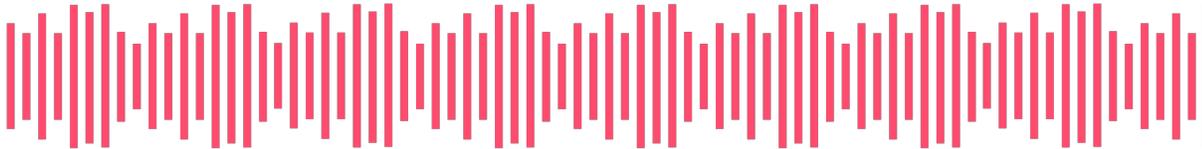


TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

Digital Dance and Technology S03 / E03

Episode Description

In this episode we talk to **Roswitha Chesher** and **Alexander Whitley** about digital dance and technology.

Both started their careers with dance training – film maker and photographer Roswitha Chesher at Trinity Laban and choreographer Alexander Whitley at the Royal Ballet School – but they’ve both moved into exploring dance in different formats – on camera, screen and using digital technology.

Whilst it’s true to say that over the past year many of us have been on a crash course when it comes to digital and dance, in contrast these two artists have been working within the digital sphere for years and so we decided to invite them on to talk a little bit more about what it is that excites them and find out how we can all learn to explore and use digital technologies more effectively.

We begin by discussing the journey we have been on as a sector which has evolved pretty quickly from the kickstart reaction of many to share back-catalogue documentation to the kind of immersive experience offered recently by Rambert with Rooms. Given their familiarity of the digital space and their enviable access to high quality equipment we also probed a little into whether they themselves had felt creative during covid and how they had reacted either individually or as a company to the challenges of the past year.

Alex shares his interest in technologies such as virtual and augmented reality and the potential this is offering him and his company to explore new ways of making and presenting work. And Roswitha shares some of the lessons learnt from thirty years making dance on screen. She reflects upon how of late so much of the material she has been asked to work with has been made on the very small

(mobile phone) screen. Together we reflect upon how the luxury so many of us experience of having this technology in our back pockets can be deployed creatively when used with thought, care and skill.

We talk about the ability to curate an environment when making theatrical work and how in digital this translates to much more nuanced experiences such as directing the focus and the eye. And we talk about the ways in which technology and dance on screen can be used in hybrid formats to create completely new cultural environments which are no longer as simple as a choice between theatre or TV...

Talking Moves is a Greenwich Dance Production

Presented by Melanie Precious

Production by Carmel Smith, Lucy White and Melanie Precious

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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 creating work for the digital stage. Since we launched the podcast back in October 2020, the subject has understandably come up in many conversations. Sarah Blanc and Mathieu Geffré shared their experiences of pivoting to digital as an immediate reaction to lock down 1.0. Rhiannon Faith and Ben Duke talked through their own process which had the luxury of a little albeit not a lot more time. And in almost every episode, since the subject of digital dance has come up for our guests, and many have shared the same experiences of learning very quickly. It's true to say that almost the entire sector has been on a crash course. I guess today though, both started their careers with a dance training. Filmmaker and photographer, Roswitha Cheshier at Trinity Laban and choreographer Alexander Whitley, at the Royal Ballet School. But they've both moved into exploring dance in different formats on camera, screen and using digital technology. And they've been making this kind of work for years. So we thought we'd invite them to talk about what it is that excites them about working with digital, and how we can all learn to explore and use it more effectively. So welcome both of you.

Roswitha:

Thank you.

Alexander:

Hello.

Melanie:

So firstly, one of the things that will flavour our discussion today is the change in behaviours. The pandemic is brought with it. So I thought just to warm us up in deepest darkest lockdown, choose whichever one you want. What digital dance or arts were you consuming? And what did you most enjoy? Roswitha?

Roswitha:

Oh, golly, I was consuming dance film festivals that would normally be in person at various places around the world. But were now all online. And that was enjoyable. But interestingly for me, I found it harder to engage because of being at home on my workplace. And normally, you would go to a dance Film Festival, be completely emerged for the whole two days of the festival and just thoroughly enjoy watching films and talking with other filmmakers and other audiences. So that was quite different. And I actually found that quite difficult to engage with. Watching a lot more of things that people have created and put on Facebook, perhaps people making a lot more work themselves. So choreographers, dance artists and dancers making very short and simple things. And the other thing recently watching a very rehearsed and accomplished piece of work but created purely because of lockdown. And using the medium of the camera and creating it for our experience was Rooms by Rambert. And that was phenomenal. And phenomenal whether you particularly like the choreography or the work or not, I really enjoyed it. And it became an event within our own family, we all booked tickets, we had one family member in Canada, some in Scotland, some in London. And that was really enjoyable. That was a very new way of watching a piece of work. And it was created for screen, it could not be seen on a stage with us sitting in rows of seats as an audience. And it was kind of a hybrid mix of dance on screen work and live work. And it wasn't documenting. That it was created live and live streamed was phenomenal. So that was probably one of my favourites. So very, very different ends of the scale but all just as special.

Melanie:

Yeah, bit of a mix, that that will be interesting. We'll dig down into that a little bit more because it's really pushed some of our watching behaviours hasn't it also the kind of outputs that we've been creating as artists. Alex, how about you? What were you dipping into what was keeping you going filling that void of seeing live theatre for you?

Roswitha:

Well, I have to be honest, I haven't seen or engaged with dancing culture nearly as much as I did before the lockdown. I think that's largely reflective of the fact that I have a very young family, I've got nearly three year old daughter and now a three month old baby as well. So lockdown has been

very much about family, which has been great in some respects to have that time with them rather than be in that position of always being out late and seeing things at theatres regularly that I'd normally be doing. Having said that I've been kind of dipping in and exploring a lot of kind of experimental work that's been going on in various kind of art forms and scenes. And I guess as Roswitha was saying, you know, some of that has been through dance film festivals and seeing work that's been made in that context, I guess the kind of more conventional screen dance work, which has been nice to get a bit more of an insight into but then say some experimental dance communities that have been forming in VR platforms like VR chat, for example. And these different VR platforms that have emerged for festivals to try and kind of bring something of what they would have been doing in person. We took part in the BFI's London Film Festival. The expanded part of that, and they built a virtual version of the BFI centre and hosted the whole festival within that. So having these experiences of presenting and viewing other people's work in these contexts has been really fascinating just to, you know, understand what the possibilities are, and what the obvious challenges and issues are with connecting with and experiencing culture, through these formats. But it seems to be the case for quite a few people I've talked to, there's the kind of conventional screening of stage work exhausted itself quite quickly, and the first lockdown and certainly my interest and other people that I am in regular conversation with were very quickly looking for more and the alternatives and really looking at this time as an opportunity to really ask some bigger questions of if there's a limitation with the interest of consuming culture in this way, you know, where else can we look and what other platforms exist for us to get a bit closer to what we know and love about the experience of experiencing culture in the flesh in these kind of live 3D settings.

Melanie:

It's really propelled us forward hasn't it? And I look at you, Roswitha as someone that we've used at Greenwich Dance a lot to document our work. And we've all been very good, I think at using digital technologies. Actually, maybe we can't even call it that, really. But we're talking just about filming and photography, in its most simplest form to document the work we're doing. And we haven't been as good at pushing the boundaries. Well, I say we. Not you two. That's why you've been brought in because you're exceptions to that rule. But as a general sector, we haven't been so good at pushing those boundaries and exploring what that kind of digital output might look like. And we've been forced to do that now, which is really, perhaps now a year on has really started to bring more fruitful ideas to the fore because as you say, Alex, just filming something that was meant to be on stage or going through those documentations that weren't meant for screen, but was simply existing as a record of what something was, were churned out quite readily. And it's about how we move.

Roswitha:

Because I think when you are documenting something, you have a very different role to play. Because I have to remember, I'm not making your work.

Melanie:

No

Roswitha:

When I'm documenting a piece. I have to be true to that choreographer, and they have to be able to show their work as a whole piece. So if I get fascinated by one dancer and go off with their close ups for five minutes, I'm not doing my job.

Melanie:

You've lost all of those other roles, haven't you? And it's been existing really just for somebody to be able to perhaps recreate it or show a funder.

Roswitha:

I mean, yeah, you are having a conversation about what's important about the piece and the energy. And you know, so you will have a conversation but then dance on screen is perhaps making live work more interesting for the screen is honing any more. So you're not being quite as true. But yet, what is it? It's the energy of this, but it's a to having the conversation is the lightness of being, etc, etc.

Melanie:

So given that, and that very good point, you've brought us to what is it about the digital space that so interests both of you now, and has done to delve further and deeper into? What can it bring us? And what can you do with it?

Alexander:

Big question.

Roswitha:

I am going to say something that doesn't actually make sense, in a way. It's the physicality of it. I mean, I still operate camera. So I work as a camera operator, cinematographer, editor and director. And the reason I love working with camera is the physicality of your breathing with the dancers when you're operating the camera, and in a way, the director is doing that as well. They're bringing that physicality to the audience. And they're able to take the audience's eye right into what's important at that moment. Is it the touch of somebody his fingers on somebody else's skin, that on a big stage, you don't have that option, you can't take that focus to the audience. So...

Melanie:

You're really controlling their gaze, directing their gaze to where you want them to go.

Roswitha:

Yeah. And taking that, you know, we've all been dancers and audience, you go to a show, and sometimes you feel yourself in your seat during the whole movement. And if you can bring that with film, I think that's one of the biggest things that's really interesting me is taking that physicality out there.

Melanie:

And Alex, how about you what's drawn your interest into this world of digital technology?

Alexander:

Well, I think from the early days, it was really the possibilities around motion tracking and interactive technology that got me interested and the potential of those technologies to extend the reach of the moving body to amplify it ultimately and allow human movement to find expression in domains outside of the physical space that it conventionally occupies. And early on for me that was very much about looking at using interactive technology in stage productions. So tracking the movement of dancers and having projected visuals that were responsive to the movement of the performers on stage. And I guess that for me offered some interesting opportunities to explore different kinds of relationships in a stage setting to kind of stage a relationship between the human and the technological and I guess to reflect back on questions about the role of technology in the world. And that's really grown and developed, I guess, as the technology has developed. And I think my interests lie a lot in how the platforms that are emerging through the developments in digital technologies offer up very different possibilities for the kinds of relationships you can establish between performers and spectators, or completely change what the position of and role of the spectator is in an artistic experience. And I guess, especially with developments in virtual and augmented reality, a lot of that is directed at movement, it's really about immersing people within a space and allowing them, giving them freedom to move within and explore that virtual environment. And so there's an awful lot of choreographic knowledge that's very relevant to that. And so I think that's what's really drawing me into exploring those kinds of platforms. But then I think there's also an interest in the representation of movement and the human form and the possibilities around through the use of motion capture technology, digitising and abstracting the human form, and ultimately finding or exploring different ways of representing it and visualising it ultimately. I think, you know, that just plays into a really deep curiosity I have about, you know, the, the psychology behind what's interesting about watching movement, you know, why is it that we're drawn to two bodies moving? And what is it that's interesting about it, you know, that's something that choreographers obviously obsess over and think about a lot. And I think digital technologies open up different kinds of possibilities, different questions that you can then pose in relation to that.

Melanie:

I've struggled with this, I think, up until now this idea of why and part of what you were just saying, said to me that there was something about using motion capture and things like that as inspiration because you're analysing movement and shape and form. But actually, then it's much more than that, isn't it as you then went on to say a more about building almost new environments for us to experience dance performance. So almost, you know, we're so used to thinking about performance as being in a theatre. And we've all struggled very much with theatres being closed, but because they've been closed, we're starting to explore much more what those other environments are, that we might experience something and that's where this is starting to take us.

Alexander:

Absolutely. You know, there's, I think, some strong precedents in developments in immersive theatre, for example, like, you know, Punch Drunk is a great example of a company that has really challenged the conventions of theatre and performance and the relationship between performance and spectators and the role of the spectator in determining the narrative and ultimately determining the experience they have. I guess that kind of agency of the audience member in the experiences is relevant to development in in other domains as well in in video games, and so on. I think that's something that technology is pushing forwards an awful lot. It's really challenging the conventions around spectatorship and increasingly there's more and more demand and interest from cultural consumers for want of a better way of describing it, for that kind of active role to be a part of... and it, you know, plays into much bigger questions around how technology influences our lives with social media, for example...

Melanie:

Yes

Alexander:

...it's completely changed how we communicate with each other and how we ultimately are able to construct images of ourselves and put them out into the world. So that for me is really you know, we're both the technology and the way they're shaping the world have deep significance to art and to you know, the kind of questions that I think we can ask and explore through those same technologies.

Roswitha:

I think lockdown's also enabled us to go right back to very simple form as well, in the thinking of some of the projects that I've done with Melanie and Greenwich Dance and Crystal Palace Festival, making a film with Temujin Gill and 10 performers contributors using their own mobile phone to film themselves. So sessions over Zoom, and really giving them agency to, they are contributors they're filming themselves they're taking the time to create and hearing the feedback that Crystal Palace

Festival did quite a lot of talking to the participants afterwards, and how they'd felt really empowered. And I thought, Gosh, filming themselves, wouldn't that be more nerve wracking than being in a rehearsal room, and they'd actually felt the opposite because we'd given them some tips on how to use a camera, etc. But they'd really delved into what they were doing and taking the time, but were able to do it on their own. And that wouldn't have happened without lockdown. So that's been really interesting. For me, this is gonna sound wrong as well, but the lowering of production values, and what I mean by that is just the camera that you use, because in the screen dance world, we all want the best dance. But you know, you've got to have an ARRI camera and this lighting and that blah, blah, blah, and you kind of lose sight of your project and of what you want to create. And actually, I think it's been really, really refreshing that a lot of the films that have come out during this year have been filmed on people's mobile phones. And it's not what camera you film with. It's how you film it and what the content is. And there's been some very not good things and some absolutely wonderful things where people have really taken the time and energy and thought and creativity as much as they would with the live work. And that's been so refreshing. So refreshing.

Melanie:

That's really interesting, and it does link into what you were saying, Alex, doesn't it about us all being so much more familiar, many of us, not all of us admittedly. And that's something that comes into a more of an access question about all of this. But many of us do have the luxury of a smartphone at our disposal. And so therefore, some of those tools and some of that familiarity that we've had around social media and apps and things like that, that we might be able to use. And then like you say, Ros, really good tips.

Roswitha:

The group at Crystal Palace were all over 70. So not people who are usually quite so au fait with their mobile phone, but we managed. And in fact, I have to say, I've often had much more interesting footage from older age group and from a younger age group, because so what, if it's okay to say at this point, what's been really interesting and frustrating at times is because it's so accessible and because people do it every day is they're not actually giving it the care and attention that they would if they were in the studio, and we still need to create and rehearse and think carefully. Rehearse is maybe not the right word, but give it as much time and thought and consideration as if we were creating a piece for the stage. And there is a bit of a frustration that because we all have mobile phones, we kind of get the phone out what right. Okay, yeah. And I've done it and send it to me. And I'm like, you wouldn't do that if you were performing on the stage. Why is that okay to send me?

Melanie:

I imagine you've had quite a lot of that over this past year.

Roswitha:

And then I've had some extraordinary footage, absolutely extraordinary footage.

Melanie:

And like you say, an agency and an equality because a lots of different ages and backgrounds and different levels of their career.

Roswitha:

Absolutely.

Melanie:

So we'll dig into a bit of this a bit further. But I'm really interested in taking a step back for a moment and finding out how both of you got interested in this. So a little bit about your journey, your training, both of you trained and performed as dancers first. But how did you come to find digital dance in whichever guise, because both of you are looking at digital dance very differently. How did you find that? Roswitha, tell us a bit about your journey.

Roswitha:

Okay, I spent my teenage years in the art department at secondary school and was very interested in photography and then discovered dance at a late stage. So I dropped all of the art and went to Trinity Laban and trained but at the time, I graduated nearly 30 years ago this year. But so a while ago, I was asking, Can we use the camera, which was this massive piece of equipment, but never managed to do that. Left, and as you say, worked as a dancer and taught dance, and managed to buy myself a tiny little high eight camera with tapes. And I was doing projects with schools and we'd film in the playground. And then I'd edit it on my VHS recorder, pressing play and record and pause to literally do analogue editing, hire a massive projector and work with the kids in the school and really enjoyed that. And so I was always interested in the two dimensionality how you put the three dimensionality into two dimensions of a screen and use it on its own or as part of our live work. And then went on to teach myself about editing with a computer, which now seems like gosh, I didn't have a computer? But eventually did and then kept teaching myself and doing various projects. And then I was very lucky to have the opportunity to become a trainee camera op at The Place. And that was fantastic. Because that was always in the world of filming live dance. And it always informs and found out more learning about cameras and have been lucky to work with lots and lots of wonderful choreographers, creating pieces. And I think the reason I've been able to work is having that underpinning knowledge of movement and dance. And to me, they go hand in hand, because making a film is choreographing a piece. It's just a different medium and using the strengths of those mediums differently. So I was very interested in choreography. And so it's just been a sidestep really.

Melanie:

Flow and the energy used in dance you use in your film.

Roswitha:

Absolutely. And all the time, space, shape and motion as my choreography teacher would say I don't remember which book that whilst but at Laban, and it's all exactly the same.

Melanie:

Yeah, yeah. And Alex, how about you? How do you go from training at the Royal Ballet School to being at the forefront of the digital dance world, which I feel that you are?

Alexander:

Well, I think both dance and technology were part of my childhood, something I grew up with, but I didn't at the time, see how or could imagine how the two could kind of coexist, I think I was part of the first generation of young people to grow up with games consoles as a regular feature of their lives. And I enjoyed playing them with my family and friends and just happened to have friends that were really into computers and ended up having kind of careers as graphic designers. And so yeah, technology was very much a part of my life alongside my dance training. And then throughout my performing career, and as I started to create my own work, I guess I was naturally drawn to the work of other choreographers that we're working with technology because I was really curious about how they were combining these two things. And then again, it was really just the fact that there were people in my social circles that were working as digital artists, and we're very aware of the developments in technology and it was really with the release of the Microsoft Kinect, which is a motion tracking device that came with the Xbox games console, I think it was released in 2010, or 11, that suddenly changed things for the way that independent digital artists could work with motion tracking technology. And so suddenly, I had lots of friends around me who were saying, We've got this amazing device, and we're building these systems with it. And they were fascinated by what I was doing as a choreographer, I think because of the rich source of information that that could provide for the systems that they were building. So suddenly, just this conversation kind of exploded around those possibilities. And, you know, I'd worked with Wayne McGregor as well in the latter stages of my performing career. And obviously, he's worked a lot with technology and technologists in his work. So there was strong influence coming from Wayne in terms of the ways that not only the, you know, these forms could be combined, but processes of thinking in relation to the two, I guess, relating to William Forsythe's work and his development of improvisation technologies and the connecting of geometric and architectural principles with movement, were all of interest to me. And so I guess, alongside my dance, performing career, I tried to keep my kind of academic interest as alive as possible. And we've been really fascinated in science. And obviously, that relates to technology in many ways. But I also I did a degree in PPE, with the Open University alongside my performing career, and...

Melanie:

Sorry, what's that?

Alexander:

Politics, philosophy and economics.

Melanie:

It's not the PPE, we wear during COVID.

Alexander:

No, no that would be a different meaning! It was the philosophy side of that is what really kind of drew my interest and philosophy and psychology and thinking about movement and cognition and mind body dualism. And I think all of that kind of plays into my interest in immersive technologies, and the potential that an understanding of movement and cognition brings to bear on what these new technologies are kind of affording and how that knowledge is really relevant to understanding how these platforms work, like how they relate to experience.

Melanie:

And was the creation of your company, a vehicle to explore that in more depth, then in that case, yeah?

Alexander:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I think I quickly realised that working with technology is, it's kind of obvious, is not straightforward. It complicates matters, it's more expensive, it takes more time, it requires different kinds of resources and spaces to work in. And I quickly realised that the only way I was going to really get anywhere close to having enough time to really understand, you know, what was possible with these technologies. And I guess, to get into the interesting, creative territory to scratch beneath the surface to move beyond the low hanging fruit. Because you know, so often technologies come with, they're often created by particular industries that have I guess, a particular interest or preoccupation with how it's used, and often that, you know, there's so much spectacle that comes associated with it. I mean, you think about Hollywood movies, for example, and how CGI works in it, it's largely about creating visual spectacle. And so that, you know, there's so much that kind of naturally, or tends to come with the application of this technology that I'm kind of interested in trying to get beyond or to co-opt technology to do something else with. I mean, obviously, the visual spectacle element of it, I think, is always going to be significant and isn't something to be

ignored. But there's so much more to understand in relation to these technologies, that really just takes an awful lot of time to discover or to get to.

Melanie:

And to get past those default settings almost to to explore what else is there.

Alexander:

Exactly.

Melanie:

Given the familiarity you both have around the digital space, the equipment you both must have at your disposal and your skills and your knowledge of the area, that to others, I'm sure in this last year will have felt overwhelming and terrifying. How did you both react creatively to COVID? And how much of that reaction was a digital output Roswitha? How did it feel for you?

Roswitha:

I think it's been working a lot more with editing this year. And yeah, I felt less enthusiasm getting my own camera out and a but it's been working and helping people through Zoom calls and projects like that. That's been my main creative. I mean, the first piece that I collaborated on was with Luca Silvestrini of Protein Dance and Andy Pink the composer, and that was a call out the film's called The Sun Inside. And basically it was directly addressing that we're all in lockdown. Lockdown number one. Did we know that we would be almost a year later. And that was just sort of recognising the moment that we were in. And we had, I think 150 people send in clips, which was huge. And what was interesting about that was we were collaborating, Luca was in Italy with his mum at times, and Andy was away and where he is, and I was here and sometimes that was really frustrating collaborating through Zoom and made it take longer, but then also, when would we actually really get to spend so much time talking with each other? So that helped us really wrestle out questions and then all sorts of questions about the quality of clips, and is that important, what's important what are we ask people to do? So I think my main creative output has been working with other people on projects that have involved people sending me their footage. I mean, I've had so many projects cancelled and postponed, and that I should have been filming in Watts Gallery in November, that's now happening, we're making an installation piece. And that's going to happen in May, fingers crossed, everything crossed. We've got our dates fixed, and oh, so many exciting projects that have just been moved and moved and moved and moved. And some that have actually come about initially, because they were supposed to be performed live, and they've been re imagined and re envisaged and in a really creative way, but then we couldn't do it. So we've not been allowed to film, especially if dancers, in particular have been in quarantine and isolation that's made that difficult. So when I have been actually able to go out and use my camera that's been really lovely, and really exciting. And I'm really looking forward to doing that more and more. Yeah.

Melanie:

So you didn't have the urge, interestingly, to suddenly make work given your skills you were I was about, say, thrown into that might not be the right word, but into more of an editing role. So using your expertise as an editor and a director.

Roswitha:

Yeah, I think so. I think as with most people, there's also family circumstances like Alexander saying, you know, you've got a family. And I think whether it's caring for elderly parents or family that sometimes when you're going out to film for a specific thing, it gives you permission to rip yourself away from your family or your other responsibilities. So to actually take that time for myself as an artist was difficult.

Melanie:

And it was a strange time in terms of creativity, wasn't it? Some people felt very creative. Some people didn't feel creative at all.

Roswitha:

I think so. Absolutely. I've spoken to a lot of artists who've like, I don't feel like an artist, anymore I haven't got any creative ideas, which is quite bizarre, because you would think perhaps the freedom of not having those rigid times to go and work that you know, had so many projects cancel that you would go Oh, yeah, I'll go into this now go and do that. And, but that's okay.

Melanie:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And Alex, how about you? How did you respond creatively to COVID as a company or as an individual?

Alexander:

Yeah, I mean, that's kind of a significant distinction, maybe, because the challenge was keeping the company activity going. I mean, that was the first major fallout for us is that we were just about to have the London premiere of the production we'd been working on for the last 18 months or so, you know, that was cancelled, and the following tour dates. So yeah, everything kind of fell away for the plans we had with the company. But I was fairly quick to respond or to try and keep something going and saw an opportunity to just try something out or be a bit more experimental, because I guess, in this role of directing a company, there's so much that like these projects, we plan them and carry them out for so long that doing things off the cuff is what I miss a little bit. And we had, I think, towards the end of 2019, bought some motion capture suits for the company, we were lucky to get

some funding to buy some suits. And I'd had in mind for some time to try and run a kind of an experimental or more open project exploring the use of motion capture technology and the, you know, almost endless possibilities of how you can then visualise movement once it's been motion captured. And so I threw a conversation with the previous collaborator, someone called Memo Akten, decided to kind of run this as an open source project just to start experimenting and recording because I actually left London in the first lockdown and went to my dad's place up in Scotland, with my two sisters and their kids. It was just nice to be in the countryside and have some space rather than a flat in London.

Melanie:

What does open source mean? What does an open source project mean?

Alexander:

Well, I guess in tech terms, it's that the software or the code is freely available. And so in coding communities, you know, they make projects open source, and they give people access to the source code, so that they can then take that and build on it and develop it. But I guess from my perspective, it was really looking at how I could create dance digitally without the kind of funding infrastructure that would normally be there for it. So I started recording sequences of choreography with motion capture suit that I taken with me, I grabbed it as I was leaving the flat in London and so glad that I did because it became the kind of centrepiece of my work for the next few months. But it was a really nice way for me to kind of keep up movement practice and actually returned to a bit more of a personal practice when so often my work is about creating with and on the dancers of my company and and so yeah, for those several months of the first lockdown, I was recording sequences and kind of understanding more about how the motion capture technology was working, the limitations and issues around things that can interfere with getting good quality recording of it, but then I was posting all the sequences I've recorded, or at least the better quality ones I put on my website, and it was basically making them accessible to anyone who had an interest in working with an FBX file, which is the file type that motion capture data comes in and was able to kind of reach out to people in my existing circles but also through putting things on social media.

Melanie:

Did you find people responding to that and picking those?

Alexander:

Yeah, yeah, we've got some amazing responses. And it's something that we're still working on now. We're about to relaunch it actually, with some new sequences that have been recorded by the company's dancers. It was amazing to see the responses that came back really vastly contrasting ways of interpreting or transforming the movement sequences I created. And it was fascinating to see different responses to the same sequences of choreography and in as I was referring to before,

just to understand how much remained of that original information and how much you can recognise that the human form when it is translated into something that looks very different. And one of the people that contributed to the project also developed a filter for Instagram. So we could take that motion capture data and put it into augmented reality. So you could place content in your own environment. And he developed that into something that started to introduce some more choreographic features. So you could have multiple characters and decide at what time you place them and have a variation of sequences, so you can start to almost create your own iterations of versions of choreography.

Melanie:

So what does that become, Alex? Is that a performance? Is that a film? Is that a game?

Alexander:

Yes. Yeah.

Melanie:

It's whatever you make it.

Alexander:

Yeah, it's something in between all of those things, I think it's a tool. In some respects, in that it provides some options for people to make the kind of choices that a choreographer often makes when they're constructing a sequence of dance. I mean, I'm talking specifically about this augmented reality filter here, but I guess it's partly entertainment as well, and that you can just enjoy watching it. I guess the thing with augmented reality as well is that it tends to encourage a certain kind of movement, because the idea is you can place a digital figure in the environment seen through your smartphone or tablet device, and then, you know, you can move around it and it stays where it is. So you can see it as though it exists in the real world. And again, that's something that is really interesting for me in thinking about how these technologies almost kind of point the finger back at the member of the public or the user and ask them questions, or provoke them, either explicitly or implicitly, to move to discover things about whatever the content is, or to think about movement in a way that they might not ordinarily do. And ultimately, to engage them in physical thinking, to engage them in the kinds of ideas that choreographers are preoccupied with, you know, these technologies expand the scope of choreography and choreographic thinking, and they also draw people in to the, to the, to the realm of thinking that has kind of remained for a long time, the kind of exclusive realm of people...

Melanie:

Of choreographers that have had years of training...

Alexander:

Exactly. Of work in theatre. Yeah. So that's the real excitement for me.

Roswitha:

And I think it makes me think of what I've really missed and why particularly I have not been inspired is that two way process, but in my way of the camera and performer dancer person, and how it's so much a two way process. And the physicality again of that is, you know, it's like, well, why didn't I make any films? Well, my poor husband doesn't want to be in everything anymore. Yeah, and I think a lot of us have, I've also missed being with people. And I think that's that that two way process, which you're talking about is enabling, but it also sits side by side. And reminds us of that.

Melanie:

And you've been involved Ros, haven't you in the building of installations and environments with your film and with your screen? Can you tell us a little bit more about that, and perhaps how that leads us into what dance on screen is because it's been around for years, The Place has a whole course around it, and they still do. And who's influential in that realm? And who are the role models. And...

Roswitha:

I just wanted to mention Simon Fildes, who sadly died at the weekend, who was hugely influential in the world of screen dance and a tireless ambassador of dance from over decades. He was an international award winning filmmaker himself, artist, curator and teacher. And he really pushed forward the story and journey of screen dance. And he would work as a facilitator bringing all of us people together, people who've been in this world for a long time, new people to share, to question to discuss and to make, and it's a huge loss to all of us. And screen dance yes there's this world, there's a small world a big world. Installation, I suppose my starting of installation. I did work very early on with live dance and images on the screen at the back and how that can connect how you need to give space and time to both and not let them fight. Because often the image will take over. If you're the audience member, your eyes going to be drawn to the big screen rather than the dancer. So you have to work very, very, it's always very attractive to us as choreographers. Oh, let's get the camera and let's have a big projection. And you've got to be very delicate and very careful how you handle that because there'll be no live stuff left. You won't work with it. So I did work with that a lot and still do. And creating an installation piece is really interesting because of how it might be viewed can be viewed very differently to watching a film beginning to end in a dance Film Festival or on a screen. I made a piece a few years ago co directed with choreographer Rosemary Lee, and it's a triptych and it's been installed in various locations, and with an installation, people might just come and spend a moment it might be 10 seconds and absorb it for that, and then leave. So you don't as the maker have a choice in how long I mean, if you're making a piece for theatre, yes, you as

an audience can walk out, but on the whole people will stay from the beginning to the end. With an installation, they might just dip in and out. And that's really interesting. And how you you're creating a narrative in a different way that any point might be the beginning of this particular piece was 17 minute loop. And we tried to create that there was no beginning and end that it would just continue and you wouldn't we knew where the beginning and end was. But hopefully other people didn't. Being with the piece on tour at times I've seen people walk in spend two seconds and leave. I've seen people sit with it for an hour. And just continue watching it. I was one lovely moment, two young girls, maybe five or six watched it through once the second time through one lay down and watched it and the other danced and copied everything, which was really beautiful. So kind of gives people a different perspective to enjoy as they will. And then also the piece that we're creating for Watts Gallery, that's what's choreographer Chris Pavia and Stopgap Dance Company. We're thinking that you know, you can have a screen in front of you, you can have screens at the side so that perhaps, very often screen work is seen as two dimensional straight in front of you, and you sit you watch it with your eyes looking forward. But having an installation piece makes you think about where do you want the focus to be? Maybe you've got three screens, maybe it's in the round with you as an audience in the middle? Are you going to be drawn to different screens at different times? Is a screen also being an audience of you are off the other screen? So it's giving you different questions and different answers and different possibilities.

Melanie:

It's so interesting, isn't it? Because I think that in a way, the criticism that we've experienced over the last year is that we have all sorts of gone, okay, we're really good at digital now. We're all filming on our mobile phones, we're all making these films, and we're putting them on YouTube. And we've still set these sort of barriers around ourselves. And yet there's this whole wide world of where technology can take us. And it's all about that environment, again, isn't it what we said right at the beginning, it's about the environment that you create, cleverly with these new tools at our disposal and new ways and visions and perspectives of the work and the new agency that we've given those audience members, because like you said, just sitting in your seat and watching a film of dance, it is enjoyable, but to a point, you know, and there's something really interesting going on around these ideas that you're talking about. And I've been delving into for some time.

Roswitha:

I think it's as enjoyable. It's just a different experience. You're as a maker curating perhaps a little bit how you would like your audience to view this particular piece. And that, actually, this piece, I would like you to pay full attention. And the way if you go to a theatre, they demand of you or request of you that you do watch from the beginning, and you go on that journey, and you have to trust the maker, because they've made that decision to make you sit watching somebody eats a banana for 30 minutes. There's a reason why they're making you watch that for 30 minutes, and you have to trust them and go with it because something else is gonna happen. And so I think it's choosing different platforms, different mediums. And then also what is it that you can only experience in that. That everything, you've got to choose it for a reason, you've got to choose wearing a white costume

for a reason, as long as you have a reason behind it, or that you've got a pile of books in the shot. Why have you got a pile of books and it's the same with where you screen it. I think it's a really valid point. And I think actually, it's something perhaps I hadn't thought enough and perhaps us as dance filmmakers that we're not thinking about enough or maybe other people have, but it's about requesting or suggesting that you know, this is going to run for 10 minutes. And it might be quite nice if you do take time to sit down and watch it rather than on your phone on the tube, because we think you may get more from it. I mean, it's made me think of, which is different, but when pieces have become set events online that you booked tickets for, and there's been live streaming of, perhaps it's a pre filmed piece, or a new filmed piece. And actually, you might get together with other friends who are in different parts of the country and right, okay, we're going to watch the eight o'clock performance, and you are making a new event out of that. And that's been something new and quite interesting. And I think it's good for them to ask us to do that.

Melanie:

Am I right in thinking that with *The Sun Inside*, you gave some notes about kind of recommended environment for the audience to be in to watch it. And I can't quite remember what they were. But I seem to remember there being a sort of recommendation of sitting somewhere quiet or as conscious as a choreographer making work for a theatre. And you'll have experience of this, Alex, of course, is that you can curate all the elements of that theatre experience right down to perhaps recommending that there's a certain drink in the interval or they might be themed to what you might be doing. And I'm thinking then more perhaps family work or whatever, you know, you can really think about that whole experience of going to the theatre and the programme that somebody gets, the music around them. I suppose there's limitations to that. But there are certain choices that a choreographer and maker can start thinking about. But when you put just a film, and I'm talking now, I suppose about just a film as opposed to an installation where you're back to curating that environment again. You don't know where they're going to be consuming that they might be on the tube. They might be consuming it on their phone through social media, or they might do a little mini festival for themselves, get themselves some nice snacks and a drink and decide they're going to spend the evening.

Alexander:

I mean, it makes me think a lot about, you know, the conventions around spectatorship, in different forms, and kind of the rituals that exist around them. And theatre going is kind of the most established form of that. And we take it for granted just how much of a structure there is around the experience. It's not just about what you see on stage, it's about the experience of arriving at the foyer of the theatre, getting your tickets, getting a drink, in the kind of bustling Front of House area, going into the auditorium, lights going down, curtain going up. All of that is kind of priming you for the experience, you then go to have. And, you know, both as an audience member, and as a creator of those kinds of experiences, you base a lot of your expectations and thinking around it on that kind of known structure in the format. And I guess, you know, as you're describing in a gallery installation, for example, the conventions are different, they're perhaps more flexible, there's, to

some extent, a defined format of how people are expected to behave in relation to the content experience, but they have an element of choice, as you're pointing out, as you know, how long they might stay with a thing. So as a maker, you know, you have to take that into consideration. So there's both kind of conventions and different affordances creatively for the kind of work you can make the questions you can ask the questions you can pose to a viewer or a spectator, an audience member. And I think, you know, each new technology and platform that emerges through the developments in technology come with a different set of criteria in relation to those considerations. And I think that's something that's really fascinating and often really challenging is to figure those new terms out. And I think they are really layers that a building around the conventions of theatre. I think part of the reason why I perhaps haven't, and a lot of other people haven't been seeing as much, even though there has been a lot out there online to see is because there's something very convenient about how knowing that you've got to be at this place at this time to see the show when you go there. And there's a format for you to experience it through. And as you were pointing out Roswitha, you know, some of the more successful attempts that I've been aware of have been very specific in defining the criteria and making sure that you kind of set up, establish your own ritual around the experience and control the conditions. So that I guess, as makers, they can make sure that you're having a specific or as tailored as an experience as possible. But I think it's for that very reason that people in my situation, and many others where being at home, when you've got the chaos of family, and things around, it's really hard to carve that out or to define the space, especially when everything is tending to come through the same kind of devices. You know, we're consuming such a range of different types of information and forms of media through the same device. And so to kind of portion out and divide our experiences coherently is really challenging I think in relation to these platforms.

Melanie:

That's such a good point. Because one of the things, I've said this before on the podcast, I've never really been somebody that would sit and watch a dance film or not so much a musical maybe because they're kind of you know, thinking Sound of Music really traditional. Those are films that would sort of sit there with the family, but a dance performance that had been filmed I might not watch at home. And when I realised that I could link up my TV and watch it on YouTube through my TV on my sofa rather than through my work laptop. The experience felt different for me. It wasn't the theatre I recognised but I could make it, as you said Ros earlier, about that experience. I could make it into more of an evening. But you're also right, Alex, in that sometimes you might think that we would all be able to access this so much easier, because it's all at our fingertips. But we've all got those busy lives. And I was invited to an event online one Friday, it was at 730. You know, that's crucial bedtime mayhem, you know, in the house. Now, if that had been in the theatre, I would have made that negotiation with my husband or fine walked out the door slam the door. Gone! But because I was still in the house. I couldn't I didn't feel I had the permission to do that and just shut the door and say at 730 I'm going to embark on this online experience.

Roswitha:

Yeah. No I agree with that totally. And I think it is as various different walks of life, having a ticket and going out gives you permission. And it's really difficult to make time for ourselves. But talking about audience a bit if I might go back to why do I make dance film your question right at the beginning. And what's interesting is that actually, we had a bit of a conversation about what that audience might be and who the performers might be that sometimes it could be an audience of five, you know, the one I was talking about there were people across Europe watching this performance, but actually it could be a project with a pupil referral unit or a care home and you're making a piece of work with them. And the audience numbers are literally five. But it's so so much as valid. So that's made me think of why I film. There's so many films I've made with choreographers that I can't show because of safeguarding reasons. But they hold such a special place for me just as much, they're just as valid because having the camera and creating work, it's really interesting how people react with that. And they often feel very nervous. But then witnessing is a bit of a funny word. But I don't know the right word about being acknowledged being somebody's giving me that care and time and attention to create something with me. And you asked us previously a favourite film moment, and I made a piece with the choreographer Stella Howard and two dancers, Sheila and Ian. And we had two four hour sessions to make this film. And Stella had worked with this couple in her weekly session at Trinity Laban for people with brain trauma. So Sheila had had brain trauma. So we could only work at a certain pace, but I was, I so remember, there was only four of us: Stella, myself and the two performers. Very clearly at that point, thinking if this only ever exists in this time, and I know that I'm supposed to be making a film, but it was such a special event about how they were with me, and Stella and each other, and the camera was wonderful. And that film actually was created for Trinity Laban and then funnily enough, has done the opposite of what I've just said, it's been round the world. And it's still with a film festival at the moment going round and being shown, but it was such a personal and touching moment that that's one of the reasons that people are so generous, so generous, and what they give me and I can't believe they trust me to take it home and and work with it. And that film also was a real eye opener. You think you filmed one thing, and you watch it, and you see something. So I had in my ignorance, seeing that he was caring for her. And when I watched the footage, you see her caring for him. That was just such an extraordinary moment. And then the responsibility of editing this because they weren't professional dancers. And they were through movement, the beauty of working with a dance artist and choreographer, and the power of dance. And basically, I'm a facilitator to bring that story. It's just it's a love story. That's, you know, very simplicity of it. But yeah, there's so many projects. And I think you've Melanie talked about that, you know, who is our audience, and sometimes we want to go for big audiences. And that's really important. We've got to have numbers and numbers, numbers, but actually, perhaps, if there's a really valid audience of five, and they've seen somebody they know very well in a very different way. And they go, Oh, absolutely huge.

Melanie:

It's really, that perception has really changed, I think over this last year, and I hope we take that continue to the new year, the new normal, whatever that might be. There's so much to talk about, and so much still I want to talk about. But there's one last thing that I wanted to ask, which is whether you've seen a sea change, well you've just mentioned one thing Roswitha there. But are you

seeing a different acceptance of your work? Are you seeing a different understanding of it, more of a call for it, and perhaps even some new asks of you, new ways of working? I know, Ros, you were talking earlier about going into the studio this week and spending a bit more time working on something that you might not have been asked to do before. Are things changing. Is there a sea change?

Roswitha:

Yes. Well, I suppose one thing which is a bit cheeky to say, but it's I've had a lot of people go, oh, golly, it takes quite a lot of time this filmmaking malarkey, doesn't it? So don't know if that's happened with you, Alex. People actually realising why you need time to create this. That sounds joking, but actually, it's really nice, because, as creators, you need people to know that, as choreographers need people to know that they need not two minutes in the studio, they need more time. And I've had that quite a few times people filming themselves. Gosh, it takes quite a lot of time. Yes, I think even with documenting that what you're talking about is you know a piece that was supposed to be performed live and we had a long conversation about recording it a run which can be done and is very valid. And interestingly, that's possibly what promoters want to see more is a clean documentation. But we're actually going to spend a day working with the piece. A day is not long, but it's enough to think okay, how can we just choose a few different setups to perhaps take what you're trying to say with your audience. In a way you're trying to create the live feeling more because there's an audience. You go into see that close up with your own eyes, but when you just see it as a wide shot on a TV or even with two cameras, it's just wide and they're tiny dancers, so it's having a conversation with a choreographer what's really important at this moment in your piece, and how can we get that across and we've only got a day but so I think that's a really interesting way of working and I've seen lots of people do more and more of that. It does as you know, like you were saying earlier about money, it does take more time. Whether that's going to continue or just happen now, I don't know. But yeah, I hope that people you ask for tip and mine's look. I hope people are looking more, looking at what's on their screen more. So maybe that's changed, about really looking.

Melanie:

Yeah. And how about you, Alex. Do you see a new acceptance, a new appreciation for the work that you've been trying to do for many years now?

Alexander:

Definitely. Yeah. In a way it's been, you know, tragedy aside, and being respectful of all of the people that have been really badly impacted by this, it's been one of the exciting features of the last year for me is that there's suddenly a spotlight being shone on a territory that I've been really interested in and working in for a long time and have been fighting quite hard to prove the value of. And so hopefully, coming out of this, there will be a greater appreciation, both from the perspective of audiences, but also funders as to the value of what we already have, and people working in this territory. But the challenges and issues surrounding the creation of this because you know, that

really relates to the funding for people to really understand what it takes to make work of this nature is important so that you can justify why you might be asking for this bit more money than someone else's that's not using technology might be asking for. And I think, yeah, the conversation in general, the fact that we're having this conversation in this context now is proof of the fact that so many more people are engaged in these questions. And it's a really great thing. And I think it's really accelerated a lot of thinking on both where we're at and what the possibilities are with technology as it exists now, and where we might want things to go in the future in order to facilitate more meaningful experiences through these kinds of platforms or at a distance, or, yeah, I think all of those things are important. I mean, in your question, there is something about the different kind of asks, I mean, there's been quite a lot of demand and interest in the work we're doing, which has been great, that's been nice to be able to respond to new opportunities and have new opportunities emerge. But the stranger side of it has been doing rehearsals over Zoom. I was working with Scottish Ballet, for example, rehearsing a piece I'd made for them, and conducting rehearsal over Zoom with the dancers in masks, that's probably this is one of the strangest experiences. But actually, I think the fact is a piece that was already made, I was surprised at actually how effective it was being able to talk about details and features and intention. I think, like trying to make a new piece remotely, has been a lot more challenging. We did some r&d with the company early on and very quickly realised that there was just no point in trying to do things how we normally do them in the studio, but instead to kind of work in a slightly more open kind of task based way rather than... yeah.

Roswitha:

I was just gonna say that I think, as far as funders and I think because of the emergency of what's happened, they have supported artists thinking in a out the box way. One artist I'm working with, she works with community groups, and she goes to them and she would normally create a piece that's performed in the theatre. She's, what can I do, how can I work and she's created this whole project that I'm collaborating with her she's directing, where she's still working with those community groups, we've been on a reccy all around Suffolk, in fact, as far as performing is going to go to more people to get a chance to perform and create and work with her as an artist, because we can go and make that performance on the camera. And then she's thinking about the audiences. I think she's setting up at least three screenings in schools and community centres, but it's also it's kind of using the emergency of what's happened that it's not going to happen at theatre. Yeah, how else can I do that? And the funders have supported that. And that's been really, really, really exciting. And that's the value of using my medium and my tools to facilitate. Yes, we can go out there, and we're going to take it to those performers.

Alexander:

There's definitely a willingness to support and fund things that I think prior to this would have been a lot more difficult to fund and a willingness for artists to take risk to try things that they wouldn't ordinarily do. My concern is that...

Roswitha:

It'll all stop.

Alexander:

Yeah, because it's emergency funding, that's supporting this in the business models around it are very different and kind of non-existent in many respects. Monetizing it is a really different prospect. And so much of the infrastructure of funding and distribution is built on the touring and theatre based work or outdoor work. I think that's the biggest question in my mind coming out of this, what will endure, what will remain of what we've been able to do during this period, because of the exceptions that have been forced upon us. I really hope that things will endure beyond this, that it won't just be a reversion back and if anything are kind of a lessening of what we were able to do prior to this, because of the, you know, the inevitable financial strain that there's going to be on the arts and the broader economy.

Melanie:

I think monetizing is actually I think it should be a subject for another podcast. It was one of my questions, but it's just so big and how we move that forward, as you say, the future. Also it does look interesting if we're going to put a more optimistic spectacles on but just to ask you both to look back again on your beginnings as emerging artists, just in a sentence to finish us off. What do you know now that you wish you knew at the beginning of your digital journey?

Roswitha:

Don't worry so much, maybe. Just just do it, just do it. Which in a way I did, but it's just to be brave and just go and do it and try it. And you know, do it as often as you can, film as often as you can and look at it. And yeah, don't stress about production values. It really is about the content.

Melanie:

That's interesting.

Roswitha:

Yeah. Don't worry about other people with all their massive cameras

Melanie:

Just do it. How about you Alex?

Roswitha:

Just do it!

Alexander:

Yeah, yeah, I mean, I guess if there's one thing with hindsight, it's the time it takes having an appreciation of that, not only to make the work, but to, you know, to really develop an understanding and practice in it. Which I guess as dancers, we should kind of get straight away. Because we know that...

Melanie:

Everything takes time.

Alexander:

to become a professional dancer, or to achieve a certain level of skill as a dancer, we know that it takes a lot of practice and time to develop that same kind of skill. And I think we forget that sometimes, as makers, you know, we really have to commit time and think of it as a journey of practice and discovery. Yeah, that's definitely something years into this practice, I can appreciate now. But I think that kind of blindness at the beginning is helpful. If I'd known what was involved in making this kind of work at the beginning, I probably wouldn't have done it. I just kind of dived in and learned the hard way, but I think that's the best thing you can do.

Melanie:

So that feels like a good place to stop, be brave and do the best you can do. So 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 Roswitha and Alexander, head on over to greenwichdance.org.uk. And do remember, if you know someone you think we should talk to or have a topic you'd like us to talk about, please tweet us @GreenwichDance. But for today, that's it from us and do join us next time for more Talking Moves.

Thank you, guys!