

TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

Creating Dance for Families **S03 / E04**

Episode Description

In this episode we talk to **Liv Lorent** and **Arthur Pita** about creating dance for families. Once upon a time, dance for children and families was perhaps seen as lightweight, if indeed it was seen at all. But pioneering leaders in the sector, such as Emma Gladstone and her children's dance festival Offspring at The Place, set about to change that – spotlighting high quality work and the wonderful artists making it – and in doing so raising the status of this magical genre.

Liv and Arthur, both of whom meet on the Venn diagram when it comes to their imaginative use of traditional fairy tales, discuss the careful choice of story and the way they relate that to lived experience as well as to reflect the complex society we live in. We talk about the artful balance of dark and light and how neither of them is scared to shy away from the sad or scary parts of a story but rather the faith they have in children to interpret this and see sad and happy as parts of life.

We talk about the creation process and the involvement, for Liv, of community casts within the research and development as well as the presentation of the show. Arthur and Liv both talk animatedly about the collaborative way in which they make the work alongside creatives such as dramaturgs, writers, designers and musicians and the importance of narrative and pace perhaps over and above choreography which oftentimes comes second and is layered upon this robust structure.

And we talked about audiences – discussing who this work is really for – adult or child? And whether it's The Little Match Girl, or Ballo Arthur Pita, they have really come to see. This led us to muse upon

whether digital tools and technology might offer the potential to widen access and strengthen the bonds between company and a (growing) audience.

Talking Moves is a Greenwich Dance production

Presented by 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 moves them. I'm Melanie Precious and in this episode I'll be talking to two artists about making work for children and families. Once upon a time dance for children and families was perhaps seen as lightweight, if indeed it was seen at all. But pioneering leaders in the sector such as Emma Gladstone and her children's dance festival, Offspring at The Place set about to change all that. Spotighting high quality work and the wonderful artists making it and in doing so, raising the status of this magical genre. The luxury of seeing and sharing beautiful dance together as a family is one that many of us perhaps took for granted, and we are eagerly awaiting its return. But whilst we wait, we have joined up with two renowned choreographers and directors of dance for families, to find out more about the complex art of creating work that appeals to children and adults alike. Liv Lorent, artistic director of balletLORENT and Arthur Pita artistic director of Ballo Arthur Pita. Welcome both of you.

Liv:

Thank you.

Arthur:

Thank you so much.

Melanie:

So firstly, can you talk us through your portfolio of children's work? How many pieces have you made? How long have you been making work for family audiences? Liv?

Liv:

I think I made my first one in 2006. And that was a full length work called Angel Moth.

Melanie:

I saw that

Liv:

Oh, where did you see it?

Melanie:

At Sadler's Wells' Lilian Baylis. I remember it well.

Liv:

Brilliant. That's nice. That was our first one. And it was made for the dancers and their skills and their personality types. And it was created by my partner Ben Crompton, who wrote the story and narrated it. And then we worked with various other collaborators to create a very, probably our biggest work with a lot of set. Set in a library a multitude of books. Did flying for the first time, I've never done that before. And it was the first time we'd created something which had narration within the sound score, which was the thought to make the dance work easier to be enjoyed by a multitude of different ages. Especially because we've all been there when you enter theatre and you hear little whisperings, your children going Mum what's going on? So I wanted to see if just a few words here and there, just leading us to where we were going. And it meant that I didn't have the burden as I saw it of having to do ballet mime to take us on to particular stories. Just get on do whatever movement I wanted. And the idea actually to do family work was interesting because I didn't have a family at that stage hadn't had any children then. I can't even say that I was even aware of much family work but what happened was that Bush Hartshorn was a big mover and shaker in dance theatre internationally for a long time and he was a great supporter and he said to me, I was doing quite a lot of naked work and seductive work and but quite fantasy work at that time like *la nuit intime*. And he said, You know what, if you took out the nudity and some of the more sexual images, you would be creating a really amazing fantasy world for children. And that's a just surprise thinking me...? Family work? Me with my pole dancing and rocking horses and naked dancers, that was very strange. But then the idea took hold. And that's where we decided to create *Angel Moth*. And I found I absolutely loved surrendering into that world of make believe and fantasy, and expanding that audience across many different generations at the same time. And since then, we just haven't stopped, we just have been making work consistently for family audiences since 2006.

Melanie:

How incredible because I was going to ask its relation to your work. We'll get onto that in a moment. Arthur, tell us about you. What's your history of making work for families and children? Where did you start? And how many pieces have you got in your rep?

Arthur:

Yeah, so I started with the commission for Sadler's Wells, which was a collaboration with Theatre-Rites. So also Emma Gladstone curated that. And that was the start of it. And that was a piece called Mischief. And then after that, I created another piece with Theatre-Rites and Sue Buckmaster, called Mojo. And then I'd actually done a little, it was a third production with them, but I only did like a little bit of movement, it was sort of like more of a part time thing that I just kind of enhanced with a few movement sequences to another show that they did called Lighten Up. But subsequently, I've created two shows with my own company, one being the Little Match Girl, and the second one being more recently 10 Sorry Tails. So I'm not like Liv and fully in it all the time. But it's absolutely the same way that Liv says about surrendering yourself. I absolutely love that surrender. And I learn so much every time I do a family show, you know, it's incredible how one feeds the other.

Melanie:

I was gonna ask a bit more about that how it dovetails within your wider portfolio of work and whether you have, do you think, an aesthetic or a process. And Liv, you've already kind of explained yours in terms of that fantasy world, but that distinguishes your work from other makers and falls into your family work as well as your sort of non family work. What would you say about that, Arthur, have you've got something that you think is a constant?

Arthur:

You know, I think it's all about what the pieces. So I must say that I learned absolutely everything from Sue Buckmaster, because I really didn't know anything about making work for families and for children. And actually, I remember going to the meeting, and I remember misunderstanding the project. And I thought it was a project like with children making a show for children. And I remember saying to Sue, oh, you know, I don't really have that much experience of working children. She goes, I don't work with children, you know, this is for family. And I was going oh okay. And then suddenly, the world opened up. And we had a long conversation about a lot of stuff. And it was quite an abstract idea, because she was working with visual artists, Sophia Clist, who designed the set. So actually, it really didn't have much of a narrative, it was devised work. And I could go, Oh, is this going to be, you know, I was very confused, I thought is this going to be clear, or you know, so I was kind of going through it. But I guess what was happening in that process is that Sue, myself, and Sophia, we were all impressing each other. It was like a new sort of love affair with each other. And I think it just brought out the best in all of us, and wonderful, deep conversations. And it became quite an abstract piece, which I learned a lot about, because I thought, well, you could never really do something so abstract for a young audience. And actually, you totally can, because the rules are that there are no rules. But then, after learning so much from Sue, who's just so experienced and knows so much about it, I was then curious to do something that had a narrative, which is much more my comfort zone. And that's when I got asked to create a show for DanceEast. And I'd just come off a job that was really bad and really horrible, and had to do a Christmas show was the brief.

And basically, I could only think of like, what is the saddest Christmas story I could find. And I was like, oh Little Match Girl, perfect, that's gonna, like, heal all of my wounds. And actually, it turned out to be the most joyous experience and completely healing. And also, it was just another way of learning from what I'd learned from Sue and Theatre-Rites but taking that into a narrative, which was very interesting, because I had the freedom of understanding the abstract, I'd learned about how you connect to the audience about the beats, about all those sort of technical things that you learn along the way. And then I could apply that to something else much more comfortable with which is really telling a story.

Melanie:

And I wanted to ask you both about that. Because I think this is, in a way, a place where your work starts to join and overlap your interest in stories. Both of you seem to have utilised existing stories, namely fairy tales. But I think both of you have also created work using some original stories too or certainly adaptations and twists on an original and I wondered if you could just talk us through the process and tell me what for you makes a good story? What are you looking for? I mean, Arthur you just said you looked for the saddest story you could find. But what does make a good story? Liv?

Liv:

I think for me, I have to find a deep connection with the story. And sometimes it's about I think where I am in my in my life. By the time I made Rapunzel, I had one child and was hoping for another and was finding that was taking longer than I expected. And like many women, I was having those hurdles and then suddenly because you in that lived experience, you're seeing the, suddenly projecting the sadness of other people maybe who are struggling for making a family and are not able to have the family that they want, for whatever reason, and I loved Rapunzel for that story. Because, you know, it starts with, it's a husband and a wife and they long for a child so badly that they have to steal the rampion from the witches garden and the witch herself so badly wants a child that she creates this bargain with them and then steals their baby. So I've done a lot of research and seeing some terrible stories of the lengths human beings go to to have their own child. And it was such an immense story. I felt I wanted to say it because on one level for a small child watching it they're like, you know, husband and wife can't have a child big deal. It's not a tragedy when you're seven. But for the parents it can be incredibly potent and meaningful. So I was very interested in seeing how we could have a coexisting world of something that had enormous emotional punch and truth for the grown ups in the audience. And at the same time that would go right over the heads of the children but together I suppose like to you know, when you see a Pixar film or something, or Toy Story 3 or something and you're weeping but your child is laughing! That was that kind of thing I said to you before...

Melanie:

It's that first section of Up, isn't it? Have you ever seen Up and every adults, first 10 minutes is in pieces. Children are they're just waiting for the story to start and you're like putting your heart back together! No completely. They have it down, don't they Pixar?

Liv:

They do. They are amazing. But that was a big inspiration. To be able to achieve in the imagery, the choreography, the text, the music, something that could really exist, that could... We've all sat through some shows where you're just there for the kids, and just waiting for it to pass, and equally there's times where something might be billed for children, and you're really enjoying it, but it's just not thought about for young people. I mean, I think Arthur's Little Match Girl, which I saw with my children, and loved is perfectly pitched. I can see why it keeps coming back and back. It's fantastic.

Arthur:

Yeah, ah thank you so much. Yes, I think, you know, what Liv is saying about the adults and the children, I think it's such an important aspect of creating work, because obviously, what you don't want are the kids sitting in the audience, you know, screaming and having a great time, and the parents on their phone just waiting for this to be over. You want it to be really a shared experience. So in a way, and it's really difficult. I mean, it's really hard. You know, I think this is really difficult making work for families because of that, because you want to achieve that level. And I think a lot of people might think that like a pantomime, the audience have to be so active and screaming, and up and down. And actually, what I've loved and what I've learned throughout is actually when the audience are quiet, and when the children particularly are dead quiet, and they don't move in their seat, and they just focused on what's happening on the stage, and there's not much noise, then you know, actually that you've hit the mark, because they are concentrated, and they are having a real experience. If they start looking up looking around them wanting to go to the toilet, wanting to come back, you know, all this disruption, then you know, that somehow there's something... and I can always tell exactly the moment when I might lose the focus. And I go Okay, there. Because you know, I watch them very closely while they're watching the show to see where the focus is. And I find that absolutely fascinating. But what's so beautiful is the shared experience between you know, if it's a show where the parents are coming with a children, or whether it's a school show with school teachers and the kids, it's that shared experience. You know, I find that for example with Little Match Girl, I find it very touching, especially those seven o'clock evening shows, often you don't get them in their schedule, because you know, that's the other thing, which is fascinating. You know how you have to do shows so early in the day, which is a whole different game for the performers for everyone involved. So when you get that sort of 7pm show, which is to me very magical, so literally it's just more parents and their kids coming. And with something like the Little Match Girl, they're kind of holding each other and they cuddling the kid and they having... and everyone's focused and this lovely support and genuine shared experience I find very touching that you have the honour of providing them with that.

Melanie:

It is very beautiful. And I think you're right to distinguish or make that distinction between panto and the kind of work we're talking about. Panto has a place but this is not that kind of audience participation thing, is it? I just love bringing my children to the theatre and sharing that magical moment with them the whole bit about telling them that we're going to go and getting on the tube and walking in the whole thing that of course, we've missed. But going back to those stories, and you have both touched on this already, actually, but fairy stories don't shy away from tragedy. And I think we always sort of shock ourselves with just how much darkness children can take. For example, let's think about Disney again. We've got the famous Lion King and you know, spoiler alert, Mofasa the father plummets to his death. But we've just been watching a TV programme as well. Now I wish I could remember what it was called. It's the Lemony Snicket books anyway, I forget exactly what they've called it.

Liv:

Oh, yeah.

Melanie:

I've got a six year old and a nine year old and they are both absolutely absorbed by this story. But it's the bleak you know, at one point the baby's hanging from a cage and I'm going to bed thinking about this image but my children aren't thankful. And I entertained myself by finding a couple of reviews of both of your work so for you Arthur, Laura Freeman in The Spectator described her experience at the Little Match Girl as to a child raised on Frozen this parable about poverty, darkness and want comes as a brilliant nightmare. And she said she left with a tear in her eye and a chill down her spine. And you Liv and Angel Moth: an evil siren with her kiss of death, a mother finding her lost son and losing him again, melancholy grief and bereavement. And I wondered how do you tackle that balance of dark and light? And perhaps also, why are we so compelled to do so? Why don't we just keep it magic light pink icing and sprinkles?

Liv:

Well, when I was searching my next story after Rapunzel I was, intrigued to find that the original Grimm version of Snow White, the original mother was Snow White's real mother. It wasn't a stepmother. So Snow White's real mother condemned her to die in the forest because she was so jealous of her beauty. And that gives it a very different feel than it being a stepmother. And by that point, I was gripped I had to tell this story because it is written, and even the Grimm brothers had edited it, as we all do through generations and times when suddenly you go dark or socially then you decide to make the stories a little gentler and a censor. There's fashions for this and it was clearly even in the 19th century this was happening. And I was very much wanting to tell that story because I think it gave a whole different feel because it is a tale to warn against narcissism. It's a tale about love. And it's a tale about coveting beauty and being jealous of beautiful people when you wish you were. And I think there was a lot to say. And I wanted to make the miners a very different story where

they are the workers, and they are kind of bent over a double, because they are facilitating all of the glory, the warmth and luxury of the royal household. And with Carol Ann Duffy, who I collaborate with, often, she really brought out some very important things to say not just about love and family, but about society, and unfairness, which we really enjoyed putting out there. And it's not an aggressive stance, but there's a lot of truth in there that I think is then absorbed. And we can say a lot, we can communicate a lot through these stories and how we choose to interpret them, and what we choose to say and which version. So I think there's so much scope within some of these traditional tales to say so much truth about now.

Melanie:

That's really lovely. So it's offering that layer, but also that truth about the world that we live in. The beauty and the complexity and the ugliness and how that all becomes one. Arthur, what's your take on that?

Arthur:

Yeah, I would say with something like approaching Little Match Girl, obviously, we all know she dies. You know, a lot of Hans Christian Andersen's real deep tragedy. So I immediately thought, Oh, how do you get out of that one. And at the time, I was watching a lot of documentaries about space travel. And I'd seen one with some astronauts who spoke about looking back at the earth from outer space, and being so moved about not really just being amazed by being out of space, but looking back at the earth and realising how beautiful it was, and how you kind of see your life and how everything sort of makes sense, you know, so I thought would it be beautiful to do that, you know, to pull back. And I was also interested in astronauts and I was How can it work that in, and then I thought, Oh, it's just perfect, actually, when she dies, her grandmother will just take her to the moon. And the other reason I was excited about that is because it's quite a Christian story, the original Hans Christian Andersen where the grandmother is like an angel who come from heaven and takes up and I thought that's very heavily Christian, and you know, you're gonna have a diverse audience. And this has to talk to everybody. And also, it's quite hard to explain to a child what an angel is. And that's a conversation that parents choose to have their children whenever they choose. But it's a conversation that at some point, but actually the moon is something that you can see all the time, you know, you look out your window, and you can see a moon etc. So I thought that's much easier to explain to a child of a possibility of what might happen to you in the afterlife. So we went for that. And it was really liberating, because then we could do fantastic things like have an astronaut and have a moon landing, and a whole sequence where Little Match Girl has this kind of lunar experience. And then you have the Earth and the Moon. And we can keep playing on that perspective. But I thought what was really powerful the first time we did it at DanceEast, and we weren't quite sure, but they said, Look, we get it, we'd like to just show and we'd like to invite some terminally ill kids and their parents, and we don't know how they will react to the show. And I was like, Look, let's just do it. Let's just see what happens. You never know. And they all came it was really beautiful and very touching. And we had a lovely show. And we had an interactive moment afterwards where we stayed in costume. And they got to ask the performers questions and have a

conversation and everything, it was really lovely. And then I've got the loveliest and sadness, but most beautiful email back from DanceEast saying that one of the little girls who's really shy, who was terminally ill, and was trying to process that because she knew what was happening. And her parents had explained it to her, had a complete revelation about it and fell completely at pieces, because she understood that her life was like Little Match Girl and she was just going to go to another elevated space. She was just going to go to the moon and we had this kind of like movement gesture of like the flame and apparently she kept doing the dance. And yeah, you know, it was extremely... you never set out to make a show to do that. But it was like, so amazing that it could aid someone going through that, who's eight years old, where it's so complex, and the parents and to find actually that the theatre is really a wonderful place. And it can lay those messages down and lay down images for someone to process to maybe go through something. All these deep I mean, the deeper the deeper and more gutsy the themes, I would say obviously, the more it's going to penetrate the audience, you know, the more it's really gonna hit and then I think what you make, you know, if it's universal, what is personal becomes universal. And that's fantastic. You know, like when we're choosing these narratives and we're going through something we're choosing them because maybe we're feeling sad or because we go Oh my god, this is an amazing relationship between a mother and a daughter and I need to sort of go through that myself. That's gonna go through to the audience and I think that's what's fantastic. Yeah.

Liv:

Yeah, I think Melanie and I are both welling up hearing that.

Melanie:

Can't Imagine the depth of pain.

Liv:

Amazing.

Arthur:

Can you imagine? Oh...

Melanie:

I completely recognise how the theatre could provide space for dialogue and conversation and acceptance and what a role for it to play. So, gosh, it's quite hard to move on from that, isn't it? Because it's incredibly emotional but so beautiful. Once you have that story, just moving into the sort of creation process now, how do you approach the r&d then? So I know Arthur you've already mentioned that you will look at audience responses and work out those moments where you feel

something is needed. And Liv, how do you work out how the story is landing with your audience in the creation process?

Liv:

Our current work, the work that's frozen on ice until we tour again, hopefully this autumn, having shunted all those dates several times now for our national tour. Our current full length family work is *The Lost Happy Endings*, which is an original story by Carol Ann Duffy. Now, in this story, it really focuses on the major character Jub who contains in her sack all the happy endings of all the stories in the world. And once these are stolen, all the happy endings go wrong. So it is a brilliant way of revisiting so many fairy tales. So it's gorgeous, it's gorgeous. And then the whole story is about building back to rewriting new happy endings. And what I really wanted to do was not shy away from some of the deep dark pieces of the story. And I really wanted to have quite a sizable number of real children. Because in the story at bedtime, when all the stories have gone wrong, and Snow White dies after the apple and the prince's kiss doesn't wake her up. You know, there's all these tormented screaming children wetting the bed and being inconsolable, which as all of us know, as parents, sometimes your kid does react to that something they've read or something they've watched in the film, and they are inconsolable at bedtime. And it is an absolute nightmare. So every family's been through that. And I wanted to show that not this picture-perfect, gorgeous, sweet, lovely bedtimes, which are lovely when they happen. But they're not that often. But this is just this disaster, bedtime with about 25 people on stage, you know different families and having a real difference of sometimes a single parent family, sometimes a family with two men with the children or two women with the children, all different sorts of families. So we're really sort of normalising the breadth of what a family looks like, and seeing children from five or six years old, up to 12 years old, and they are also dancing, and they're ripping up the books, and they're screaming into the pillows. And we're just seeing sort of like carnage at the end of Act One where everything has just gone to pot. And that. And I really wanted to try that out. And I thought Can I Can this work? Will children be able to pull this off? And these are not dance children. These aren't children we take from, you know, performing arts schools, these are children we find in primary schools that we hand pick after little workshops and find people who are atuned to tell the story. And it's about really including their utter commitment and seeing does that passion, translate and then thinking through an r&d will this work has a tour? With different children each place we go to can that depth of experience be achieved within a few days work? And that's all the stuff we have to r&d, because then the other side, you go, Well, we have projections of children then you know. But I have to say I really like having the real flesh and blood on stage. That's the kind of stuff we discovered.

Melanie:

It's the motif of your work, isn't it that you often have these large community casts. So you're saying that that process when you've got your young people from a local primary school or whatever is where you might test some of that. And then so it's just a couple of days, when you take that out on tour, you obviously got to source and cast that in whichever place you're going, how much time do you have with those...

Liv:

It can be a number of days, but once we fix what the four scenes or whatever the children are participating in, that's relatively easy. The harder bit is when we're building it in Newcastle upon Tyne where we're based, and that's all the r&d and all the times I get it wrong and all the times the scene's too long or too short or too populated, or you know, and that's the hard bit because they have to buy into that repetitious and wait till we finally get it right. But we're quite good at that. And I've got an amazing team of dancers who've been with me for decades who are excellent at working with these children. So it normally works out pretty well. But it does take an awful lot of exploration because it's not a cut and paste job and each piece is different. And each time we seem to explore sometimes we've had toddlers on stage. Other times we've had older people who are knitting in Rumpelstiltskin, or this was very, this is this particular age group. And what we're asking of them for The Lost Happy Endings was quite different because it wasn't idyllic. This was gutsy and had to be completely authentic and committed and also not be upsetting. We didn't want it to be but actually they absolutely love it. If we go to schools and say jump and riff they just love exporting, like we all do, all that frustration.

Melanie:

I love that I love the way that that cast is serving those kind of multifunctions to the making and presentation of your piece. It's so interesting. How about you Arthur how do you r&d work? And how do you get audience or children's feedback on your story and your plotline,

Arthur:

Yes. It's always a different process for each time you do it. But I do, you know, I map out the whole narrative. There's a lot of play in the room. So I think you have to get very playful with the cast so that everybody can release all possibilities. And then we start a piece together, I think music plays a big part in it. So I really work very closely with Frank Moon, who's a composer that I work with who is actually very much involved in the room and often becomes the live musician on stage. And I think music is a wonderful manipulator, especially for a family audience, because you can really pull the strings where you want to. And once it starts to get a little bit in shape, what I do love to, if we can, is bring an audience into test the material out. So to try and get a school in or just a class to come in just to watch whatever you're doing. And then at the end of that session, to break them up into groups of different performers, and to just kind of talk about it and get a little bit of feedback and see what they saw. And see if it was clear about what you we're trying to get across. That is normally very, very helpful just before you get on stage. Then once you get on stage, everything sort of changes again. And it's really about getting all of the levels, right, you know, the sound levels, the light levels, especially for a young audience, you know, it can't be too dark, it can't be too bright, it can't be too loud, can be too quiet. So it's like just try to get it really balanced. So it feels nice and comfortable. So that you can really take them in on the journey. And I must say most of the time, like Liv was saying most of the time, kids are just totally up for anything. And I think you can really throw so

much at them, and they'll really take it. But a lot of the time, it's more about the parents or the school teachers. So like, I don't know, if you've had this Liv, but you know the kids will come to a show and they'll react to something and you hear the teachers shushing them, you know, to shush them in the theatre, I'm like, No, it's okay. Like, they should be allowed to laugh! You know, like, screaming, but you know, they should be able to react. Or when a show, if it's an evening show the parents sometimes you can see them holding their kids, and if something is too loud, or if there's kind of like a bit of a scary sound, it's normally the parents who grab the kids first, it's not the kids who grab the parents. And it's almost like that conditioning of the parents going, Oh, this is scary I have to like... and actually leave them they'll be fine. And if they're scared, they'll come to you, you know. So it's trying to get all these balances, which is a big part of the process, which then actually I think really does feed into the adult work so brilliantly, because it's all the same things. Is it clear, you know, are they really getting it? Is everything sitting right? Are the levels right? Is everything balanced? It's just, you know

Liv:

Oh, totally, I absolutely agree. Because there's no way when I'm doing a family work that I think oh this is dumbing down, this is a little easier than my normal job making work for the grown ups. This is... you know, if you're going to as you say get that stillness that we're seeking with the children...

Arthur:

Yes.

Liv:

the audience and their focus, we have to be so on our game. And as you say, tuning everything every moment and the balance of you know the sound, the set, the light, story and how long Act One is and Act Two and like Arthur, we do a little test audiences too. And every time I make a new piece, I expand the level of time I've got to repair and change things after my test audience, even if the choreography is a bit of an afterthought, all the other ingredients are there, getting that information in for clarity, as you said Arthur and for pace and everything so good. You know, the choreography can sometimes be later and then develop that because I know we can do that in time. But it's about clarity of narrative. Because once you've lost people, and especially children, so hard to get them back. And you can lose them in 10 seconds.

Arthur:

Yeah

Liv:

So if it's not clear, or if you fudged something they'll see right through it.

Arthur:

Totally

Melanie:

Gosh yeah they do don't they. Uneducate children through their lives I think rather than educate them. Often they seem to know everything to start with. That's really interesting, though, what both of you're saying without getting the structure, the pace, the format, and then layering on the choreography, which you guys could probably do with your eyes closed later because you know that that will come and given what we've just said about that. Both of you have such a rich list of collaborators that you've been working with. So Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy, Doctor Who composer, a Game of Thrones costume designer for you Liv. And Arthur, you've been working with Yann Seabra and Frank Moon for a number of years. And so all of those magical components, how do you work with your collaborators? How much of an input are they getting? How much do you rely on them for things? How are you setting up that structure?

Arthur:

Wow, I think first of all, it's such a beautiful friendship that I have with both Frank and Yann. And we always try to challenge ourselves actually. So well, what did we do last time? Let's try to do that differently. Or let's have a different process like: Let's not talk about it too much and why don't you go read that and come up with something or sometimes you go, let's do it all together, and let's go in the room. But ultimately, you're serving the thing that's bigger than you, which is the thing that you're creating. And what's so lovely about both of them is that they absolutely have no ego. I mean, there is no, we all have an ego to a degree, but they are so open, and they are so unprecious about any idea. If you go oh not sure about that, there'll just be another idea really quickly, like nothing is held. And I think that's such a lovely way to collaborate. And then we get very excited, then we're just like children playing ourselves and we go, oh, it could be this, it could be that and you start getting really excited about what it can be. And then you look at the budget and you go, Oh, we can't do that. That's really depressing. Here's another way, and slowly you start to get there and you start to get more and more ambitious, as well, as you start to do things, you know. Like with the Little Match Girl, I really wanted also to just be an exploration of because, you know, a lot of the time actually, a lot of the time an audience coming to watch your show a young audience, that might be the first time that that five year old or seven year old is actually even going to watch a show. So they're just going to be amazed about how it works. So you have to think about all those lovely little theatre tricks that you want to expose them to, which is, you know, if it's a little trapdoor, or if it's like a specific sound coming out of the microphone, or it's a light happening on a cue with a sound that sort of magically happens. It's all of these things that I think everybody contributes towards to make the thing. So actually, it's vitally important. Like, for example, I know in Little Match Girl, the moon that Yann designed, the moon and the earth is such an important part of the set, because it's sort of like a target. And because it illuminates so beautifully, it actually is a big help to keep the audience

focused, because it's like a dartboard. And I didn't even realise that until like years later I was going, ah that's why because there's nothing around it you can just focus on that. So the design is hugely important. And then someone like Frank with the music, how you introducing and how big you go. And if he's going to do some crazy beatboxing, or if it's going to be something operatic, you can literally go anywhere, but it's about serving the narrative and about everybody going in there. But everybody feeling so free to play. I always say, first, let's think of what the Las Vegas version is going to be. And then we start to pare down from there

Melanie:

That's a great mantra for a lot of things I think.

Liv:

It is, yeah

Melanie:

I've seen Yann at work, and he can get really physical, can't he? He's is not a costume designer behind a desk with a pen and paper, he is right in the studio large as life, which is magical.

Arthur:

Absolutely.

Melanie:

But I imagine that Liv, you must be working in a similar way with all of those bits of the jigsaw all sort of coming together almost simultaneously, as you start to find your way through the story.

Liv:

Yes, and I completely connect with Arthur about the importance of not working with massive egos in the room. We are working towards a bigger thing.

Arthur:

Yes.

Liv:

And together and you have to be good friends in that working process and trust each other. Because if you work with the wrong collaborator, it makes your life really, really, really hard. And it

can really kill a project. So those good collaborators that we work with again, and again, are just worth their weight in gold. And they are incredibly inspirational. And I find it really helpful that I don't... I'm not a secret costume designer. I know nothing about music. So I wouldn't go to Michele or Nasir or Murray and say, I know just what I want. Can you enable this for me? I say, this is the story. We all meet in the middle to the story and I explain what I want to get out of it and I explain the experience I want to honour the audience. And now how do we all approach that and as you say, with the budget restrictions that always come into it and the practicals etc. But I feel like what I choose to do rightly or wrongly is... once, you know I remember we made with Rapunzel Phil Eddolls, did this amazing set with like a wrought iron tower which was really important to the story. And then Michele Clapton did this incredible red long wig for Rapunzel. And all the choreography I'd done was all the swooping back bends and the hair will rainbow up. And then it would get caught in all the wrought iron and she couldn't move.

Arthur:

Oh god!

Liv:

But what do you do? I'm not going to turn around to Michele and go, I need a different wig! The hair needs to be long. It was perfect. The set was perfect. We're not starting again. So what has to move? It's the movement. And there is where I think I am the most frustrating person for the dancers to work with sometimes because they've practised that choreography, and then that's what we're ditching, because it's the one movable piece. You know, we can be human and reactive, the wrought iron will not bend, the hair can't change. So it's us that are sometimes trashing really nice choreography but because it does not fit within all the other kind of collaborative layers.

Melanie:

That's so interesting. And then that leads me so perfectly into my next question, which is when you cast your performers, what are you looking for?

Liv:

Well...

Melanie:

And is it different to any other work that you might be casting for?

Liv:

Not for me not for me, these dancers have to, I mean, obviously, I'm building relationships with some dancers who've been with me over 20 years, some dancers less. But it is about building a family and building a huge amount of commitment and trust. And also, they need to have a capacity sometimes to see that they will be totally upstaged by a six year old on stage with them. And that six year olds well being an artistry has to be focused on and that they have to... sometimes I'll be in a rehearsal room and say, do it like that child do it like Tommy. That's perfect, how he's doing it. So these trained very experienced, professional dancers, are trying to legitimately tune in to a 10 year old and see how their movement dynamic, that purity of movement, informs then what I want in to choreography. So it takes a particular type of dancer to do that.

Arthur:

Amazing...

Melanie:

Would you agree with that Arthur? What do you look for?

Arthur:

Yeah, absolutely. I work with lots of different people. So it's slightly different in terms of like, I feel like each so demands a certain cast. But I think in essence, what I what I'm really attracted to, and I think what when you're creating these kind of works, you need performers who have a big appeal, and who also have the discipline to be able to, you know, wake up at eight o'clock in the morning to do warm up at nine, to be ready for a show at 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning, that is a different kind of discipline, which is much harder, but I think it's really the appeal. And there's the sense to play. And you know, I love a performer who loves to show off and is hungry to be in the room. And that's what the audience enjoy. So if you have that, then you can fire away, because then they will have fun with each other. And the showing off becomes a playful thing and can help serve the greater things of the piece. So I think it's really all sorts, all sorts of you know, from just to have a cross range, which I think is also important. And also I think what is very helpful, or having people who are kind of multi disciplinary, you know, the triple threaters you know, who can sing, dance and act a bit if it's required, because then if you just want to go, you go, Oh, my God, we need a song, or this is really a scene or here we're going to have a big, you know, this is really the movement section. And if you can have that within your cast, and you've got more to play with.

Melanie:

And I imagine that when you're working with restricted budgets, which actually they can be large or small, they always feel restricted, don't they, because our ideas are always bigger than the money that we have. But that's a great way of starting to be economical with what you've got when you've got that multidisciplinary talented cast. And I think we're requiring of that so much more now, it seems. So given that I love that phrase that you just said all sorts of Arthur because again, it's led

me into my next question, which is about our society, our families, the types of families we're playing to which as you said, Liv already are not Mum, Dad, and 2.4 children anymore. We're looking at blended families, we're looking at lots of different families. But we're also looking, I think, at the moment about a growing awareness of gender and its limitations when we think or have thought in the past simply of boy girl. I was talking to somebody who was talking about toothbrushes, and how she can't not get a pink toothbrush for her daughter, because society sells blue toothbrushes for boys and pink ones for girls. And we sort of find ourselves in this kind of stereotype. And I wonder, as we rethink that, as we challenge the associations that we have about the conditioning that we've had about how we consider what boys and girls like, you know, boys like trucks, girls like princesses. How are you challenging those stereotypes in your work? Or are you does it play on your mind at all?

Liv:

It's a very hot topic! I have been very, very informed by my children with that, you know, I have a seven year old girl who is off at school now with boys shoes and boys shorts, because that's what she wants to wear and is much more comfortable. And she's very, very clear about that. And my 12 year old boy, again, has absolutely no interest in clothes, and is so so just on a whole other kind of level of imagination. I met a family friend recently who said the two oldest children are 15 and 16. And they said in their school, it is normal that most of the children identify as bisexual.

Arthur:

Wow, amazing!

Liv:

I know, I know. I thought, wow, when I was 15 16, that was definitely not what it was. That was not acceptable. That was not encouraged. And I know that's a story for many of my age group who had had to hide anything that wasn't heteronormative and which is just awful. I'm really glad that the world is shifting slowly. Not fast enough. But there is some progress being made. And I'm very excited by this new generation as having such a level of openness to smashing those gender stereotypes and heteronormative world. Because that isn't real. It's not real in the animal kingdom and it's not real in the human kingdom and it's just got a go, you know, so I'm very much championing with the children about accepting individuality, I think.

Arthur:

Yeah, amazing. Yes. You know, I totally believe in throwing everything out there. So for example, in Little Match Girl, we made a conscious decision that the cast will play both male and female. So some of the characters like Karl, he comes straight out dressed as the mother. And then later on, he is like a bad boy. And then he's an astronaut. And they, you know, so he just plays all the different roles. And then actually what's quite fun, sometimes you hear the little whispers, and they go like, Oh,

I think that was the one before I don't know, is it? It's a boy, it's but that's a girl. And then like, you know, so Valentina will play the role, nasty girl, but then she'll play the little boy on the street. And I think that's just a lovely little way just to put it out there just to let them know that it doesn't matter what's happening here on the stage. And if they think that they are looking at drag, or whatever, whatever it is, they're observing something that has kind of like, it's just, it's open and possible. But absolutely, I think we have to think about all of these things. And I think it's something you always approach about having a diverse cast about just incorporating everyone really. The whole human hood. And like I said before, just about trying to avoid like with Little Match Girl trying to avoid sort of Christianity, because that has felt so separate. And you know, not everyone coming into the audience is going to be there. So how can you just try and open it up. So it just kind of accommodates everybody really, in whatever they're experiencing?

Melanie:

And we've been talking as well about the complexity of the audience. We've already touched upon the layering that you do in order to reach because of course, you're selling to the parents, but it's the child's being entertained. As you said Liv the adult also has the right to be entertained as well. And I wondered whether you felt this work is only for audiences with children or not. And there was again, a quote that I found for yours, Arthur, which was "adults should beg, borrow or steal a child to take to this funny and moving production, otherwise, they should simply take themselves". And I wondered how many abductions you've heard of?! How much of your audience has borrowed a child or just come on their own? And how much of your audience do you think actually is there with children? And so what's your opinion on the Arthur Pita, or the Liv Lorent audience and this kind of work that you're making?

Liv:

Well, I found which to my delight, I go on tour a lot with the work to absorb and I sit in the audience all the time and absorb what is working on stage and what could always be reinvented and I remember going to the Edinburgh Festival Theatre for the first time. And I was amazed that in our evening shows, we had 1000 people and most of them were adults. So there was definitely you know who were coming. I don't remember Snow White or Rapunzel, or we did both. But remember this happening twice going Wow, this is great. Because actually, a lot of adults like fairy tales too. And they like narrative work. And people aren't embarrassed and feel like they need to take the child actually they just go and it's it's they're absolutely welcome. I think in the future, I'm even sort of thinking about some of these fairy tales when you really get juicily deeply into them just thinking, ah actually, I'm sort of toying with the idea of will I one day make a Rapunzel noir I really go to town on the sort of sex, violence and drug addiction in that story. And actually do maybe a late night version for adults only alongside our classic version as a daytime and early evening show.

Melanie:

That's sounds so exciting with with the curtains down. And in a way Arthur you might have done it Stepmother Stepfather was it called that? It was for 14 plus? That's kind of what Liv is saying there. Obviously...

Arthur:

Yes

Melanie:

you didn't have a version for the younger ones. This sort of sugarcoated version...

Arthur:

Yes,

Melanie:

But you've gone dark.

Arthur:

Yeah, that was deliberately trying to aim for that kind of teenage audience. And it was really dark. And it was fun. It was fun to do. And it was liberating, you know, because I think it's always hard to like impress that age group, particularly because nothing is going to be cool enough. But I think we did manage that. And I think we did get there with that in terms of like, you know, to get them to be gripped, but it's true what Liv was saying like, you know, whenever I'm working with a cast on a family show, we're always talking about the late night naked version that we want to do, because you've invested so much in creating that but at the same time, I did the story of the mother with Natalia Osipova, Jonathan Godard, which is another Hans Christian Andersen and I don't think that I would ever have visited that work in that way. And with that vision that we had that we created for it if I hadn't created work for families, because I actually did it with the same approach. But we just went for the full blood and guts and just really enjoyed the adult themes, but it's definitely heavily influenced by the effect that I had from creating work for a family audience. So one definitely leads to the other and actually, sometimes the audience's do, you know, because maybe some parents had seen something, they might come something to the adult show. Also the kids grow up throughout the years. So then they maybe become more interested in your work as they are growing up because they remember maybe seeing something when they were younger. So it does change. And I just think about sitting in the audience I've often seen, which I find just so delightful and elderly audience, you know, I'd come in to watch an elderly couple or two friends and I think that it's almost like how you can slightly sort of regress as you get older. And sometimes I think when you maybe reach that age of maturity there you do find a delight in the simplicity of or something like a family show with children. So I find that really interesting, you know, just goes back full circle.

Melanie:

And given that, as you said, you've got an audience that perhaps is being introduced to your work, how important is it to you? Or rather, how do you do this. So they might have come to your work because of Snow White or because of Rapunzel or because of the Little Match Girl, they may not have seen your name, they may not know your name, if they've come from out of the centre if you like. How important is it and how do you make sure that they leave knowing that it's Liv Lorent or that it's Arthur Pita so that you can follow them up and link them back into some of your other work? What do you have at your disposal to do that, do you think?

Liv:

Not a lot for me! No, it's made me laugh when I see here a little post show feedback form. And it might be the question, what other ballet LORENT shows have you seen? And they'll put down the Red Shoes! No that wasn't us! I mean, I'll take the credit like but you know! You see how people assume maybe we're all one of a thing? And I don't know how much we can change that.

Arthur:

Yeah.

Melanie:

Goes back to that ego thing again, doesn't it I suppose.

Liv:

I'm okay with it.

Arthur:

Yeah, Yeah, me too. I mean, I don't think it's like about just grabbing them and holding them. But I do. I think it's nice that they can just remember what the experience was, as they grow up. They might want to come back the following year, you know, because ultimately, it's about the parents. So the parents are the ones who might be following you and reading the reviews and checking out if this is something that they want to choose to bring their family to.

Liv:

Yeah, and if we're all building a dance audience if they come in love dance, because we're making these works, and that means I might go and see Merlin at Northern Ballet or something Matthew's made or Arthur, then that's good. We're just building a greater audience for all of us.

Melanie:

That's such a lovely way of putting it and it does take us back to another episode that we've done about relationship between artists and venue, because quite often, the venue is the gatekeeper of those audiences. And so this might be a frequent attendee of Sadler's Wells that happens to see your work at the Lilian Baylis because they come and find a children's show in the half terms or whatever. And it's whoever Sadler's Wells choose to put in that space that they see. Or it might be that they take the initiative and follow you around. And perhaps that leads me to my next question, which is about the potential of digital and I say my next question, and we're about to close. So this will be the last one. But I know that you've been working in this field Liv. And it strikes me as perhaps that hook between building to you as an artist that an audience might, if they're going to watch something that you've made than they are actually interacting with you as an artist, or your company, or your offer through perhaps your website, or whatever that might be or through an app. I just wonder what you felt about digital, particularly now that we've come out of a year of COVID, where we really have been relying on that. And whether you see that as a tool, whether it's something that you're playing with and how you feel about the experience of your work in that digital sphere, and perhaps whether it does offer you that opportunity to connect more personally with your audience. Liv, I know you've got a couple of films, haven't you on Marquee TV at the moment.

Liv:

Yes, we committed after the spring tour got cancelled, and then the autumn tour got cancelled again, my greatest desire was to keep the freelancers working and paid. That was everything. Because I've had most of my life being a freelancer. And I know exactly how harsh that is. And it's not just about the money, it's about the purpose and not feeling like as a dancer you've kind of lost a year. So we filmed at the Theatre Royal in Newcastle The Lost Happy Endings and we rejigged the choreography so that it was socially distanced. And we did all the safety measures that we could and we recast some things in marriage bubbles, or partnership bubbles or family bubbles. And that ended up with something we're very proud of. Ben Crompton filmed it with Vilte Balciunaite, who's our digital officer. So it's very much a kind of family enterprise, it was a company thing, we weren't funded lots of money to get it done by The Space or anything in this instance. And it was I think, every bit as good as the time we have been. We did Rumpelstiltskin with The Space in 2017, which was really successful. And that's on Marquee TV and Sky Arts as well. We've also made lots of little homemade films with iPhones. And I think that's also incredibly creative and rewarding. And what I love about the digital sphere is that it can reach the audience that I care about very much who cannot for reasons of geography, or finance, or disability gets to the theatre. That means that it is more widely available for less money and to be watched in its own time. And also the dancers are so good close up. And I think that the storytelling and the visual nature of the work translates incredibly well to the digital medium. Now all of us I have to say, though, can't wait to perform live again. That is where our heart leads, and that relationship is unmet for this last year. So we long for that moment again, all of us. But in the meantime, this has been an interesting substitute that's helped us keep

going and keep the company together. And I'm sure we will continue that now. Always alongside our live touring works

Melanie:

Lovely, that's so exciting. How about you Arthur? Are you playing around with any of those?

Arthur:

Yeah, at Christmas time, we were scheduled to go on and do the Little Match Girl on the main stage, which was exciting for us. And the day before opening, I think we went into tier three or tier four where just about everything was like axed. But luckily, we had plans to film it in a very nice way, which is commissioned by Sadler's Wells, which will come out later this year. And then also, we tried an experiment, which was the VR with virtual reality. Now, the technology is quite new. So it's not quite there yet, I would say. But if you get the right proximity, it's fantastic. And what's wonderful about that is that once you put on the goggles, it's like you're sitting in the front row of the theatre. And it's not like there's an edit, you're watching it in real time. And you can move your head wherever you want to, like you would when you're watching the show. So we're going to release that. It's an experiment and we're going to see how it goes. But it does mean that there is a way to possibly get that to remote areas to maybe children in hospitals, to places where people just might not be able to have access to an actual theatre, but to have a theatrical experience. And I think and I hope that once this technology develops and becomes much more of a norm, that they'll just be like the headpieces in most households, that people will be able to access more theatre. It's amazing, I put it on and I was like, well, it feels like I'm sitting in the best seat at Sadler's Wells, and you're watching a show in real time. So it's an exciting technology. But there's just a little bit about the quality that they're still working towards getting it but I'm very excited because like Liv was saying there's nothing better than the actual live experience. And of course, for family audiences, I mean, you just need to look on Netflix and Amazon Prime to go to the kids section to see how many amazing, beautiful full productions there are. But live is live. And that's what we're doing. And I don't know about you Liv but the moment you start thinking about translating something onto the screen, you're like, oh, but could we have a bit more of that. And then eventually what you start dreaming is the full Hollywood budget that you really want to just make actually then you just go Well, why don't we just actually make the actual proper film.

Melanie:

It is interesting because we watched, my family and I watched I Want My Hat Back on the National over Christmas, because again, you know these things, we've always used theatre as a way of punctuating school holidays in particular. I usually go a little bit to town at Christmas, I'll have to admit and book, anything that's going and of course, that was absent. So and I didn't know how well my children would really go for watching stage on film. And it wasn't brilliantly filmed. Because I think it really was one of the archive, you know, we've recorded this just so we remember, it wasn't made for film. And you could see what you were missing. Because you could see those moments where

the cast, you know, either go into the audience or talk to the audience, and you just wished you were in that front row. And so that kind of technology that you're talking about Arthur could be magical couldn't it, really exciting. Another of to people to bring it to life.

Arthur:

I think so, yeah. Because it's different to like the manipulation of editing and, and all of that is already a whole different thing because you're making decisions for your audience. But the interesting about the VR is that isn't there. So you're really watching it in real time, which is fascinating. You sit in it in a different way, which is interesting.

Melanie:

Well listen, there is so much more we could talk about. But I have had you here for an hour with me, which I've enjoyed every minute. It's been so fascinating finding out about your work. So it feels like a good place to stop for now. And perhaps we'll have you back to continue another time. So if you would 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 Liv and Arthur, 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 and do join us next time for more Talking Moves.

Liv:

Thank you.

Melanie:

Thank you so much.

Arthur:

Thank you so much for having us.

Melanie:

It was magical hearing about it.

Liv:

Thank you. It's been fun. Thank you