour and a half show in a theater or are they such kind of different experiences that people will not kind of, uh, connect them or if they can really enjoy the Frankenstein Beat Box show on Iplayer, would it make them want to go and watch it live? I don't know enough about that kind of transference of interest and whether that's something that happens or not because yeah, part of me wonders if they are very different kind of cultural experiences and they always will be. And, uh, yeah,

Melanie:

It's really interesting. Do you remember when Andrew Lloyd Webber right at the beginning of lockdown, put out his shows, the show must go on and my mum started, you know, Friday

nights waiting to see what Lloyd Weber show was going to be streamed on. YouTube became a thing for her. She lives in Spain and we text each other through the week, oh which one would it be? And I actually found there was only one or two I wanted to see. And then I remembered that didn't really want to see, quite a lot of that stuff anyway, I hadn't ever thought about snuggling up on the sofa and watching a musical, unless it was one made for film, you know, like Sound of Music, something. And then when it came to more dance stuff, again, I've never ever been somebody that would consume that digitally. It's just never interested me, but I've found myself now sort of curating a little dance festival for myself and opening up my laptop and helped by a series that we're putting together could walk to work, which is a little Roundup of five little things. And then I, and I sit and enjoy them, and I've never ever thought about doing that, but then I'm also in the dance world. And so, like you said, Ben, would people be wanting to engage in content in this way? And we're only eight months in and we changed everything that we've done. So, it's really hard to draw that down. Lots of questions.

Ben:

Maybe they just remind us of the live experience. I feel myself going, I like to be reminded or I'd like to go and watch Palermo, Palermo, the Pina Bausch show because I've seen it live, and I can remember that as I watch it. But I guess part of the thing we're talking about is what about people who haven't seen things live and is this a way of them becoming engaged in live things? Or is it just another, it's just content before we close.

Melanie:

Before we close, I've got two last questions for you. The first is just going back to what you created in lockdown in terms of commissioning, what do you think an organization needs to be thinking about that perhaps they don't already, if they're going to approach you with the commissioning of something digital. What do we need to be thinking about in terms of the needs of artists and the performers? And is there anything I can take away?

Rhiannon:

Hmm. Um, what do you reckon, Ben?

Ben:

I should think about that more, uh, the, the kind of experiences that I had so far with the commissioning thing was it was kind of us going, I've got this vague idea about a film. Would you be interested in supporting us? And some organizations came on board and then, I mean, it was more simple, I guess for me, I was just working by myself with Rachel and with Raquel as well, supporting me, but there weren't other cast members as part of that process. Um, I think the distribution thing is interesting and how that is dealt with and then what happens to, I'm still not quite sure about the kind of limited run thing or the kind of, like I said earlier, I liked the live thing, the idea of it happening live and being shared live. But then I also liked the idea because I'm someone who's always late to the party of going, Oh, I can still see that thing that people were talking about, even though I missed the thing, but yeah, the kind of how it's distributed and shared, I think is important and that I guess needs to be talked about and understood.

And I don't know. I mean, again, it feels like we are non, well speaking personally, I'm a, non-expert filmmaker dealing with organizations who are not expert in distribution. Um, you know, we're all kind of feeling our way through it and that feels okay for now.

Rhiannon:

Yeah. I think it's just about having conversations with the venues and when you're now budgeting for like this festival that I've been asked to do this weekend, we've put into it, all of the planning and, you know, bringing people in to participate and you know, what that costs or what that would cost if you were doing it in real life, but it's all online. So just making sure that you're budgeting, yeah, in the right ways and that you are putting a price on the art that you're making, like you would when people are paying for the tickets. Because I think I was quite happy for all of the venues just to have my work for free until my producer was like, well, Rhiannon, you know, you've just made that and the venue have a responsibility if they want their audiences to receive that work, that there needs to be a fee involved.

And I guess it's about negotiating fees that make you feel comfortable as an artist. But then again, what we were just talking about this, you know, how can audiences that don't have any cash access that work? So, I think it's that just having those conversations, honestly, and openly with venues. I think when we streamed Drowntown Lockdown, we had the Barbican, and I think for other venues live streaming it at the same time. And that seemed to have quite a big impact on social media and um, in terms of the views that we did receive. And so, you know, that seemed to have worked, but again, like Ben said, you know, then, oh yeah, our work is done on the Barbican website, so people can access that afterwards, but how long does it stay there for, and you know, it's new territory, I think.

Melanie:

It isn't it, lots to think through.

Rhiannon:

Yeah, there is a lot to think through, and I think by doing is usually how you figure it out once you've given your work away for free, you probably don't do that again. Like, you know, you just, you try and figure it out as you go along, which I think most artists do from the get-go. Yeah.

Melanie:

So, my very last question, and of course it's not going to be an easy one and that is we've been using the terminology cultural recovery a lot, largely due to the famous 1.5, 7 billion. That's just been covered up and billed as a cultural recovery grant. What role do you see for digital as part of the recovery of culture?

Ben:

You need to edit out these long pauses

Rhiannon:

And me going, you go Ben

These are really hard questions Melanie.

Melanie:

They are hard questions, I mean, culture recovery, that's got, you know, that's a high bar, isn't it? Yeah.

Rhiannon:

I mean, cultural recovery means something different to me. Like when I think about cultural recovery, I think first about how we recover as humans before I think about how we recover financially and digitally. And I know Ben's work is to do with narratives in the human condition. And I think the work I make is about common humanity and how we can create pieces of art that tap into us thinking about how to be compassionate and how to value each other and hold each other in these kinds of times. And I think that kind of recovery is far more interesting to me and far more essential. How do we, as humans recover from the loss of, you know, the loss of people in our lives and how do we cope with the grief that we're experiencing the grief of, like, losing loved ones, but also the grief of losing our identity in a life that we kind of have already made for ourselves. I think that's where I go first before I can think about the bigger picture. So, I know that doesn't answer your question, but I think that's my responsibility and the work I make is to go to those places. And I think people who are masters in the cultural ecology and landscape and financial recovery are far more equipped to talk about how to do that for digital platforms than I am.

Ben:

That's true. I think that the role of culture in recovery is really important and the kind of stories that get told or need to be told, or just the, the role of culture in a, and I know we're talking about digital, but for me, that kind of recovery is a lot about how do we get into the room together? How do we share the space together and how do we yeah, feel that we're not as isolated as, as it feels at the moment? And yeah, I guess as a small organization, I'm all in, in favor of how does this money get to the artists? How does it get to the freelancers that we work with? How does it get down the food chain? And the recovery suggests that we're trying to get back to where we were before, but we're not really all. We were trying to get somewhere different and to somehow pass that money on and trust that there's a kind of intuitive physical knowledge in so many artists, particularly dance artists, I guess that it's just so useful right now, but how does it get out there? And I don't know how it forms digitally, to be honest, I think that's still kind of a, yeah, it's still a question.

Melanie:

Well, I think that's a very meaningful place to stop and actually quite poignant to be thinking about culture in recovery and what you said, Rhiannon, human compassion being what that recovery is about. So, thank you both for joining me today and having this discussion perhaps earlier than any of us are really ready to have this discussion. And thank you for listening. If you'd like to hear more episodes about subjects, moving artists of today, search for Talking Moves, wherever you get your podcasts. And don't forget to subscribe, leave a review and spread the word and for more information about Rhiannon and Ben head on over to GreenwichDance.org.uk. And do you remember if you know someone you think we should talk to or have a topic you'd like us to talk about, please tweet us @Greenwichdance, but for today, that's it from us and join us next time for more Talking Moves.