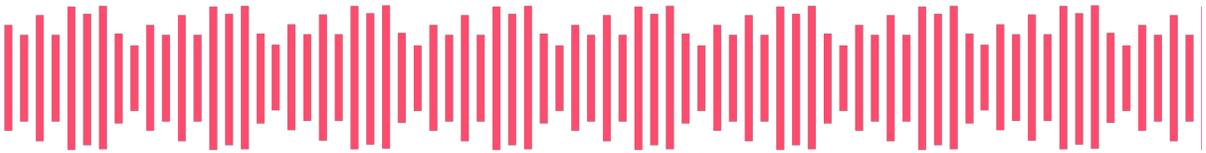


# TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

## **Women and Dance** **S03 / E01**

### **Episode Description**

In this episode we talk to Avatâra Ayuso and Anna Williams about women and dance.

Within an overwhelmingly female profession, it still feels largely led by men particularly in creative and managerial roles. How has this come about and most importantly... what can we do about it?

We discuss how being a woman has shaped Avatâra and Anna's own careers and those of other women they see, we discuss the work both of them are doing through their initiatives and teaching programmes and the mechanisms they use to empower young female dancers. Avatâra observes that women are more often than not infantilised (which comes up again and again as we unpick the topic through the discussion) and Anna discusses the careful use of language as she works with young and impressionable dancers.

Together we contemplate the unfairness of the dance sector gender make-up and drill down into why achieving a gender balance really matters. Avatâra draws upon years of study and reflection – gathering case studies from powerful dancing women across the world and Anna contemplates the hierarchical nature of the balletic institutions and together we ponder whether those companies have in a way become a metaphor of the sector – lines of excellently trained female corp de ballet, some highlighted male soloists and the choreographic genius at the top.

The three of us reflect on what stands in the way for women and predictably the subject of parenthood, along with the impact that Covid has had and the learning we might take from this past

year about how we could do things differently. Together we reflect upon whether there are changes to make in ourselves which could progress the movement, alongside thinking about the changes we hope that others might look to make.

Finally we reflect upon some of the recommendations coming out of the recent Women in Theatre Forum Report such as quotas and training, and discuss whether these really are the tools we need for change.

### **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 in this episode I'll be talking to two artists about women in dance. A recent study showed that just 31% of artistic directors in national portfolio theatre organisations are female, and this has prompted a call to Arts Council England to recognise women alongside other underrepresented groups in its 10 year strategy. The report is admittedly wedded in theatre statistics and they are shocking. Only 33% of boards are made up of women, for example, the same is true of technical staff. 10% of Olivier Awards are won by women. And 10% of critics are female. But I think we feel it over here and dance as well. Within an overwhelmingly female profession, it still feels largely led by men with some notable exceptions, particularly in creative and managerial roles. How has this come about? And most importantly, what can we do about it? So today, I'm joined by two inspirational women in dance to talk about just this. Anna Williams award winning dancer, rehearsal director, maker and lecturer and Avatâra Ayuso. Dancer, choreographer, cultural leader, and activist. Welcome both of you. So we're three women around a virtual table, at slightly different stages of our careers, and looking at your own career in this profession. How much has it been shaped by the fact that you're a woman? Anna, do you mind having a stab at that one first?

#### **Anna:**

Gosh, that's sort of an impossible question for me. In that I wouldn't know any different, because I am. But if I think through my sort of dance history, the reason I was actually attracted to contemporary dance, as opposed to ballet and other forms that were kind of coming my way was

because it had a sort of feminist angle to it. And I think it chimed with my kind of teenage self. And I was a student in the late 80s, early 90s. And I think that actually it chimed with my political self at that time, and what we were uncovering in society and what we were kind of thinking about and the injustices we were seeing, and as well as it being, you know, an art form that obviously I really enjoyed, and really wanted to pursue. And then I would say the other big point about being a woman, and how in my career was the big kind of other change was when I became a parent. I think my experience of being a parent and Tom, my daughter's father's experience, that really kind of changed how I felt. Well, ramped up again, that idea of how unequal we sit in society, in a way in terms of what is expected of us, and how it impacts on our careers and our working lives, we have a very what I consider equal partnership, you know, absolutely extremely fortunate in the way that we are able to live our lives, you know, fairly equally. However, it wasn't to do with our personal circumstances, it was to do with how I butted up against what was happening out in the world and how unconfident I felt about saying I was a mum asking for what I needed to be put in place to facilitate that work. And I found that really difficult in the beginning of being a parent and then coming back into the workplace or trying to adjust and just basically trying to cover it up. So yeah, that's fine.

**Melanie:**

Nothing's changed here!

**Anna:**

And I think in the way that my partner didn't have to deal with in quite as big a way as I did.

**Melanie:**

Oh, there's lots in there.

**Anna:**

Sorry, go!

**Melanie:**

It's always hard the first question for podcasts because it's like, bang, right? How do we get into that? It's lovely. We'll pick into some of this as we go through. Avatâra, how about you?

**Avatâra:**

So in my case, I started in classical ballet. And even though it's a technique that I really enjoyed, I had some issues in finding myself in that technique. And luckily, thanks to a big injury, I had a tumour in my leg that kind of forced me to go away from classical ballet as a professional, which I thought it

was my career. So as Anna said, as well, you know, contemporary dance really opened up my world in the sense that I started first of all to accept my body, a body that I was struggling with as a ballet dancer was very good in technique, but my bones, my physique was kind of much bigger than the one that had to be for the ballet context. So for me, the moment that I shifted to contemporary dance, I started to empower myself, my body, my mind, my instincts, you know, those guts in there, my confidence and my voice as well. So even though at that stage, I didn't experience any inequality, because it was maybe just the students or very early on in my career as a professional, I felt very empowered by the experience of dance very early on. And then as I became a professional, I realised that Oh, things are not as nice as they seem. Lack of opportunities, feedback that was nonsense for certain positions or roles and I'm not just talking as a dancer, maybe in other roles as well. And then I realised how the art world and the dance sector how unfair it is. And that was very painful. And that's what actually made me be a kind of a true activist in the dance sector, because at the same time I was experiencing that they were fantastic women in the sector that I was meeting all around. And I'm not saying just in the UK, which is where I develop my professional career. I've been working a lot in Asia, in Africa, and Latin America, in Canada, and all around in all the dance sector it was all inspirational women of the time. So it was this paradox is like what's going on? Clearly, society has a lot to do with that, not just the dance sector, but the dance sector's reproducing those old fashioned patriarchal patterns that are really damaging for us. So my experience as a woman in the dance sector is that anger and frustration that has given me the drive to create my charity, AWA Dance, Advancing Women's Aspirations with Dance, but also to empower other women. Every time every project I do I give opportunities to girls and women. And it may be here, but maybe also in Burkina Faso in Senegal, or when I was in the North Pole working with the Inuit. So I'm very inspired by the women in the dance sector. And Anna is one of them. I met Anna as a dancer, she didn't know me just yet, but I saw her dancing for a long time. And then years later, I met her as a rehearsal director. And it was like, wow, you know, it's like when you say like, why would someone is so inspiring. It's just it gives me such a drive and motivation.

**Anna:**

Back at you Avatâra, thank you.

**Melanie:**

Anna's blushing. That's really interesting. I always feel slightly embarrassed when I'm in these rooms with artists and try and put myself as an artist because I wasn't. But I did dance, but not to the levels that you did. I had a foot in sort of musical theatre camp, I always thought that that was where I wanted to go. But I also really liked contemporary, I never really fell into either one of them. But the unfairness of the opportunity always struck me when I was auditioning. The lines of 300 women for the roles, and then the 20 men, and there might have only been one male role, possibly, but it was this sort of inequality of this herd of women, amazing women high standard have been studying and training for years, and then a much smaller pool of men. So that was sort of echoed around me as I was auditioning and dancing. And I never really thought too much about it until this role, actually, and then feeling sometimes that I'm in an all men's club that I'm having to sort of knock on the doors

of. So it's, I just wondered, did you ever feel that as you were dancing? Did you come up against that feeling of the imbalance of opportunity between male and female?

**Anna:**

Yeah, I think definitely, for me back in the day, we all knew we had to be, we always used to make a joke about it, we had to be four times as good as any man in the room, because there was so much more competition. And we were, we were much better than most of the guys in the room. It was the truth, because no, it was the dragging boys out of school to go come and do some dancing, which on a social level was brilliant. And of course, it should be open for all and trying to generate that. But as you're training as a professional. Yeah, it was always heard of us and a few of them. And really, that wasn't part of the competition, you were sort of in competition with each other in order to get these small amounts of roles. And I suppose I don't really have the temperament I'm not very good in auditions. I never had been, I never really got any significant jobs through auditions. And so I very quickly understood for me, I had to go a different tack anyway, and work with people that I knew. And that was a deeper kind of relationship and valued me for what I could offer and also with groups of people who are artists that were really inspirational to me. So yeah, I sort of moved away from the competition, but I just thought I can't, I'm not going to survive here. I'm going to find a different way.

**Melanie:**

We've heard that play out in a number of these sorts of conversations for a number of different reasons. It's interesting, isn't it that as creative people, sometimes we just go right okay, I'm not going to wait for the opportunity to make it for myself. And talking of which, Avatâra, you've done just that. Your organisation Advancing Women's Aspirations in Dance recently held its first women in dance awards online, and exceptionally with all kinds of interactive technology. Amazing. And hopefully next year, that will be an actual event. Why did you decide it was important to host an award ceremony of that kind?

**Avatâra:**

Well, first of all, because women deserve recognition. A recognition we are not receiving in the sector. Women in dance I'm talking, yeah? Recognition that we are not receiving us in the sector. The type of recognition we are getting, which is brilliant, is as a muse, the ballerina, the best dancer, you know, the first female contemporary female ballet, even choreographer, but it's this idea of Muse that. Yes, it is empowering. But at the same time, just one dimension of what women are and women leaders in the sector are totally forgotten. They are an exception as you are, as you are visibly I'm saying because we are there you know, those women leading in the sector are all the way through, and in almost all the levels, not the top levels. So basically the charity, AWA Dance, that was a dream that I had even before I had the charity done. I just needed the infrastructures like, how can we recognise what women are already doing? How can we acknowledge the talent that is already out there? How can I acknowledge the impact that women are already doing there? So it was just a homage to all the women because I'm really fed up of being hidden by the sector, by society. And it

was just that drive to say, like, we exist, we are there, we are doing fantastic things. And we are really, really impacting ourselves, our communities, and the society at large.

**Melanie:**

It's really putting a spotlight on women and their achievements. I thank you, for all of us women out there, who you might not be able to hear thank you for being out there and championing the cause.

**Avatâra:**

Yeah, and I think I was aware that doing a gala online was not the best format. But I thought, I don't care. There might be technical difficulties, I there might be 10 people attending or 100, we had almost 100. So but that was not the point. It's like, even if we have just one person that attends it is what worth it.,

**Anna:**

Yeah absolutely, a fantastic thing. And you just as you were talking, it made me think, yes, women have sort of always been like the foot soldiers in dance, we've been regarded as the foot soldiers. So we're like the fodder, there were like the corps de ballet, you know, we're like the things that fill out all the work, but at the top, then that's where the men sit. Or I suppose it's that idea also of the choreographer being the genius. You know, whichever gender. The choreographer is the genius and then everybody else. So that's a slightly different way of sort of talking about the social makeup of a company, or how work is made, but it's often the worker bees aren't ever given any credit.

**Avatâra:**

And also, how, how sad is that the fact that, you know, this is the great paradox in the dance sector. You know, women and girls are outnumbering in boys in training and in professional context, but women are not taught to be leaders.

**Anna:**

That have no power.

**Avatâra:**

They are taught to be a followers and follow the patriarchal structures that are in place. But if we think about who established the sector, not just in the UK, I've travelled all around the world. And I can tell you, women started it in Mali, in Burkina Faso, in Senegal, with the Inuit in the North Pole, in Chile, in Taiwan, women are the ones that start. Of course, there are men also there, but women are the ones. And then after they put the base the infrastructure for it, then the men are given the power. So how embarrassing of the dance sector to not trust women, you know, is pure distrust that

the dance sector and society but the dance sector has. But how embarrassing that knowing that the women established all those dance sectors around the world. Now, they don't trust us.

**Melanie:**

It just made me think and I thought this before but that structure of those ballet companies, as you say, the genius choreographer at the top, and then all of those – I love the worker bees analogy, looking beautiful, or looking the same leg at the same height, you know, all that kind of thing, conform, stay in line. And then perhaps a few little principal moments for men in front of this lovely backdrop and picking up on what you said there at Avatâra, in researching this, I stumbled across an article which framed the question of is there sexism in dance against that backdrop of hundreds of girls in community centres and schools on a Saturday morning dancing. And you talked about that Anna of pulling in those few boys trying to encouraging them in the doors. And I wondered what is it that happens along that journey that starts so positively with girls dancing, that results in that imbalance? And there was another little quote, I forget where we saw it that talked about because there are so few boys in dance earlier on. And I remember the one in my Ballet School actually, who's given so much attention and was so just so grateful that he's there. He's exhausted because he's doing all the pas de deux work but they're encouraged to be an individual whereas the girls train in the group the corp de ballet. What is it in that journey that just switches? Is it confidence? Do we hit puberty and we lose our confidence? What what goes on?

**Avatâra:**

I think it's the, the lack of opportunities, because boys go through teenage years as well and they lose their confidence in many ways as well. So it's just in the dance sector, the lack of opportunities and the girls in training, they always have to choose. Oh no no, or sometimes they are not even given a choice. You know, you need to do pointe shoes or no you cannot go into your choreographic practice or no you cannot go into teaching. You need to concentrate on your technique. So I think it is the sector and sometimes some teachers that stop those girls from growing in the way they want. Of course body confidence as well. I think there is much more pressure on girls and women physically than on men. A man he is sometimes too short to dance with a female ballerina, but you know their body types is different. The different body types are much more accepted than girls ones. So I think it's lack of opportunity and pressure put on the girls.

**Melanie:**

What do you think Anna?

**Anna:**

Yeah, be really hard to unpick that. Because now for me working with those young dancers at Northern, you know, the boys and the girls, they have the same lack of confidence or the same issues, the same anxieties, the same technical abilities now. I mean, extraordinary training coming

through for all these young people. So I'm not sure kind of what happened. And I think back to my personal experience, I kind of don't understand how it's happened. Because I'm sort of brought up with these big female icons, who were changing that idea of a muse changing that idea of, you know, women taking hold of how their bodies are used, and visually, that they've become less of a visual object and much more about a developing art form and a form of expression. So with the Judson Church group, they completely neutralised in their costume and, and how they were, you know, interested in intellectual tasks for the body. You know, Trisha Brown, and I started with doing Isidore Duncan Greek dance when I was a kid. So I was a little Isadorable. And she was completely about. I mean, yeah, she was completely about like, waaaa! You know, expression and take a woman's body and sticking it out there and, and taking charge of her own expression and her own art form. So I suppose I was brought up with those icons. And you know, I was very lucky to have that in my vista. And so that in my 30s, I sort of looked behind and went, Oh, God, what's happened now? How come we've not moved off the back of that? That's not how I thought we will go in. So it is really tricky. I don't really understand. I mean, I suppose the dance world, obviously, is a reflection of society as a whole. And we could say that actually, since the 70s, it has gone backwards in terms of equality for women, now, anywhere in society as general and it keeps doing these flips, doesn't it keep doing these cycles, we feel like there's a bit of progress and then you know, it just seems to sort of retrograde back.

#### **Avatâra:**

And I think another point that what happens is that women, the moment they start becoming a professional, they are infantilized, you know, we know in that large ballet company, I've been there, you're in a rehearsal with, you know, 30 40 50 dancers, okay, girls who are going to go and do that part men, you go and do that... I said - what do you mean, girls and men? I'm sorry, you know, women and men. So I have my own campaigns saying that I'm not a girl, in the context of being a professional. So um, these are things that I've talked to principal ballet dancers, in companies that they are empowering and empowered. And they those principal, female dancers, they still call themselves girls, and not in a in a friendship context. No, in a professional context. So women get infantilized all the way through. Even I have big bosses men calling me but you girl, you're doing so well, you know, you're so proactive as like, I'm sorry, I'm not a girl. If we're having a coffee a chat, maybe on a Saturday evening, maybe, but in this, and I and I call out people and organisations, because we're kind of assimilating that as if it was just, you know, drinking water, you know, we're infantilized all the time. And we carry that from the early years of training into our first years of professional practice, until your 40s and 50s.

#### **Melanie:**

That's such a great point. And do you know what I don't think I've even thought about that, which just plays into that exact point, doesn't it that we exist in this structure ourselves sometimes blindly. And and I'll come on to that a bit later, because I think I'm gonna pull and dig down into that a little bit more. But I'm conscious that both of you actually have a responsibility in your work for working with young women in schooling or through your programme. Both of you are there and working with

girls as they grow through into women. What sort of tools do you give them? What do you talk about to prepare them for this dance world that they're about to move into?

**Anna:**

I think language as Avatâra pointed out, is one of the really key things. So we're also working really hard now in the light of the Black Lives Matter protests. I mean, we were doing it before, but we're really trying now, a real focus on scrutinising the language that we use when we're teaching. For me, it's really important for it to be as inclusive as possible. So that the language that I use in the workshop is, you know, they are dancers, they are people, they are human beings. So then that any ideas around body acceptance and issue so you meet it as the artists that you are. So really trying to empower the young people that are in our care really for that time, to be really aware about their status and their power. I mean, as a young dancer, you know, no matter which gender you're open to being exploited, because everybody wants work, everybody wants to get on the ladder. And I think we kind of try to embed really with all the my interactions with the students. Just to give isn't the confidence to know their own boundaries to know that it's okay to not do things. It's okay to challenge their job to challenge sometimes our language or the language of society puts at them the opportunities that they have to call it out when they see it. Yeah, I think just by being in the room and talking about your history, and acknowledging that this is a challenge, this has been a challenge, but where the progress is where things still need to move on, I think sort of just emotionally supporting where I can, that feels important at the time that I have them, which is 18 to 21. So they're quite young.

**Melanie:**

Avatâra, how about you?

**Avatâra:**

I think, of course, yeah language calling out that's very, very, very important. And you know, calling out in a respectful way doesn't mean that you're going to get confrontational with someone. You can say, Oh, thank you. Yeah, don't worry, I'll do my task. But just a point, you know, I'm not a girl. I'm a woman. I'm a professional as you are. And I've heard that even from women. Yeah. So it's something that really interesting it's not just men. So language, calling out, also engage in conflictive conversations. So whenever there is a conflict, I don't mind stopping and say, Okay, let's talk about this. Now, what's going on here? Why do you say that what you know, and helping them to develop a voice within conflict and not be afraid of engaging with conflict, because conflict can be a very powerful state to change. To change many things. It doesn't need to be always traumatic. So engaging in conflict, also, in that direction is I teach everyone I work with or I collaborate with, to say, No, I'm telling them the power of saying no. No, is to say yes to other things. So if there is something even as a choreographer that I'm asking you that I'm fighting for it, and you say, No, okay, give me your reasons. But feel free to say no. Basically, letting everyone know those women's and girls that your voice matters, you know, so your voice matters. And I'm going to create the context and

infrastructure as Anna was saying, for you to be able to come to me and disagree with me, or express your emotional feelings or, or your worries for you to be able to not feel embarrassed about who you are. And in AWA Dance, in the charity, we want to be a platform for women and girls to connect with each other. So I think providing a network is really, really important to know that, for example, I want to be a rehearsal director, I don't know how to start, I may say like, Oh, I know, a brilliant one. And I might put her in touch with Anna. And Anna, might invest a couple of conversations that will be super empowering, and life changing for someone that wants to pursue that journey. So I think connecting women and experiences because you know, even if they are top top bosses, sometimes they might say no, but still I don't mind if I have that person and I know someone wants to get there, I would connect them. You know, support, empower and connection.

**Melanie:**

Networking is such a powerful...

**Avatâra:**

Healthy networking. Healthy networking.

**Melanie:**

Tell me about unhealthy networking.

**Avatâra:**

Unhealthy networking is the one where you are so selfish, that it's just about yourself without worry about what you can give back to that person. So I might network with someone that I'm passionate about what they do, they may be passionate about what they do. And they can be an exchange of contacts, of expertise. That's a healthy network.

**Anna:**

Exchange

**Avatâra:**

Exchange

**Melanie:**

Anna I've cut in on you then did you want to say something?

**Anna:**

Oh, just a silly thing. But very often, when Tom and I are out, doing whatever we're doing, our different projects. And we have a company together. And sometimes when we're together very often the young students will come and they'll ask how do you do it? How does your life work? And I think they mean, how do you have a child and be on tour? How do you be a family on tour? How do you make work? How do you get past the Arts Council? How do you get your commission? You know, just how does life work? How do you manage all these things? And I think it was just really nice to say it happens. And it's a bit haphazard, and it's a bit chaotic, and you find your own way. But I think at the time when I was trying to come back into the workplace after having had my daughter was probably one of the hardest points in my career. And I was looking around to go How do other people do it? How do they do it? It was like a bit of a hidden secret. Because as women, we feel like we have to be so professional, just get on like nothing has happened. And then I was going but I can't How can I get to be seven days in a rehearsal studio and get back in time for bedtime? And emotionally how can I be there if my kid's ill? Or how did it work practically strategically? How do you keep your relationship going whilst you're on tour? You know, there's so many sorts of these things. At the time, I felt that I was scrambling around going Who can I look at for examples to say, Oh yeah, you can try this. Or maybe this is the way to do it. This is really successful. Try this. And so I think that idea of role models and mentoring and networking and you know, going and of course is much, much more possible now. I mean, I'm an old crone, so it was 10 years ago now. So now of course it just jump on social media and you find help and people help you. But actually having something more visible, more tangible and people that you can just have a conversation with and say, you know, actually what is important here, and I'm struggling a little bit with this area of how to, you know, put myself forward for this. Feels like there are lots of conversations happening now, which is brilliant. And you know, Avatâra is part of really pushing that, you know, they've been part of all sorts of pushes by different companies that are really trying to tackle that and provide a platform where we can, we can support each other, and at different stages in our lives.

**Melanie:**

I'm so inspired by what you're saying. And there's lots of things to draw out in some of this, I think some of it is the power we have in us that we have to harness to make change. Because just waiting for society around us to make the change is too slow. And other people with other inequalities are facing those same battles, aren't they? It's exhausting having to take charge. But sometimes we just have to go do it. And the other thing that made me think when you were talking Anna, was an incident I remember of somebody very high up in the sector, needing to bring their child to a meeting. This is pre COVID. Because COVID has changed this landscape. She'd come equipped with all the stuff we do as women, the bag with the iPad in it, the headphones, the snacks, the books, the everything. She set her little one up, and I saw the men in the room, I saw their opinions of her hit the bottom, like I watched it, I watched it happen, I could have cried inside. And I say that. And I didn't ask anybody what they felt about it. I just held the whole thing internally. So I might be completely wrong. But I looked at those faces. And I thought I saw what I saw. And I saw her struggle internal struggle too. And just her incredible professionalism to say my job matters, I need to be here. And this is what I'm going to do to make it happen. And actually, it's fine. And it was it was brilliant. So one

of the things that I also found as I was trolling around was it was an article in 2013, written by Luke Jennings ironically warning young ballerinas of the glass ceiling. And I think we've established that there is one. In the absence of any other statistics, he used the Sadler's Wells associate artists to make his points and he at the time of writing, then there were 10 associate artists and only two were female, which is 20%. I checked last week, and they now have 17 artists and five of those are female. So that's 29%. So there's not much of an improvement in eight years. But admittedly, Sadler's Wells associates are not the only metric. And to be totally transparent, I can't push Sadler's Wells in front of the bus without looking closely at Greenwich Dance. So I did the same thing with our ArtsUnboxed programme which we are working on now. We've got six artists producer duo's working, some of which, and Anna you're one of them are you and Tom and doing a quick tally, I can't say that we've done much better. So we've got five males and two females, more female producers than male to add to that, but still, there we are, you know, and we, as I'm sure Sadler's Wells have done, looked at lots of other things as well as you're making those decisions. But there we have it, we've got that situation that we're in, and I'm sort of asking why do we have to break it? Well, I think we should. But it's a question that I'm putting to you to say, let's think about the reasons we have to break this. And one of the things that has come to my mind, if you remember in the press, they talked a lot about technology and how the design of technology like iPhones has been made for the male hand. And I wondered, is there a theory that dance made by men is different? Or that decisions in dance made by men are different? Or how different does dance look, when we have more females in that room? We have to change it for our society for everything else. But are there other reasons we have to change it? Why do we need more female voices at the table in the studio?

**Avatâra:**

Because we exist? We need those voices because we exist. I'm sorry, yes, because we exist. And we deserve to be heard. Because we also are powerful tools for change and improvement. And until those in power, don't realise and they don't do their research. And they don't go out there and see who is there, things are not going to change. And for me, that's enough, you know, we exist, and we are powerful tools for change. And our creative voices are as valid as men's. So then we can go in how to change and I have many ideas, very simple ideas of how to change that if you want but that's fine.

**Melanie:**

Yeah, yeah! I will get there. Is it just that we exist though? Because I think yes, absolutely of course it's what we exist, but it's more than that, surely. Isn't it?

**Anna:**

Yeah. For me the richer the mix of voices that are heard in any area of life, just the richer society is. So the more diverse voices are heard, the more reflective it is of this society that actually exists is more reflective of the experiences that people are having, that's just got to be better. That's just better. It's richer, the more you know, diverse, the more female MPs there are sitting in the house,

that's going to be better because they're going to have female issues in their lived experience and they are going to then be able to put that into the mix when legislation is being made. It's the same for art. If we want to watch plays and dance and listen to music that is made by a diverse range of voices so that we can connect with those that can communicate in a bigger way, if it's only a very small part of society that is making the art, then it's only a very small part of life experience that's being reflected. And therefore it's super narrow.

**Melanie:**

I'm not disagreeing with either of you, my God!

**Anna:**

I know you're being provocative!

**Melanie:**

I wouldn't disagree with any element of this! There's nothing to disagree with. But what I'm trying to push, push, because I think you're absolutely right Avatâra it is because we exist. But then it's what you're saying too I think Anna, it's just because of the representation that we're making, that the fact that we're in that room means that the voice is sorry... my husband's creeping in the room, talking of men...!

**Anna:**

Let's asked him. What does he think? Does he think we should be allowed?

**Melanie:**

We'll come on to that. No, because we're in the room, we're speaking on behalf of others. And again, it's the same argument, isn't it that we're making?

**Anna:**

Yeah, just a richer conversation,

**Melanie:**

For more disability, for more ethnicity, for more richness in our societies is the same.

**Anna:**

And also, you were saying, we are in the room. We're just not being heard.

**Melanie:**

Yeah, yeah, which is back to Avatâra's point.

**Avatâra:**

I mean, I think for me, the big issue, and maybe that touches on what we can do is that those in power, don't want to share power. That's the first big problem that I find in society, but in the dance sector. And those that are in power, kind of get quite complacent about the artists that they find or they just met, or they just know, and they don't do a proper research to see what is out there. Yeah. Because I'm very sorry. And I always say that whoever says, Where are the women, shame on you, shame on you! Whoever even thinks that, because I know women that are changing the world, even if their dance community, a dance school like Anna, like, you know, they are there. So shame on you, if any man or woman thinks for a second, where are the women? Yeah. So apart from what all we can do in our daily lives, you know, to exactly and call out and empower of those girls and empower all those men, as well to know You know, we're all in this together. The big change will happen, when those in power realise that as we've just done, Melanie, such a great exercise of self awareness is like, actually, we're not doing that well. That's the beginning of something big. That can happen in Greenwich Dance agency. And hopefully, in places like Sadler's and yeah you're working towards that we are aware that. But it's outrageous that in the 21st century, it just hasn't changed much quickly. It is outrageous. And we're talking in a first world country, we think that we have the resources. Of course, there are difficulties and challenges, but we have the resources to be very open minded, diverse and inclusive society, we are not there yet.

**Melanie:**

So much more work to do. And you said, rightly so, let's move on to some of the things that we can do to change. And both of you have talked about assertiveness in our conversation. And I don't know if you agree, but I feel that there is a perception of a woman being assertive, that perhaps goes back to your point Avatâra about infantilizing, whenever you put your foot down as a woman, you're being pushy, whereas a man is taking the reins, and we see it playing out in politics. I won't say that I'm an advocate of Theresa May. But the kinds of criticisms she faced about what her hair looked like on the you know, the whole act of Donald Trump grabbing hold of her hand, for example, you know, all of these kinds of power plays that can happen, you know, when you start unpicking it like that it feels so unfair. So when a woman says no, as you are teaching women with you, Avatâra, how do we find that in ourselves to be more assertive? Because it feels like that's something that we should be and quietening the noise around us when we're criticised for doing so.

**Avatâra:**

I go?

**Melanie:**

Go!

**Avatâra:**

I go first? Okay, go. I think if the pandemic and I know we'll touch on that, but if the pandemic has had something good is for the whole of the society to realise that we need a new type of approach to what leadership is and how we use our voices. So I think the women, we should not be afraid of developing what we understand by leadership, and each of us can have a different style of leadership, which is completely valid. So if as women realise that we can reclaim we should reclaim that term, we should reframe what leadership is we should redefine what leadership is, you know, because leadership doesn't happen in a vacuum, you know, it starts from our reality. So when we do that, and we take it as we say in Spanish, we take the bull from the horns, I don't know how to say that in English. But once we do that, we will not be afraid of having our voice being heard or disagree with whoever is at the moment in power. So I think the confidence is by realising that leadership has many forms, even if it's, you know, to lead yourself in a dance class with a teacher that is not empowering at all. You know, I'm saying no to that teacher having a conversation with that teacher like you know, you're not helping me to evolve as the dancer I want to be. So I would say it has a lot to do with redefining...

**Melanie:**

That's interesting

**Avatâra:**

...what leadership is.

**Melanie:**

Anna what do you feel about that?

**Anna:**

Um I agree, I was sort of my first instinct was to say, why do we have to be more assertive? Why do we have to, you know, why in a way I sort of went, why do I have to be? Because I'm worrying I'm not. But that idea about soft skills. And so that goes to what types of leadership are we talking about? But I think before then there are experiences, aren't they? Before you get to kind of leadership level that we're talking about that I think, to have the confidence as a young artist to speak up, you need to know that you are supported don't you? You need to know you're backed up. You need to know that it's going to be okay to challenge. And I think because there's so many of us, like we've reflected already really briefly is that we've just internalised everything, we've seen it, and we've

experienced it the whole of our lives. But we haven't felt confident to speak up. And that's definitely true for me. To challenge, you know, I'm in awe of Avatâra and her like, I've seen her in action. No, I'm very clear about this. And I'm really clear about this. And it's fabulous. And this is the way that I actually could never couldn't have been, and never really was I was a bit more sneaky power. But, you know, I was thinking what would have helped me feel like I could have spoken up or challenge things when I didn't. I mean, lots of times I did, but when I didn't, and it is it's complex, isn't it? Because there's a lot about your rights as a human being your rights as a worker, the equality of the space that you're going to be in. And I have a little bit of hope, because I do feel like those conversations have been blown out of the water this year, in terms of yeah who's allowed in the room. Who is allowed at the table, it's not going to change quickly. But I think the next generation, they are saying no, they're going No, no, no, we're not having this. We're not having this, no, this, we're going to challenge you, we're going to change you, which is brilliant. And there's one other thing that I would say, but I feel it's actually kind of stopping it at the moment, I think there's loads of work happening ground up but right at that top, it's going to take those people in power, they have to move over before it can change. You're hanging on to the top.

**Avatâra:**

Totally, totally.

**Anna:**

You're hanging on like that to your retirement, you're part of the problem. And that's one of the you know, the massive issues, isn't it is that we have to work on this together, we have to not seen as a threat to those in power, but they have to be on the journey, they have to shift over and they have to concede they have to make room. Otherwise, we can only go so far.

**Avatâra:**

Yeah, and two things: being assertive doesn't make you a better leader. And who says that? That's rubbish. I might be assertive, because that's my personality. That's how I want to lead myself. But that doesn't make me a better leader. There are other things that make me a very good leader, not just that. So being assertive doesn't make you a good leader. And second thing, Anna even though I agree that we need to make sure that all those young people, even women in their 50s that are reshifting their career, you know, that we should make sure that they have a context for them to tell your opinion. I think everyone should learn to be comfortable with uncomfortable because most of the time, we will not find the context for us to feel safe and tell our opinion. And that's, it might be political issues, social issues. But then that's a reflection a personal reflection we need to make as human beings as leaders to say do I want to push my opinion, knowing what that can take me through it might be jail, it might be ostracism, in maybe you know many things. But being comfortable with the uncomfortable is something that has to be taught, you know, I'm not saying being confrontational, it's being comfortable with the uncomfortable and your opinions might not be popular. But if you believe in them, if you really embody and believe in them, express them.

**Melanie:**

I was going to ask you about that feminist leadership because I saw that you've undergone some training around the Clore around that. And all of this is really interesting, because it is very dangerous and easy to fall into stereotype and say something along the lines of a female leader can bring her maternal instincts, etc, etc. But that sort of stereotype aside, there are qualities in different people whether that person's a male with maternal leadership style or female with maternal leadership style that goes back to a point then conclusions that we came to earlier about that rich tapestry of people and styles in the room to create an environment where people thrive. So tell us more about feminist leadership Avatâra. What else can we learn from that?

**Avatâra:**

I think the best the first point to clarify is feminine leadership is not feminist leadership. Okay. There are two very different concepts. Feminine leadership might be associated to certain traits like nurturing or care, or Yeah. And things that society kind of believe that being feminine is. Feminist leadership has a purpose. It's really about social change, it's about justice, it's about inclusion, and feminist leadership can be practised by men and women. It has nothing to do with being a woman in power or a man in power. Feminist leadership is about putting in the forefront different values, like transformation, challenge, adaptability, care, care, well being well being, you know. So that's something that hopefully it is kind of a new concept in terms of leadership. I know feminism, of course, we know has existed there. But I think there is this misconception that a woman being a leader is going to have a feminist approach to leadership and not at all. You know, sometimes you may be a woman that is kind of just basically reproducing the patriarchal patterns, that because she wants to, because she has been forced to that that's another conversation to have. But being a woman doesn't make you a feminist leadership. It's about bringing other values and realising that feminist leadership has a purpose that really considers justice, fairness, inclusion, and diversity in the core values of your practice. And that's what I tried to apply yeah to all my work. And to what I do with the charity.

**Melanie:**

I think that's really interesting. It takes us away from the person and over to the values, which is far more empowering, and actually fairer in terms of not calling out, you know, because a world without men would be very boring world. That's not what anyone's trying to do here it is push all the men out so the women can take over. It's not about that. I really like that idea. And there's something in that report that I was talking about earlier in my introduction that said that more training of female leaders was needed. And I'm wondering through this conversation, whether that's actually not quite true, and actually falls right back into that issue that we've highlighted of infantilizing. And actually, it's more about opportunities for female leaders rather than the training of. Would you agree?

**Avatâra:**

Anna, you go. I talked too much.

**Anna:**

I know, it's not I mean, as an artist, yes. It's not I don't really aware of leadership, you know, it's not my area of I'm not doing training for leadership. And I'm not leading anything particularly! Apart from my own company.

**Avatâra:**

Anna, Anna! Sorry, I'm gonna call you out. I'm very sorry, I'm very sorry, you are a true leader. You can hold a room, the attention of everyone empowering them and do their best. And that's a leadership position. And that's another big problem. Women still don't embrace don't grab that concept of leadership, because it's too alien to us. What you're saying is you're, Anna, sorry correct me if I'm wrong, but that you are not a leader in the traditional sense that we inherited.

**Anna:**

I don't have a title. Yeah, I don't lead an organisation that's sort of what I was meaning.

**Avatâra:**

Yes. That doesn't make that doesn't make you less of a leader.

**Anna:**

Yeah, thank you Avatâra. And I do accept I am a leader in my work. Sorry, I thought Yes. Because Melanie's is talking about leadership roles in the kind of organisational sense, which yeah isn't my career.

**Melanie:**

I think your point Anna about clinging on to those roles, you know, even those choreographers that are in those roles, I think possibly applies there, too, doesn't it? That, you know, waiting for somebody to leave their role as an artistic director of a ballet company, contemporary company, whatever, you're waiting a long time for those opportunities to come around that cycle is really slow. So for new talent, there might be a whole generation that just misses the cycle.

**Anna:**

Yeah, it's also because you know, the dance world, it's impoverished, really, really impoverished area of society. So there's opportunities, there aren't loads of them, you know, in a way, it's like, Yeah,

what if you're there, you've made it, you've got your position, you're going to go? Why should I give it up? Because there's nowhere for me to go. It's really complex isn't it?.

**Avatâra:**

Yeah, but there are different aspects here first, is about what you say training, more training. I do a lot of training because I just love it. But training, I'm sorry, we can all learn in the job, as we all know that we can do. Yeah. So I think there's this exceptional, the man to women to train to be even better leaders. And when you realise men, they learn on the job, they may do something here and there, but they don't have the same pressure to keep on doing training. What we need, as you pointed out is opportunities. And in those opportunities, there might be learning processes that happen but clearly more opportunities. And then in terms of those that are up there, you know, we know that some men are holding that power. And yes, we can wait until they retire. That might be in 10 15 years. What they can start doing is sharing power. So they can start doing something until they decide to retire, because that might not happen. So that's the second thing, no, start sharing power, whatever infrastructures that you can create to include the voices of the women that are out there. And then the third point I was gonna say is the sector has a big problem with the word you know, the trilogy of terms, women, dance and leadership. Because I do believe that you don't need to lead Sadler's Wells to be a leader. You don't need to lead Greenwich Dance agency to be a leader. I do believe that leadership is a much more democratic term.

**Melanie:**

I'm a bit flawed because you're so full of great ideas. I just want to grab them and absorb them and I'm trying to absorb so very quickly. Avatâra you're really hitting a nail on the head. There's something that I'm very conscious of personally, and this is that I know that it might own micro-world of my house, I am not the best driver of change in gender imbalance. In fact, I'm one of the causes of it. Because I've traditionally absorbed, I think, an expectation or a model. And I'll give you an example, when COVID hit, I was five days a week at Greenwich Dance, and I, as soon as it hit, and we knew we were all going home, I said, I won't be able to do five days, the kids gonna be at home, I'll go down to three. I didn't talk to my husband about that. I just made that decision. And there's a whole sense of imbalance going on there. Now, through COVID, and the nastiness of what lockdown was, I suddenly became very resentful later on, but I realised that I hadn't given him a chance. He had taken on the responsibility of COVID of the fear of making sure that our households continued, and he just got on with that job that he felt was his, and I got on with my job that I thought was mine. And neither of us had thought to have a conversation about how the world have changed and what that meant. And we've done that, since it's been really interesting. And he's the most supportive husband I could ever wish for. It's not a criticism, but it's just a reflection of society, it painted this picture for us to be part of, and we just absorbed those roles without sort of questioning them. And COVID has really started to make me question how that imbalance happens right from home, and then how that expands out and therefore what I can do to support my team and other dancers and the wider people about that shift. And some of that, well, we've seen that a lot of that comes down to childcare, and parenting you made that point earlier Anna about the change in your career and your

perception of yourself when children came along. And I think us learning through COVID the reliance we have a society on who looks after our children and how and then therefore, how we can do our jobs around it and who is responsible for that? There's been quite an eye opener, and we've got lots to unpick there. But the fact that childcare is even now an access cost in ACE applications is a little step in the right direction, isn't it? And I wondered Anna, whether you as a choreographer, as a maker, as someone who's putting in, I'm imagining, quite a lot of those projects grants to make your work happen. How has that changed and what other parental issues colour your life as a choreographer and maker and leader?

**Anna:**

Well, the first thing to say is, I think I'm just a much better person for it. For all of those things, I just do all of those things much better now. Having become a parent, or differently, maybe, but I feel I've become less self centred, and more aware of the impact of my life in the world, the impact of me and the impact of how other people experience the world, I suppose. It was really interesting. When I first went back into the workplace, I didn't ask for help with childcare. I thought it's up to me to sort this out, and then get there and do my job properly. And it was only you know, after a few years, and then beginning to work, well, beginning to notice how I had to kind of value each job as it came along. I had to go What is it worth now? Because it's worth financially worth to my artistic career worth to my artistic self? And what is it worth practically? What does it do to the whole family unit? And is it worth doing? And so therefore, sometimes it'll be okay, well, it's worth doing if they can all come with me. And we can all be there. Good. Okay, so that's the bottom line. Or we need £200 more to pay for childcare, or whatever it is. So I became more ruthless, really, in asking for what I needed. And I have to say, I was never met with a no, but it was just I didn't know that I could ask, I didn't have the confidence to know. And then through conversations and working with various organisations, I realised, yeah, actually, no, this is definitely a thing. And that idea that it's an access issue. If you don't have the money to fund your childcare, then you can't work. End of. You know, it's so obvious. But like you were saying, Yeah, my social conditioning had been Oh, and as a freelancer, you're also even on more of a back foot is like, super, super difficult to know, what am I allowed to claim for? What can I ask for? What will they give me, because we know everybody's on a shoestring. But again, it goes back to that actually, the sector is so impoverished in a way that it's really difficult to feel like you can assert yourself and ask for these things. But thankfully, it is now a general thing. I mean, I can't believe it's taken this long for it to be recognised in that way. But I was also part of the problem. I didn't know it was my right as a freelancer that I should ask this. And if that organisation doesn't offer it says no, then I have to accept that and go somewhere else. And it is that thing that Avatâra, you were saying, we have to take risks. To risk that we might lose that job, or we might risk that we might offend somebody and that sitting in the uncomfortable that you were talking about. That's a possibility, but I never was rejected. Everybody went Oh, yeah. Okay. We'll see what we can do. Yeah, but the fact that wasn't offered in the first place. So we tried to be really upfront now with our company and say, What do you need in order to come and work with us? Great, we'll write it in straight away. It's there. And so they don't have to ask for it, but they know it's part of the policy. It's there. They don't have to feel embarrassed and hold the hands up. So we really try now through our own, you know, experience to go right let's be really cards on the table to begin with, let's think

about what people need in order to work. And then see how we can facilitate that, then you're going to get the best out of them.

**Melanie:**

In the permission of that from policy that makes it feel like it's okay to do, and through this experience of COVID. I think what we're learning now is that leaders, makers, choreographers and mothers don't have to keep the mother bit of their personality in a box anymore.

**Anna:**

Out of the room.

**Melanie:**

I mean, how many times have we all been interrupted by children? Now that is normal. Now, you might expect at any point, a child to walk in, and I'll have to stop, give them jelly beans, give them a banana, give them whatever it is that they need to go away. But before that, it was not expected. And so that part of your personality as a mother had to be shut away. Exactly as you said earlier Anna about coming back from maternity leave and going I'm back, don't worry about me that never happened. I'm still the same person I am and you're not. Avatâra, how do you think COVID will change the landscape negatively or positively for women? As you see the campaign shaping up in your work?

**Avatâra:**

Yeah, I think I hope I will fight for a better change for women. I think COVID has exposed many things not to us that women we knew those were problems, but to men, which are the ones who're still in power. So I think that has been really good for them realise, and oh, wow, yes, homeschooling. Oh, wow and being, you know, my wife was the one that was here all the time, or, you know, childcare, or I'm not a mother myself. But I've experienced many of my colleagues in the sector, going through many ups and downs before the pandemic, during the pandemic and after the pandemic. Starting, as Anna was saying, I was starting conversations with organisations, they're going to work with. So I think we've raised visibility. And that's the first thing for change to happen. I'm not saying that this might, you know, things might change in the next year and a half or two, but things are putting now on the table. They're not hidden under the table. And that's fantastic. That's the beginning for a change. And also, I think in terms of women, the confidence of women, I'm hoping the charities as a contribution for that to connect with each other to know that there is a platform where we can do healthy networking, where we can actually support each other. And hopefully that will give us the confidence that we need to be whoever we want to be in this sector. So a lot of things have happened for the better. And my hope is that the men that now have experienced that realise that they are in this and with us.

**Melanie:**

Yeah. And a couple of quick questions before we finish. One other thing that the report called for was quotas, which I think has a kind of Marmite effect on people. What are your feelings about quotas, particularly the open letter to the Arts Council saying that national portfolio organisations and project grants, they really should be looking at quotas as they assess those?

**Avatâra:**

My point? Yes, we need quotas because we don't trust the leaders of those organisations. That easy. If I would trust them, then no problem. We wouldn't need any quota. Because they had plenty of time in the last 10 years, which is when big conversations, right the study, no women in dance, plenty of time to make a change. And the changes that were making were so tiny, I'm sorry, we're in the 21st century, no time for forgiveness anymore. So I would say we need the quotas, because they have proven us that they are not ready to make the change. So if they need an enforcement from, you know, powers above them, then yes to that, but hopefully the quotas will disappear. That's the point. The quotas shouldn't be there to stay forever, they should just be there to change until it becomes part of the norm. That's my view.

**Anna:**

Yeah, I was going to ask you, actually, Melanie, when you were talking about the project, so ArtsUnboxed, for example, and you saw those stats, what did you think about that? And how you might approach it next time?

**Melanie:**

It's a really good question. And actually, you've asked me, I think the last question, so I was going to ask you what I should do as an organisation. And I think you've asked me it. That's really interesting, because when we were going through the recruitment for that project, it was really complex. We had 70 applications, we knew that we had six opportunities to give out. We had to think about the type of work that people were suggesting and how that fell in with the project, we had to look at whether people understood the nuance of the platform, because it's asking people to think very differently. We were trying to get balances across disability, which we haven't done very well. But there's there's some representation there. We were looking across diversity and cultural diversity, and male and female and we looked at the producers as well as the artists and we tried to apply a sort of, we weren't going into it blind is what I'm saying. We were looking at all of those things, but it's interesting when you then look at it with just one filter on and you go, oh, that doesn't look so good. Because anyone looking at it on just that filter, might not recognise that all that other sort of thinking went back. But that doesn't answer your question. You're asking me what we might do differently. And I need to really think about that. Because the quota thing, I can completely see what you're saying Avatâra. But if you've got quotas against a number of different things, you might end up not being able to match them up. So it's an ongoing thought process, I think. But we need to

drive this. Greenwich Dance as an organisation, all cultural organisations, have lived through this tremendous pandemic. And there was a world before the pandemic, which we've sort of forgotten about, which had its own issues and aspirations. And we've got to drive change for the good. And there'll be things that we do wrong along the way. But as long as our values are in the right place, we can keep adjusting. And I think we've got to... I honestly, I don't know what the answer is. But we've got to keep looking. You said something earlier Avatâra about there are women there. Don't tell me those women aren't there. So I think with all of this in terms of recruitment, it comes back to us as an organisation, you know, have we done enough to make sure the opportunity was circulated? It's not just about the applications, you've got in. Because those are all you've got, it's the bit before, isn't it? And making sure that we've done enough?

**Anna:**

Yeah, it's about the opportunity to access.

**Melanie:**

Ensure as many people as possible have received that application can look over that opportunity. And I think that's where we need to do more of our work, because it was very quick. We certainly had to address the way we've done that in terms of disability. And we checked ourselves quite close to the end of the application process and thought, I'm not sure we've done enough here. And we quickly tried to address that. But it was quickly and not quite good enough. And yeah, I think that's where we need to put a lot more attention. And then who gets selected? Well, that's also got to come into the mix. Of course it does, but also then quality and brilliance and excel. But women are brilliant and excellent and wonderful. We need their applications on the table first don't we.

**Avatâra:**

And Melanie, something quite useful that you can do apart from, you know, you get a bunch of application, the 70. And you realise maybe that out of the 70, 55 are just by men. There is a problem there clearly, so maybe give you a kind of a little bit of time to approach some people to say listen, did you see that and call them and say, just apply. I'm not saying that you're gonna get it because one of the things that I find that the UK has, but especially the dance sector is the power of feedback. Many times I didn't get to be selected, but I got to be shortlisted. And the feedback was so valuable. It really helped me maybe I didn't agree with it. And that's different. But it was really valuable. So if you as an organisation finally happens that you have 5 and two, two women and seven, but at least you have some women that had got into the shortlisted. That's confidence boost, because like I almost made it and the feedback they gave me will make me improve my project or my vision for the future.

**Melanie:**

Yeah, yeah. Well, fantastic. And I absolutely love it when these conversations as they always do enrich me so much in terms of our practice here at Greenwich Dance. So I think that feels like a really good place to stop. We could continue this conversation for another few hours. But for the sake of our listeners, we'll stop there. And if you'd like to hear more episodes about subjects, moving artists of today, search for Talking Moves wherever you get your podcasts. Don't forget to subscribe, leave a review and spread the word. And for more information about Anna and Avatâra, head on over to [greenwichdance.org.uk](http://greenwichdance.org.uk). And do remember, if you know someone you think we should talk to you 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, ladies, goodness. Ladies, not girls!

**Avatâra:**

Not girls!

**Anna:**

Yep. So when do we take over the world?

**Avatâra:**

Right now! Already starting!