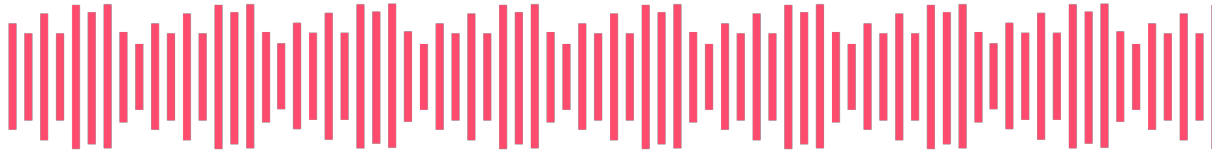


TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

Leading Off Stage S02 / E06

Episode Description

In this episode we talk to **Cath James** and **Kenneth Olumuyiwa Tharp CBE** about their transition from stage to management.

This particular topic was inspired by a listener, Laura, who got in touch to ask for some support as she sought to make a similar career change. She felt frustrated as she navigated the unfamiliar terminology, high expectations (and low pay) of a sector she knew so well from one angle but less well from another. Did she really, she asked, need to start right back at the beginning?

Kenneth and Cath both agreed that life experience and the ability to recognise and seize an opportunity when it arises have been just as valuable as any training they have undertaken. They each walk us through their inspirational journeys from esteemed company dancers to senior management and consider the point upon which they decided to hang up their dancing shoes for good. They share experiences of creating roles for themselves along the way – in the establishing of new services or supporting friends with touring – rather than waiting for roles to present themselves. They share anecdotes of when their performance skills have come into play and considered how being a performer has shaped who they are as a leader today.

Both talk so very honestly about the skills they had to learn... quickly... and whether their impressive performance CVs's added kudos or doubt from the sector around them.

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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:

So 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 moves them. I'm Melanie Precious and in this episode I'll be talking to two artists about their transition from stage to leadership. The topic was inspired by listener Laura, who got in touch to ask for some support as she sought to make a similar career change from performance into management. She felt frustrated as she navigated the unfamiliar terminology, the high expectations and low pay of a sector she knew so well from one angle but less well from another. Did she really, she asked me, need to start right back at the beginning. So today, I'm going to be asking two inspirational leaders and ex-performers about the journey they've taken and the skills they've picked up along the way. I'm joined by Cath James artistic director at South East Dance, and former dancer with Siobhan Davies Dance and Rambert amongst others. And Ken Olumuyiwa Tharp OBE, freelance arts and culture consultant, and former dancer with London Contemporary Dance Theatre and Arc Dance Company. Welcome, both of you. Thanks for joining me. So this question about what one does after performing comes up so much for dancers because of the nature of the work and the famously early retirement age. But before I ask you about that transition, I wondered if you could just give us a really quick potted history of your career from performer to where you are now. Cath, would you like to kick us off?

Cath:

Well, I started quite late. I didn't go to dance college till I was 20. And then graduated two or three years later. Joined a dance company in Brisbane called Expressions Dance Theatre that has recently renamed to Australasian Dance Collective. And then I went to Dancenorth, which is in Townsville up in the tropics, and was there for a few years before then heading overseas to expand my horizons. And I landed up at Rambert when Richard Alston was director there. So stayed there for quite a number of years before then moving on to Siobhan Davies Dance company where I stayed for 12 years. And I think, during my entire career, right from when I started at college, if there wasn't an opportunity to dance, I would make one. I would find one. So even while I was at college, in the evenings, I would get a gang of girls together and we would rehearse and then we would perform in nightclubs and open fashion parades, or we ended up on Saturday Morning Jukebox on Channel Seven, every week dancing to music that hadn't got a video. I mean, this was back in the 80s when videos weren't big. So yeah, I was always looking for that opportunity. I think during off times when we would have a summer break with Siobhan Davies' company. Again, two or three girlfriends would get together and we formed Snag Collective and ended up presenting work at the Southbank Centre, and this was all done with me as a dancer, and basically learning producing on the job.

Really, you know, you learn how to ring up venues, you learn how to talk to them, you learn how to make deals, you learn how to do everything on the job, so I had no formal training. And that transition from dancer to producer, it was all sort of interwoven into my career. And I stepped off stage when I was about 42 I think. I'd had a number of injuries and then my third pregnancy ended up in a miscarriage. I think I took quite a number of months off completely after that to recover and I think that's when I made the transition into producing properly. So I became company and tour manager at Siobhan Davies and from there went on to director at Take Art in Somerset and then from there to South East Dance where I'm now artistic director. So yeah, no formal training. I didn't do any MAs in producing. Nothing like that I'm afraid. I went to the University of lived experience so...

Melanie:

Diversity, diversity. Kenneth, how about you?

Kenneth:

Thank you, Melanie and it's great to hear Cathy's journey summed up so neatly there. I started dancing much earlier. I started dancing at the age of five with classical ballet. I was living in Glasgow at the time in Scotland. Actually, we moved there when I was a few weeks old. So I started life as a Glaswegian.

Melanie:

Ha! Somebody else has entered the room!

Kenneth:

Exactly. I was the only boy of course. I'm not claiming to be Billy Elliot though. At seven and a half we moved south to Cambridge and took me six months to lose my Glaswegian accent. Apparently the last two words to go were wee which means small and hoose which means house. But I still feel like an honorary Scot. I'd like to think I can slip back into what we call me Glasgow patter. I was lucky enough in that transition to find in the move to Cambridge a very, very good and very well respected Russian ballet teacher. And I mean, she wasn't someone teaching Russian classical ballet. She was a Russian teaching Russian classical ballet and she had a very good reputation, sent people off into companies etc. I made the switch at 18 from classical ballet to contemporary dance when I went to train at The Place as it was called then - the London School of Contemporary Dance now London Contemporary Dance School. And on graduating from that company I had a few brief months with Janet Smith and dancers. Janet went on to lead Scottish Dance Theatre and then later direct the Northern School of Contemporary Dance. But I had already done an apprentice with London Contemporary Dance Theatre, which for those people that don't know or aren't old enough to remember was the original resident company at The Place. Founded by the late and very dear Sir Robert Cohan, he's only just recently left us. I danced with that company until it closed in 94. So for about 12 and a half, 13 years, and then had what I later discovered was a portfolio career. At the time,

I thought it's just survival in it. And I did lots of different, lots of different things from running a youth dance company at Sadler's Wells to being dancer in residence at Queens College, Cambridge, just juggling still performing. I did a lot of work with Kim Brandstrup's company, Arc Dance Company, but also work with people like Nigel Charnock and Kate Flatt and Claire Russ and you know, a whole mixture of things. Teaching was consistent though from the very start of my career. And my first two weeks on professional contract, we're actually in a school with London Contemporary Dance Theatre in Havant, Hampshire, on residency. So teaching was always a passion, I suppose there was a key moment of transition around 2005, where I was still teaching I just at the end of 2005, I did my official swan song at the place dancing a solo by Siobhan Davis, to the famous swan music. But I was lucky enough to be accepted on the Clore leadership programme in the second cohort. And I did that over two years part time, but I was still teaching at that time. Was still in the studio. And then as I was finishing that programme, this job at The Place came up, which was a newly conceived job of Chief Executive. There had been a chief executive maybe about 12 years prior to that, but the organisation had lived with a very different structure in the interim with sort of flat hierarchy at the top. And I suppose I'd never expected to go back to my alma mater, and certainly not in that role, but I did apply for it. And so I went back to the organisation that I had attended as a student, and then as a dancer. And I did that role for just over nine years. And by the time I left, I think I figured out that all in all, but with a 12 year gap, it's 25 years of my life at The Place. I remember joking at the time, if I didn't leave, then I'd have to be surgically removed. And then subsequent to that, at an interim period, again, when I went back to a bit of here, there and everywhere and went back to the studio and choreographed a musical in South Africa and taught in Italy. But then for two years, until September last year, I was director of the Africa Centre, which is a charity that's been going since 1964, and had moved to a new home. So that I suppose in a very rapid nutshell, is my sort of career path.

Melanie:

So both of you, that echo of portfolio career has come through and that that was quite expected, I suppose. But I wondered, was there a pivotal moment for either of you, where you pressed the off switch on performance and transitioned? Or did the two worlds meld together for a while?

Kenneth:

I think two things happen for me, I had been appointed as artistic director designate for the original National Youth Dance Company. And then in that period of sort of waiting, shouldn't get lost in the detail of it. But basically, the organisation made a decision, it sort of amalgamated with Youth Dance England. And at the same time, I think the Arts Council withdrew funding, so I sort of was left without a role there. So that gave me pause for thought. And then at the same time, I think the reason I applied for the Clore leadership programme was I felt after 12 years of being a freelancer, I felt I'm doing all these different things I'm hurling my energy in different directions, but I somehow, perhaps wanted something that might help me draw that knowledge intelligence together. And plus at Kim Brandstrup's company who I'd worked with for over those 12 years, I think his company closed. And I thought, do you know what I've done enough. I've been so lucky. I've worked with the most brilliant

choreographers and artists and I thought even if I had the motivation to go and audition for another choreographer, I just thought it's not going to lead to the next step. So I could do another contract. I could do another rehearsal period, I could go on tour again. But after that, what? So I think that was part of those things combined was part of what led me to apply to the Clore leadership programme. But when I did that, I had no intention to lead an organisation that wasn't my aspiration, I just thought I'll go back to all the different things I'm doing and do them better.

Melanie:

So it's more of a sense of consolidating in a way.

Kenneth:

And I'd say probably the I don't know how Cathy's was, but it wasn't a carefully mapped out career plan. It was probably a mixture of following my curiosity, my passions, and then a bit of what happens to come your way and how you respond to those. So it was less by design and more by a kind of alchemy of different things.

Melanie:

Cath, how does that feel to you? Is that similar?

Cath:

Yeah, I totally agree with you, Kenneth. Actually, I didn't have a career plan. My career plan was dance. You know, as soon as I discovered it, that was it for me. I knew that that's what I wanted to do. I mean, I did try. I did make a few pieces of work as a choreographer, but it really wasn't my passion. I found my creativity working with a choreographer rather than being the choreographer. And I think as Kenneth says, it's like you have things happen in your life and you accumulate memories and baggage and skills and opportunities come your way. So for me, there was no... I was teaching a lot as well, even when I was director of dance in Somerset or I was teaching at the University of Bath contemporary classes and ballet classes. And so I'm still very much in the studio. Even now I do step into the studio just for feedback sessions and you know, supporting artists and things. But once I moved to Brighton to South East Dance, the job is massive. And...

Melanie:

It takes over.

Cath:

Yeah, I don't really find I have time to be following, you know, my teaching passion or my studio time anymore. So yeah, really, it was that the full time-ness of the job in Brighton means that that's all I have time for really now.

Melanie:

Forces you away from that portfolio and more into that structure. So I can't boast to have anything like the careers that the two of you did. But I do remember transitioning into an office and sitting at a desk and somebody asked me to send them the agenda and me not knowing what an agenda was. And people talking about things like ACE around me that I just had no clue what they were talking about. And even referring to people as practitioners as a teacher and dancer myself, I hadn't ever called myself that. So I wanted to ask you what it felt like to you when you were in that new role at whatever point in your career there might have been because I know that, as you said, you've merged and melded and ducked and dived a lot. Did it ever feel uncomfortable? Or were there things and challenges that you needed to overcome or language that you needed to learn to be able to progress in that new position that you've put yourself in? Cath.

Cath:

Do you know what? The first job that I actually had to interview for was as director of dance in Somerset, and I suddenly realised I've never done an interview before and I'm 45! I mean, I've done loads of auditions. I said to them, you know, if you want me to get up and improv, I can do that! But no...

Melanie:

Here's my CV and headshot!

Cath:

So I had to sit there and have this panel of people asking me all these questions. But I just remember this time when I'm at the end of a NPO, period, national portfolio organisation, period, I know what NPO means. Now. They gave me this document, and they're going right, your director of dance, can you write the business plan for the next three years, please? And I was just like, I have no idea even where to start. No idea. So I had to teach myself how to write a business plan that would then sit within a bigger structure of the organisational business plan. So yeah, amazing learning curve.

Melanie:

And again, all of those skills that you've accumulated along the way coming in, I suppose that resourcefulness?

Cath:

Well, I think, before I took up dancing, I was at university, I was doing a law degree, which I absolutely hated, and then found my way into a dance degree. So I had a lot of understanding of the idea of argument and how to construct an argument. So I just approached it from that perspective, and also my back knowledge of having submitted applications to Arts Council for the last 10/15 years for various projects. So I just sort of put all of that together and went, Okay, this could be what it looks like.

Melanie:

Yeah. And this is what it's gonna look like for us, actually. Kenneth, how about you?

Kenneth:

It's interesting. Two very different thoughts, as Cath was talking before, and as you were talking Melanie, I suddenly remembered something Christopher Bruce said, the choreographer, and I don't know what had prompted this reflection. But he said, you know, when you've done a certain thing your whole life, you've done it, you know, maybe from a young age, but you've danced for a whole career, or you've choreographed, the idea of sort of retraining or do something completely different is quite terrifying. And I think when you've been lucky enough, exactly like Cath, I wanted to dance. I did it for 25 years. I'd have said that felt like a vocation. It wasn't just a job. It was a vocation. I wouldn't call administration for me a vocation. However, I think the reason I've worked full time for two charities is because I absolutely bought into what those organisations were there to do. And it mattered enough for me to, you know, to step into that arena. Yes, like Cath, when I arrived at The Place, I had six months for the organisation to come up with a five year business plan. And of course, I'd never done that before in that way, or taken that level of responsibility. In a way, I probably find it more terrifying now than perhaps I did then. Perhaps there was a little bit of naivety, but very good people around me, who were very experienced. And so it was more about bringing that I suppose leadership and thought process and what would inform that I didn't need to come up with all the answers myself. The one thing I did have under my belt when I stepped into that role at The Place was I had limited experience of being an education coordinator at Arc Dance. But I'd also been on the board of the Royal Opera House for five years at that time, as well as I think before that Dance UK and a couple of smaller organisations. And I think that maybe gave me some experience that not everyone has. And it gave me a sense of the kind of conversations that happen at board level. And I think that was probably very helpful preparation for stepping into a chief executive role. So I was very grateful for that.

Melanie:

It's quite a learning thing, isn't it when you step into those roles and realise that actually you don't have to know all the answers, you just have to know how to choose a good team and other people are meant to know the answers and tell you. I don't know if you feel the same as I do sometimes, but

I sometimes feel like I have to do it all. Because that's how I got there. Because you were running around doing it all and actually being able to say actually, it's not mine to do, I can just look at others or help others do it. I don't have to be doing it all myself. Now, you were talking about the Clore. And I'm interested in this because a lot of people do use the Clore to transition over, you know. It's a famous, it's lauded, and I wondered Kenneth, what your biggest takeaways from that course were, if you can remember.

Kenneth:

Well, going back to when I exited in 2007, it feels like a long time ago. I mean look, the shorter answer was probably, we came into contact with so many brilliant leaders of very different kinds, you know, not people even just working in the arts sector, but very different kinds of people from all walks of life. And I think the one thing if I was to generalise from all of that was, there is no one style of leadership, everyone does it differently. And I suppose in the end, you realise it's about being authentic and true to your own set of values. So it's not like you can just pluck a template off the page and put it on like a coat, I suppose that was probably the biggest thing. But I think one of the other unexpected joys and real benefits of that programme was, and alongside the opportunities it gave us was the sort of camaraderie of 26 other Clore fellows all from very different kinds of organisations, from the Imperial War Museum, to opera directors, to other dance people through to curators, librarians, and that created a sort of pool of knowledge, but also a network and we still remain in contact and occasionally have a reunion. And I suppose feeling that was a huge bonus and benefit from the Clore. I mean, the one thing I would say was, it's not a management course, although you could have undertaken management training as part of it, it was a leadership course. And so that is slightly different. But you know, the Clore has got an amazing reputation. I don't know of anyone who hasn't taken great value from that experience.

Melanie:

And I mentioned at the beginning of this podcast about Laura. And so I'm thinking a lot about her as I ask you questions and thinking about what she might want me to ask you. And I suppose one of the things from that is actually building a network around you, but cross art form, perhaps is what you're saying there that it's enriching you because you've got lots of different perspectives around you that you've been able to draw on.

Kenneth:

I think sometimes talking to someone who's not immersed in the day to day challenges that you're facing is helpful, because many of the challenges that you face in any cultural organisation, there's going to be a lot of overlap. But in any organisation, you know, even even outside the cultural sector, a lot of the challenges you face may have different nuances, but they're often fundamentally there is some level in which they're the same. And I think sometimes being able to talk to someone with a bit more detachment can help you to see things a little bit more clearly. Because sometimes you get

right in the nub of something you're so caught up in it, it's hard sometimes to see the wood for the trees, so to speak.

Melanie:

And Cath, you've done very well, without Clore, thank you very much. Yeah like an amazing career that you've just grabbed and got hold of with both hands. Where have you turned to for training and guidance, as you have moved through all of those different roles.

Cath:

I'm very lucky to have a number of, who also used to be dancers, people who've moved into coaching and opportunities there for conversations outside of any formal structures. And that's been fantastic. Some of my board members as well, who I've known for years, they just happened to be on the board when I joined the organisation. They're also fantastic, because they know the organisation, and if there's any concerns, I can talk to them. But outside of that, there's a number of people who I've met along the way who sort of moved with me out of dancing into producing and other leadership roles. And we're still all connected. So whilst they're not like close friends, they're really good colleagues, and have a real understanding of where I am and what I'm doing. So I find that really helpful. Just those casual conversations and glass of wine and chat.

Melanie:

Sometimes just coming out of your world and seeing somebody else's world and then looking back into your own from that perspective is so... I was about to say thrilling, but nothing in this pandemic feels very thrilling right now, but just a bit of a sell.

Kenneth:

There's one other thing that has just come to mind. This morning at 8:30am I was in a breakfast meeting called What Next. And this is a conversation basically, that's been going on amongst people in the cultural sector for over 10 years now. I was there right at the beginning, and of course, pre pandemic they were face to face. And during the course of a number of years, this was a sort of movement that ended up having what they call chapters, but different versions, similar meetings happening across the country. So I think there are now over 30 chapters. And this is really an ongoing conversation around the cultural sector. But a meeting point of minds, I suppose, just to face the challenges together. And what's been brilliant about it is it's never been about anyone fighting their own organisation or their own corner. It's really about what are the big issues that we're all facing? How do we tackle all these different things? As an intelligence pool, it's been brilliant. And I'd say for anyone who thought it's just a talking shop, no, it's done some very, very practical things. The whole BBC Creative, which is about encouraging creativity in the general public came out of direct conversations in that room. And back in 2015, when George Osborne when he was Chancellor when he protected the Arts Council's funding when everything else has been cut. We know that that

was the direct result of I think conversations that were happening in What Next, the Creative Industries Federation and the Arts Council. And joining those together and talking strategically in small lobbying groups to the right people behind closed doors. What's been brilliant about the pandemic, not about the pandemic, but as a result of the pandemic, What Next has obviously gone online. The meetings have been happening fortnightly now. But you know, I think it was one meeting when Kier Starmer was in the room, I think it was like over 500 people in the room, it may have been 700. Being able to be part of a national conversation is fantastic. I guess what I'm saying in a long winded way is it can be about other individuals. But sometimes it's also about being part of those networks.

Melanie:

Yes.

Kenneth:

And being part of broader conversations that help give you an entirely different perspectives, which is good.

Melanie:

That brainstorming collective.

Cath:

Yeah. And I'd also say that we have a chapter in Brighton and we meet weekly. And that's been fantastic to have that sort of direct conversation with City Council and the area director of Arts Council. But also, the National Dance Network is a fantastic group of all of the organisations that support artists development and production. And that's a chance for leaders of those organisations just to bare all and really talk about what the issues are, and how they're coping with things. And that went online. And suddenly, we had more attendance than we've ever had before. So I think there are some really positive things that we want to hang on to coming out of the pandemic.

Melanie:

Definitely there's been a behavioural shift hasn't there in audiences and ourselves and the way we do our work. It's interesting to think about how many meetings will go back to being live and how many will stay online for that reason. So one of the frustrations that I alluded to in my intro that Laura told me that she experienced was in that feeling that she had to go back and start from the beginning. And you picked up on this already Kenneth with that anecdote from Christopher Bruce. But she felt that her experience as a performer teacher and a mother didn't count for anything. And she started knocking on completely different doors. And I wondered whether that felt true for you and how you might have used again, Cath you also mentioned this when you started speaking about

your life experience. How have you used that to solve a problem? Meaning that you don't have to go back and learn from the rulebook, but just apply your common sense, perhaps?

Cath:

Gosh, that's a big question to ask without any prep. I think that there's always a challenge. And I hear this from producers a lot around how to get access to the right people in venues. I mean, it's a big thing now as well, that idea of tour booking. But I just remember from my years of touring, that every venue, we would meet all of the venue teams and staff, I would use that relationship.

Melanie:

Yeah.

Cath:

When I needed to speak to someone so that previous history as a dancer I brought to the front and used it, because it was a way of knowing who to speak to. That's not really answered your question at all.

Melanie:

No it has. You've drawn upon networks that you built within that performance world, and also perhaps the persona that you have as a performer, which would be confident and you know, not scared of coming forward. And then in that other role, you have to draw on those skills and those feelings in order to get through those right doors, ask those right questions. No, I recognise that. Kenneth, how about you?

Kenneth:

It's a great question and a bit like Cath, it's not an easy one to answer. Because I think part of what we've learned by being dancers is so innate to who we are, that we probably don't think about it all the time. It's just part of how we engage. But I would say, I think one of the things that artists deal with, and I guess we've both experienced this firsthand in dance, is all creative acts, and the creative process deals with a huge amount of uncertainty. You don't know where it's gonna end up. And I think when you've lived through that process with different choreographers and had completely different experiences, and come out the other end, I think that for me is when people talk about resilience, what does it mean? That's one example for me of resilience because you learn to keep the trust in the process and to live through those uncomfortable moments when you just don't quite know or it doesn't feel right. You're uncertain. And I think many people I know in dance have extraordinary stamina, tenacity, resilience, creativity, you know, courage, but just dealing with uncertainty, and aren't just going to throw their hands in the air in complete despair. They'll go, No, there'll be a way through it. I'd be very surprised if that wasn't the same for Cath, too. I mean, if you

were saying directly, and maybe literally, how has my experience as a performer maybe impacted on say, my role as the director, I can think of one perhaps slightly amusing example: when I was invited to speak at the sister School of the boy school I went to in Cambridge, I went to The Perse School, sister school called Stephen Perse. So you know, here I am, I'm going to speak at speech day. And there's gonna be all the governors and all the parents and all the teachers there. And I made this decision that I wouldn't speak from my mouth for the first seven and a half minutes. Now, it kind of sounds a bit ridiculous, doesn't it? I had prepared a PowerPoint. And it's actually started with a piece of film. And then the PowerPoint read, Hello, I'm Kenneth, I'm chief executive of The Place and no I haven't lost my voice, but you know, dot, dot, dot, and I led him through this journey. And at first, I was monitoring people's faces very closely, and I could see people looking a bit uncertain, but I lead them through this journey where, you know, I was joking with them about they've probably already made lots of decisions about me my hair, what I'm wearing my shoes, how I walk. But I said that I was also looking at them and how they're sitting. And by the way, he really should think of carrying a bag on both shoulders because he's sitting lopsided, and you know, blah blah blah. Anyway, it got to the point where I finally spoke and with huge relief, because by that time, I knew they were still with me, because they've been a lot of laughter. And when I think back to that, I think I wouldn't have had the courage or maybe even the idea to do that if I hadn't sort of been relying somewhat on my performer's instinct. There was a small bit of me that was terrified. I thought, what if I've misjudged this? What if I've just misjudged my ability to carry that off? Or misjudged people's ability to engage with that kind of slightly different way of approach? Yeah, I mean, what fueled it was I just thought, Oh, God, you know, another person to stand up, give us the same old stuff. And the same old way. How can I just bring something different to the table that speaks more to who I am and where I've come from? Fortunately, I survived it. And it did work. And actually, I did go on to do a similar thing on a couple of other cases, like for Google, at a Black History Month, and in Thomson Reuters, I think that was relying on my performance instinct of what it's like to sit in the audience, as another person takes the stage whether to speak or the dance.

Melanie:

Yeah.

Kenneth:

And so that's a very literal answer to your question.

Melanie:

No, I think it's incredible. And it reminds me, I hope you don't mind if it tell a little story of my own of when I applied for, I think my second desk job and I was asked to bring a presentation. And I didn't know how to use PowerPoint, but I was really interested in property. And I'd just did a little interior design course. So I used the storyboarding skills, they taught us at this interior design course, to make this kind of polyboard. The project was called Next Steps, so I put plaster on my feet and I actually did steps on this board painted it all, then made these little labels that you'd see in an

exhibition about what I thought the next steps for this project should be. And I turned up at the interview with this great big thing. And I remember afterwards, Fiona Ross (director of learning at Sadler's Wells) said to me, you were the weakest candidate on paper, because you had no experience whatsoever, but you were the best one in the room. Because I drew upon that performance, I put a little scarf on so I felt like somebody else that might have an office job. I put this whole persona together. And there I stood with his polycarbonate presentation, because they didn't know how to use the computer. It is hilarious. But we do pull on those skills don't we. And they either work or they don't. But actually, you've lost nothing from trying. So both of you, I think through your careers seem to me to have also, not only did you transition from dancing to an existing job, but you've both had experience of making those jobs. And Cath you said that that's been kind of inherent in how you've approached dancing, you've just made the opportunities for yourself. Kenneth, you started up a company called ArtyfartyArts and Cath, you danceservice.co.uk. And I wondered, was that a way of you creating a job for yourself and a role that fitted you and your skills? Or was that a gap in the market a business move? Or was it a sort of a value based move where you thought, actually, this thing is missing and I need to somehow fill it? What was the inspiration between both of you making those roles for yourself?

Kenneth:

I think for me, ArtyfartyArts I was working with a composer called Simon Redfern. We'd originally met as gamelan players at the South Bank, and then went on to collaborate on several pieces together. But actually, I never had the intention to start a company. So on paper, it looks like perhaps I did. But the reason I didn't want to start a company was because I was still fresh from London Contemporary Dance Theatre. And my sense of what a company meant was something bigger, more structured. And I wasn't after doing that we just wanted to make work together and collaborate. But we realised we needed an identity when we work together. That was why we coined that name. We tried to work our way through all sorts of very worthy sounding names that we just in the end binned, and we went for the one that just made us smile. And I still have that in my email address.

Cath:

I think when I set up the dance service, what it came out of is I had had a period of maternity leave from the birth of my first daughter. And it was just when the internet was starting. And I was in the process of saying to myself, right, you've got a daughter, she's going to be a millennial. You've got to learn what this computer world internet thingy is. So I taught myself HTML taught myself how to build a website. And because my passion has always been dance, and I see work and am involved in it, I noticed there was no dance presence at all on the internet. So I thought, ah, that's what I'll do. So I started putting up information, what's coming up, I started reviewing shows, made some small websites for Mark Baldwin when he had his companies. We did Mark's first website hosted it on the dance service. We did Chris Nash's first step of photography website. So it came out of my passion for dance, but also my understanding of where the world was going. And we needed to get on board with that back in the early 90s. So yeah, we had the first sort of dance information website in the UK that went for quite a number of years. But once I got back into full time dancing again, it started to

taper down and then Londondance.com came into play. So we we're like, right that there's professionals out there doing it now so we'll leave it to them.

Kenneth:

That's amazing Cathy. That is incredible. And did you say early nineties.

Cath:

Yeah.

Kenneth:

I didn't own my first laptop until 2000. So you were well ahead of the game Cathy, that I'm so impressed. That's, that's terrific.

Cath:

Early adopter! My dad's an engineer so he had a Commodore 64. Back in the 80s when I was doing my degree, and I would go around and use it. So yeah, I've been around technology. And so when my daughter was born in 94, actually, we went to Curry's and bought this big, lumpy thing with a massive monitor that's like three feet deep. And yeah, just got on with figuring it out really.

Melanie:

I wonder if some of that is coming into play. But like you say, your father was an engineer, and you just come from a place of problem solving, which is what we do, actually, isn't it in our roles now? Now, I asked my team to come up with some questions for this podcast, and that I've got a couple of exdancers in the team. I don't know which one of them came up with it but it touched something in me. It was at any point along the way, have you felt that anyone doubted your ability because you hadn't gone through a traditional academic route? Or perhaps has the opposite being true that there's been kudos because of your amazing performance careers? And I wondered which of those have been true for you? Or perhaps they both are at different points?

Cath:

Do you know who the biggest doubter was for my dancing was myself because I came at it so late and always felt I needed to catch up right through my career. And then the biggest doubter when I moved into producing was also myself because I had no formal training or even an MA or anything in producing. I had nothing. But there was kudos from my performing career in the UK. So when I went back to people to talk about things, they would know who I was, so that broke the ice already. And they understood that I'd worked at a certain level. Yeah, I think I was my own worst enemy, even though I consider myself like overly confident. Not not backward, and coming forward, shall I say? So

yeah. And quite happy to be knocked back. But get up and try again. You know, that's what dancing is, isn't it every day, you do the same thing over and over, because it could be better, could be better, could be different, could be more nuanced. So that's how I approach my work now. Even when you're knocked back for funding or knocked back for whatever you think, what could I have done better here? And let's try again.

Melanie:

Always trying to get better. And Kenneth you brought up that resilience thing, as well, you know, how resilient dancers and performers have to be and then the way you bring that through? What's your response to that question, Kenneth?

Kenneth:

Again, it's a great question. I think all human beings have doubt of some kind. At some point. I think I learned to cope with them as a dancer, I think the more experience you get as a dancer, the more you're able to ride that wave, and you perhaps spend less energy worrying. I remember one of the things that the late Sir Robert Cohan used to say to us as dancers, sometimes he said, if there's something you can do about the thing you're worrying about, go and do it. If there's nothing you can do stop worrying. It was a great piece of advice, I'd say, perhaps in the latter part of my career, being on the other side and not being a performer. If people had doubts about me, then perhaps they were kind enough not necessary to throw them in my face. But I think at the same time, you know, when I remember going to The Place, when I started, I wanted to meet the whole organisation, and to say, Hello, I'm here, this is a bit about how I want to go about things. And I realised that before I even stepped through the door, that that's bringing people from different parts of the organisation who are on very different timetables, it was just not going to happen. I did manage to achieve that. I think in my last 18 months in the place, I think we managed to arrange it. So the organisation can come together for an hour at a time for maybe five times a year, so I did get there. But it took nine years! Instead, I remember writing a letter to the organisation. And I remember one of the elements was just that I didn't expect even coming in as chief executive that all the good ideas and the good answers would come from me. I felt it was really important that they should filter up through the organisation that part of my role was to try and harness that. And I guess if you went in with the expectation that it was all about you, and that all the important decisions were about you then I suspect that's perhaps a recipe for disaster, of failure, and not a very good way to bring people on board or utilise the strength of an organisation.

Melanie:

I'm interested in that though Kenneth because and I'm going to be a bit generalised here. But in dance, the hierarchy of dancer and choreographer it often, I mean, it's moving. But when we look back, it used to be there didn't it? You know, the choreographer would set the steps and the dancers obediently did them. Do you think that that wasn't true of London Contemporary Dance

Theatre and Arc and the experiences you've had? And so therefore, you brought a more collaborative approach that we do see much more in choreographers now, but...

Kenneth:

It's a great question. I think that collaborative thing has changed in my career in my lifetime, but I think it was even there before and even if you talk to people who work with Sir Frederick Ashton at the Royal Ballet, they will tell you from their firsthand experience, it was much more iterative than one might have imagined on the outside. But certainly, I think even before I stopped dancing, you know, lots of choreographers, I mean, Cath will have worked with some of them people like Finn Walker and others who, you know, their process was so collaborative to the extent which they would probably write made in collaboration with the dancers.

Melanie:

Because it was.

Kenneth:

Because it absolutely was. And so I think whether you've been involved directly in that process, or you've witnessed it or you've, you know, I think even with London Contemporary, you know, we worked with so many different choreographers, no one process was the same. But however it was it felt iterative. And it wasn't just about responding to instructions, or Darling, I want two of those and one of those and just give it me like that. I think I'd have stepped out of dance much earlier, if I hadn't felt that one was involved in a sort of intelligent conversation of where everyone brings something to the table.

Melanie:

So you have brought that approach then from that experience that you've had dancing then too.

Kenneth:

I guess I had not thought about that direct relationship. But I guess so.

Melanie:

Interesting. And actually, as we think about you, as young dancers for a moment here, and I'm thinking now of the dancers that are out there listening to this, I wondered whether now that you're in a position of authority, and you will have had many experiences on the other side of the desk, auditioning dancers, or artists or perhaps not auditioning, but looking at commissions and proposals. Is there something that you wish you knew about what it feels like to be this side of the desk that you wish you'd known when you were the other side of the desk?

Cath:

Oh, gosh, another another top question. Thanks very much.

Melanie:

You're welcome.

Cath:

I think understanding that they're human, you know, the people who are at the top of these organisations, they're all human, they all have human quirks and pressures on them. And you know, they're not going to get everything right. I certainly don't get everything right. And that's something that I'm definitely trying to bring to my role. Is that very open, here I am, you know, my email's on my website on the South East Dance website so people, please, you know, people can get in touch. And I want all of our team to be that sort of human centred approach so that we're not sort of some we're not a building yet. But you know, we're not walled off from people. And we hope that we're approachable, that I think that that would have been something good to know, when I was younger.

Melanie:

Yeah, yeah, I can understand what you're saying there. Kenneth, how about you?

Kenneth:

I'm struggling with this one. It's a great question. Well, I'll try. I don't know if I can articulate quite what's in my head, because I don't think it's fully formed. But I think as an older person, looking at younger people, I guess there's a kind of envy makes it sound too loaded emotionally. But you know, there is something about the energy of a young person who has so much before them, I suppose I just want to see young people be as bold and courageous and as uniquely them as they can be without feeling that they have to necessarily be obedient or please older people like me. And I'm not saying that I'm a repressed rebel, or as a young person I was an repressed rebel. I don't think I necessarily was, but perhaps, I don't know, it sounds like I'm talking with regret. I'm not. But I'm just musing. I suppose from where I am now, I'd want to encourage any young person just to not think that there's a template. To not think that you have to do it like that person, or how it's already been done. Because young people today live in a completely different world. But you know, I'm half Nigerian, I understand respect for the elders. So it's not about disrespect for the elders. But on the other hand, don't let that respect be stifling in such a way that you cannot have the confidence to carve out your own unique pathway, have your own unique voice, whether as an artist or just as a person, and be bold enough to do something that's maybe going to change the world? So I have not quite answered your question, I suppose. Perhaps if someone had said to me, look just do it, and don't worry about it so much, whether I would have done something different. I, who knows?

Melanie:

Thinking about that question I asked you, I know one of the things that it's occurred to me being on this side is, I urge dancers proposing a project to us or applying to a commission call out about being specific about what it is they're going to do. We get so many that have got lots and lots of really beautiful words, but I read them going I don't know what it is. I don't know what the thing is. I wish I had thought about that from that side of things.

Kenneth:

I tell you it's interesting Melanie, I know, Cath will probably have had to deal through many more applications and things than I have over the years. But I do remember at some point in my career, when I was reading through extensive applications for something. I remember the ones that I struggled to be convinced by were the ones that would tell me what a piece was going to look like before they'd started the process.

Melanie:

Right.

Kenneth:

That's a generalisation. But by and large, those are the ones I struggled with. The ones that actually I found was most compelled by and I felt were most honest, were the ones that told me very specifically, borrowing your word, very specifically, what question they were holding up.

Melanie:

Yes, yeah. Yeah.

Kenneth:

What was the key thing that was fueling their artistic purpose without having to tell me the curtain is gonna go up? And it's gonna look like that? I found, yeah...

Melanie:

What the outcome was.

Kenneth:

So I guess I'm agreeing with you with specificity. But I guess, in that particular context, I was more if someone was asking the right questions, they were more likely to come up with a good answer.

Melanie:

That's interesting too. The process and being able to articulate that process is really fascinating, isn't it? This is going off tangent with the subject of the podcast, it feels very scary when you're commissioning and you're putting that money in and you've got somebody waiting your funder, your board, whoever it is for this big thing. But so many times I have to tell myself, I trust this artist. I know this artist is going to deliver. And I'm at that point on the process where I can't see what they can see. But I know they'll get there. And that's come true a couple of times. So now I believe it enough to just go, it's all right, I'm just in my funny moment. And I just, you know, give the artist some time and all will become clear.

Cath:

And that's true, actually, Melanie, because as dancers, we've been through that, because you know, when you go into the studio, and the choreographer says, This is today's task, and this is why you're doing the task. And after a period of weeks or months, you don't know what the end result's going to be. You just have to trust in the process of that artist who knows why they're asking you to do what they're doing. And in the end, you end up with something that fabulously addresses the investigation. So yeah, there's that trust, I think, in what's being investigated, rather than what an outcome would be.

Melanie:

Yeah. Because then you know, you can have that conversation with that person. If you trust that person, you know, everything will be okay, because you get to a problem. And you can talk it through. It's been quite a learning curve for me, and it's always exciting. So a very quick one. Do you have any role models? Was there anyone as you were going through this process that you looked up to and thought, that's what I want to do?

Kenneth:

I think the person other than my parents, who particularly at the start of my career, was a presence throughout my whole life until very recently, who probably has influenced me more and shaped me more in my thinking and being as a dancer was Sir Robert Cohan. He was such an extraordinary man, and the fact that he was still choreographing at 95. You know, even during the pandemic, he was still choreographing online and making these film solos. Such an extraordinary human being, it's difficult to sum up in a couple of pithy sentences. But I know that many of the dancers who worked with him, I can remember Christopher Bannerman saying this, I think, around Bob's 80th birthday, he didn't just teach us how to dance, he called us how to be. Now I know out of context, and without knowing the person that can sound a bit glib and overblown. But actually, for me, it was true. He taught me

just in who he was his approach, his breadth of knowledge that he always had to draw on, which was way beyond just dance. I think he gave us tools for going forward and becoming independent later on beyond his company. I suppose that name just comes to mind very immediately, because he was such an extraordinary human being and, you know, left such a legacy and such an imprint on so many people's lives in different ways. So I'm very, very grateful. The fact that Bob was part of my life for 42 years.

Melanie:

And such a recent loss to the dance world.

Kenneth:

Yeah.

Melanie:

Cath, How about you?

Cath:

I didn't spend that long a time with... I've moved around a lot from company to company. I guess, someone that I was quite in awe of was Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, who set up Australian Dance Theatre back in, I think it was the 70s. And she's another one who, if there's not something there, let's make it and I thought that was fantastic. I really appreciated her energy about making something happen. And then there's been other women along the way who I've sort of looked at and gone, wow, she's really doing it and she's just making it happen. So yeah, I don't think there's one in particular, for me.

Melanie:

It's fine, and Kenneth you're about to say something. Yeah, yeah. And the creativity, I think that dancers and performers seem to show in whatever transitioning, if that is the right word, that they make as they navigate this portfolio career. I don't know many dancers that don't have something like a portfolio career. We've talked about the pandemic in this podcast already. And I think whilst freelance artists have had such a hard time of it, their resilience and their ability to jump from one job to another has been a skill they've been able to draw on which perhaps other professions might not have had. I wish they hadn't had to do that. But I feel that they have had something that perhaps we didn't even recognise in them before that kind of sheer grit. But the very last question I have for you, do you still dance for recreation? Is it still a part of your life? Physically?

Kenneth:

I was just gonna say for me as a young ballet dancer before I switched to contemporary you know, if I'd been looking for people that looked like me, I was short changed. I couldn't see any, you know, we're talking pre internet pre YouTube. So all I had were copies of the Dancing Times, Dance and Dancers, and I confess a few Princess Tina Ballet albums. To look at pictures and all the dancers of colour who I saw were either doing, you know, Ipi Tombi, or perhaps Alvin Ailey, even London Contemporary, but there were no ballet dancers that were visible. So I guess at that age, whilst I might have wanted it, I couldn't relate to role models in that way. I just thought, Oh, that is a fabulous dancer, you know, saw Nureyev on film. I wanted to be as good as that. But I guess as you get older, and maybe even as a younger person, for me, role models don't have to be in the same art form. You can be influenced powerfully by someone's outlook on the world. But there is something very particular about dance in the way that it is such a human art form. In that although books are written about dance, the way knowledge about dancing is passed on from person to person in the studio, I suppose everyone who's taught us is probably in some way left a trace, some bigger than others, some that we remember somewhere that trace has been absorbed so much, perhaps we've forgotten where that originated. The only comparison I can ever really think of is a bit like the way the West African Griots and knowledge either about the playing of the kora or the wisdom, ancestral knowledge is passed on orally. You know, as dancers I think one of the things we're all grateful for is that humaneness about the way it is passed on. And I think it means that we value very much the people who have made an impact on us.

Cath:

It is for me! Absolutely, yes. There's something about the energy you get from dancing to music or to rhythm with other people. It's just incredibly energising and yeah, I come out of every class on a high. And having shared that moment with the other people in the room, it's been difficult over the last 11 months, because we've been doing it on Zoom. So you still get to move to music, but it's not that shared experience. You know, the idea of doing a cèilidh or some American line dancing really appeals to me at the moment, you know, and I just absolutely love that sort of communal dancing. So yeah, I do still do it. I think my body would fall apart if I didn't have some physical practice.

Melanie:

Yeah, how about you Kenneth.

Kenneth:

I guess I don't in the way that Cath described. I've done two projects, though, for older dancers, one in 2014, and one in 2017. And the 2014 one was when Sadler's Wells launched this thing called the Elixir Festival and they approached a load of former professionals and I was one of the babies was still in my 50s then. And we were basically saying, you know, will be come out of retirement to work with Jonathan Burrows, the choreographer and Mateo Fargion and the composer. I felt a bit like the scientist and the object of the experiment at the same time, because I thought for the first time in my life, I'm going back to something. Because I couldn't remember not dancing, and here it was

having sat behind a desk for a number of years and going, Oh my god, what's it going to be like going back into the studio? It was brilliant. We had the most amazing time and then we did another project in 2017 with Annie B Parsons. I've also done two very small bits in film I did a little bit in the Mamma Mia Here We Go Again group number with Anthony van Laast, which was great fun, and it was not physically taxing. And then I think even in 2019 I think it was I worked with Kate Prince who's been choreographing the Channel Four film version of Everyone's Talking About Jamie so did a couple of days on that. But beyond that, actually, I think on a regular basis, I transferred my need and I totally empathise with what Cathy says, you know, I need a physical element to my life. I've probably transferred what I got from dance into running around a tennis court for quite a number of hours a week and sea kayaking. And both of which I can see I draw on some of my dance knowledge and skill, you know, being able to read a tennis court, even at my old age, I can cover ground quite quickly. And in the sea kayak balancing is a dynamic thing. Yeah. Cathy, do you sea kayak?

Cath:

No, no, I have done in the past. But you're kidding. It's England, it's freezing.

Kenneth:

If you wear the right gear, you know, and if it's really cold, you know, you wear... you don't get cold because most of you's under the kayak and you can just wear, you know, the dry stuff on top. But it is like dancing in the sense that balance is a dynamic thing. You're so you're constantly adjusting and reading the water and feeling it and two, if you're in really demanding conditions when you've got big waves, and there's a danger of capsizing, it forces you into like performance mode. In other words, you're totally present. And you don't even have to think about it. Because you just know that your survival depends on it. I'm not an adrenaline junkie, but that's just about the right level of adrenaline for me to sort of feel alive and not feel that I'm about to give myself a heart attack.

Melanie:

I do remember when I was at The Place, wasn't it the 30th anniversary at that time?

Kenneth:

Or the 40th...

Melanie:

And you Eddie Nixon and Richard Alston did a piece and I remember sitting in the auditorium then and feeling very proud to be working in an organisation where the three heads of state of the organisation were performing.

Kenneth:

I do remember that. And that was an amazing piece by Victoria Marks the Canadian choreographer that was originally performed and made for all women. And I remember seeing it with Jane Dudley who was head of contemporary studies, and Judyth Knight, who was the head of music in the head accompanist and Louise McDonald. And then the youngest member Ruth, she was a student at the time when that was first performed. And she came back and she taught it to us. And I do remember during the rehearsal process, it was all about counts and turning and heads. And she had meticulously outlined everybody's counts on an Excel sheet. And I remember the experience of being in the studio, having to go and check the counts, but having to go and put my glasses on to do it. That's a first, that's a sign of age.

Melanie:

I think that feels like a good place to stop. 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 Cath and Kenneth, head on over to greenwichdance.org.uk. And do remember that 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 do join us next time for more Talking Moves. Thank you so much. I feel absolutely humbled to be in your presence. And I can tell you that you're both role models of mine. So thank you for being with us.

Cath:

It's lovely to chat.

Kenneth:

It's been great fun.