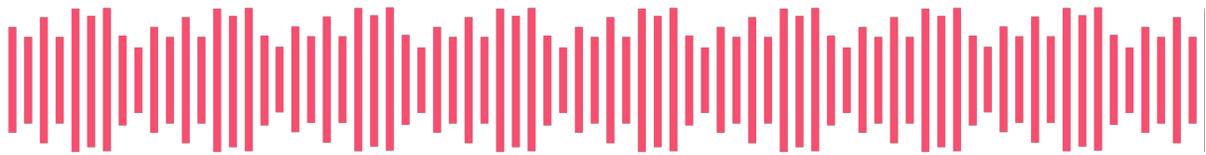


TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

Celebrating Diversity with Dance **S04 / E03**

Episode Description

In this episode, we talk to **Vicki Igbokwe** and **Shane Shambu** about Celebrating Diversity with Dance.

The two artists we invited to take part in this episode each make extraordinary, distinct work using an original voice. We ask them about where their work takes its influence, how they have been able to make it, find audiences for it and how free they are to experiment with it.

We start off by exploring Vicki and Shane's beginnings – discovering how they found dance and where and how they learned their craft. Then we touch upon the first of many similarities between these two inspirational artists – their three 'e's – empower, entertain and educate... and how these same values infiltrate into every decision they make about the work they craft and the people they aim to serve through the making of it.

I share my perspective as a white woman, watching Vicki's *The Head Wrap Diaries* and Shane's *Confessions of Cockney Temple Dancer*, and how I found myself gaining another perspective on the world. I ask our guests "is this intentional – are you trying to share an aspect of your cultural heritage? Or is there something else driving the telling of these stories?" The answer is complex and simple at the same time. Our guests tell stories about life as they see it and experience it. The want and need for the sector, myself included, to stereotype artists and 'stamp' their work with a label we think we understand is something that has to change if we are ever going to let artists be truly free to make the work inside them.

We talk about authenticity and freedom to explore... how free did Vicki and Shane feel to explore movement language and stories and how necessary or helpful is the concept of 'authenticity'?

Finally, we talk about curiosity and conversation and the ways in which both artists float between cultural boundaries and expectations, how they draw the audience into their work and just how much they dislike the post-show talk!

Talking Moves is a Greenwich Dance production

Presented by Melanie Precious

Production by Carmel Smith, Lucy White and Melanie Precious

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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 that move them. I'm Melanie Precious and in this episode we're talking about celebrating diversity through dance. And I'm joined by two artists who make extraordinary entertaining work with a very distinct and individual voice. And I'll be talking to them about where their work comes from, how they've been able to make it and find audiences for it and where they're going next. We have with us, Vicki Igbokwe, coach, choreographer, facilitator and movement director and the founder of Uchenna Dance, and Shane Shambhu, writer, director and choreographer, and creative director of multilingual theatre company, Altered Skin. Welcome, both of you. From Abu Dhabi and Shane, we didn't check, where are you calling in from today?

Shane:

Birmingham.

Melanie:

[Laughter] Loving the Zoom. So welcome both of you. So firstly, before we start exploring the work you make, I wondered if you might take me right back to the beginnings and describe to me how you found dance and where you learned your craft. And Vicki, I wondered if you'd start us off because I think I'm right in saying that you had no formal dance training. And I wondered how your journey in dance began?

Vicki:

Oh, gosh, I'll try not to take up all the time, Shane. So culturally, so both my parents are Nigerian, I'm Nigerian. So culturally movement, dance music celebration is just in everything that we do. So I remember from as young as like two or three years old, sometimes my mum would, you know, just put some music on and be like dance for me. And I would just be in the living room, just you know, having fun, you know. And she was also a part of like, lots of these like African women associations and the Nigerian women association where they'd have their meetings. And then when the meetings finished, it was almost like the husbands came out, the food came out, the music came out. And then there was a celebration afterwards. So I learned a lot of my moves from the aunties and my mum and the uncles. And then, you know, danced at school, I was always a person that they would come to for the like end of year choreography, but was never supposed to take it as a profession. Well, both my parents have passed, my dad was a barrister, my mum was a counsellor with the Labour Party. So I was supposed to either be a lawyer, a doctor, an engineer, or an accountant, because like, those were the options.

Melanie:

So that was it!

Vicki:

That was it. Pick one. So I was trying to pursue law to like, make my mum and dad happy and all of those things, but then realise that Yeah, that wasn't for me. So I started going to like classes. I remember doing this random project at The Place when I was like 14 or 15, my dance teacher at school, found this opportunity, explained it to my mum, she allowed him to go and do it. And then when I was 16, I was working in a jewellers and I remember speaking to my manager going, I think I want to be a choreographer, but I don't know what they do. Exactly. But I, I know they make dances that make people happy.

Melanie:

Ah, what a description.

Vicki:

Yeah, I was like, so I want to have some of that. And my manager was like, Yeah, sure, because clearly, that was not her world. I tried to do some A Levels to like, pursue law. It didn't happen. So I'm giving you the short version of it. Ended up going to Hammersmith and West London College did a BTEC in performing arts, and it was there my form tutor said, Oh, you've really got something with dance. I think you should go and study at university. And I was like, wait what? I can go to uni and study dance because now I believe my mum paid all of my teachers back then to not talk to me about the arts, because I had no idea.

Melanie:

Don't mentioned the D word!

Vicki:

Don't mention! I cuz I had no idea you could go to university and do any kind of performing arts let alone dance. So I ended up going to Middlesex University. So that was really like those three years were the any kind of real formal training. But it was great because my mum could brag to her friends that her daughter was in uni, but Shane, she would never ever say what I was studying. Just I was at uni. So it was like, we had the best of both worlds because I was doing something that I loved. And she could go yes, my daughter. She's at uni now. But that was it. That was it. She never went any further so, yeah, that was like my startings of getting into dance.

Melanie:

Oh my god, that's amazing. Shane top that! On your website, you describe your work as emerging out of an embodied knowledge of the Indian performing art of Bharatanatyam. So I wondered if you would talk us through your dance beginning.

Shane:

Yeah, it's just really interesting, because the parallels between Vicki's narrative and mine is just unbelievable, really, because there's the sort of real sense that sort of migrant community really have this sense that you have to study and you know, at the same time, I didn't have an accountant on my list. I had lawyer, engineer and doctor, I had three choices. But I mean, you went to study performing, I didn't get that opportunity. I mean, I got sent to these Indian dance classes because I was fat. That was the sort of the entry point for me like to go stamp on the floor for a bit. You're going to lose some weight. I just sort of fell in love with it. And there was a point when my Bharatanatyam teachers, spoke to my parents and said, we really think you should let him study dance in formal education. But my parents were really adamant that I should get a degree in a proper quotation mark subject. So I did go to university, but I studied all these subjects I was completely not interested in and then I the only way to describe this is I lost my way because I lost what was actually holding me close to myself. So I veered off track, and I got shipped off to India to get an arranged marriage, which is when I realised this is not for me, and I came back and then I got a job as supposedly...

Melanie:

Did you come back with a wife?

Shane:

No, no, no, I went in, my uncle set me up. I walked in through the doors, I sat down, this lovely woman and her family were there and she bought me tea, just like you see in those movies. And then they said, Do you want to speak to her? I said, Yes. And I went into the room. And I just said, I'm really sorry, in English and not in Malayalam, which is my parents language. And I departed. It was a it was a sort of moment when I... it landed, for me, really, that my parents cultural background is a fraction of me or is a small part of who I am really. So yeah, that journey of Bharatanatyam and taking it formally into a profession wasn't through education at all. I had a job as a marketing manager, which my dance teacher, my Bharatanatyam teacher set up for me because I had no other qualifications, essentially. And I sat there and it's interesting, Vicki was saying this, you were like sitting there in your job at the jewellers going, I wanna be a choreographer. And I sat there in this office, writing dance sequences, and I went, you know what, this is what I want to do. And so I took that leap of faith, really, it just went right, that's what I'm going to do. I mean, the rest is I could just say history. But I would to sort of lay out the complexities really coming from a culturally different art form. And fitting into the sort of arts landscape in Britain is very complicated and incredibly difficult. So even though I wanted to make that journey, I had to start teaching first and foremost. And so what am I teaching them, you know, what I've been passed on in teaching that to other students, but I'm not really enriching myself as an artist. In that process, I suppose there is an element of learning through the students and that sort of cyclical way, but not in terms of creative work. And it was when I left my teachers, which was another story on its own, because that relationship is quite a complex, integrated relationship with your teacher. It's more than just a teacher, actually, it's sort of family, I call my teachers, Uncle and Auntie, but I had to kind of rip myself out of that situation and start my journey afresh really.

Vicki:

Wow.

Melanie:

Gosh those are incredible stories to start us off with. And you've already noticed a synergy in yourself. And when I was looking at your websites, you both named the same three E's as driving your work, which was Empower, Entertain and Educate they were there in black and white. So I wondered if you'd just talk to me about those and how those have emerged from that background, that you've just painted that picture of. How they're informing your work, and perhaps the messages that you're trying to convey in your work. Shane, you look like you're about to speak.

Shane:

Yeah I was going to say I saw Vicki's website and I thought that looks really good I'm going to take that. [Raucous laughter] I just switched it around a little bit.

Vicki:

He's lying! We're just so connected!

Melanie:

Yeah, I think you are. So tell us about them then. How did you come to them? And how did they come through your work?

Shane:

I don't think there's one thing I think that's the first thing to say is the journey informs those what I would call pillars that enable the work or drive the work. And I think entertain is incredibly important, because we know that we are trying to engage an audience but engage is a very broad term. And so entertain seemed a much clearer idea of what was being achieved in a space. I mean, I'm summing these up. Educate in terms of the work I'm developing one and I'm hoping we will touch on this later is I felt it's important to share not just a cultural art form that I come from, with audiences that might not know much about it, but also the sort of history that underpins that and how you translate that through performance work, but also in education. It's not just about sharing that information. It's dismantling the education that they've been given through education in a sense, and empowerment is really the voices that I feel I'm working with and want to bring forward or find a connection with each other that are marginalised are often not spoken about, and especially in terms of race, culture, language, those kind of drive me really.

Melanie:

Vicki you're nodding through that.

Vicki:

Yeah, I can just fully co-sign everything that Shane's just said and really just adding I think we've both spoken in a way where it's not been conventional, you know, like masses and masses of formal training or dancing professionally from the age of, you know, two or three and also part of my story is, you know, I think I've said both my parents have passed. My dad passed when I was a lot younger. My mum passed when I was 28. But at the age of 14, I became her carer, because at the age of 14 is when she kind of went on this journey of up and down with illness. And I'm the oldest of four girls in total. So there was also something about dance going from solely being culture and just what was around me all the time to actually being a lifeline. And the thing that enabled me to remember that I was a teenager, I was 14, I was 15, I was 16. Because at those ages, I was doing the work of like, you know, two parents, and making sure mum was okay, and running the home to a certain degree with the help of carers. So there was something in it for me as well, where I'm just looking back at life. And it's not like I had a terrible life. I'm not saying that. But with those challenges at a young age of just going actually, dance was the thing that totally gave me life and empowered me to go... my mum always used to say, Don't allow your past or your present to really like dictate your future, don't

become a statistic, just because your dad is not here. And now you know, I'm a woman on my own looking after you, whatever it is that you want to do, you can make it happen, if you can see it, then there is a way to make it happen. So empowerment, for me is a big thing. Because with every person, whether it's through something like this that we're doing now, if it's through teaching a workshop, if it's through a show, I really want every individual that I connect with, that the company connects with to really understand that their potential is like you're limitless in anything that you want. A lot of the time, it's the mind and the mindset that sets us back or the way that we've been raised or whatever. So for me, actually, it was the empowerment comes first before you know the art form and the entertainment. It's something about connecting with people and them seeing the work or experiencing a workshop and going you know what I am great, I can do this, I should really sink into what my heart desires and roll with that and allow that to move me forward. And that's why Empower for me and for the company comes first. So that empowerment, just on a basic level, it's like we can all get to the places that we want to get to. But we have to feel good about ourselves. And it's only when we start to feel good about ourselves, the things we're trying to do. I'll never say they're easy, but they become easier. And that's the driving force for me. The art form and that's all secondary. It's like, I want people because I think when you feel good about yourself, you do good. And not only do you do good, but the people around you do good because I also believe it's a ripple effect. I want for every one person that we touch through our work to go and share that amazing energy that they received with another two people and those two people to share with another two people. The entertainment Yeah, it's like, listen, we're not performing brain surgery and all of this stuff. And again, not to like dumb down what it is we do. And it was also really a kind of an ode as well, because when I started there was this whole, you know, Is it art? Or is it entertainment and entertainment, it just felt like a real swear word. Or it felt like you know, the kind of poorer cousin, if someone wasn't talking about your work and going it's art, it's high art, you know, the whole high art, popular art and all of that. And I was like, No, we entertain, I want people to come and laugh and cry and go, Oh my gosh, and look to the person next to them that looks different to them and go, Wow, I didn't even know this, can we have a conversation afterwards in the bar, you know, bring communities together. And I believe that we can do that through laughter. We can do that through joy, even tackling some not so easy subjects. So there's something in terms of that entertainment, and just what that brings and community and bringing people together. And then yes, the education part as well. You know, we do lots of work within formal education, but also informally, as well. So there's that element of it. And then again, in a similar way to what Shane was talking about is also just the education in terms of the art forms that we use, you know, the social dances, the club styles, the traditional African styles, mainly west African styles for me. But yeah, so that, for me, it's like, I feel I know, I've been put on this earth to enable the people that I am blessed to connect with, to see the full potential in their life. Dance happens to be the language that I've chosen to do it. And that yeah, just encapsulates in terms of those three Es.

Shane:

It's really so beautiful, Vicki, I just wanted to just sort of pick up on the education fact because I know you were talking about art forms are not important for you and it's about the spirit of the person and being and I kind of resonate with that. But I also recognise that the art form that I do

come from has a specific identity. And I feel that is a burden for me sometimes. And so for me, the education is the front or the connecting point, because it's about shifting that perception of what it is. I don't know if you often feel burdened by the fact that I come from a classical Indian dance background because the expectation is, oh, there's going to be some Indian dance gestures and there's definitely going to be the... you know, it's a cultural creative trademark that's kind of given to an Indian dancer it's what's expected of me and it's only through having to then explain that not all the time about the art form, but investigate it in new ways and start to shift that slowly can I make that change and become as you put it, that sort of liberated feeling of no art form, which I think is actually a very Eurocentric standpoint, these sort of categories, essentially, of artistic disciplines. I think across the globe, Asiatic art forms definitely don't have that sort of denomination of artistic genre.

Vicki:

Yeah, no, I Yeah, fully identify.

Melanie:

I love the way two are playing around with the meaning of those words and how they're playing out for you in the way that your work is being produced and portrayed. I love that idea that you had Shane of using the word entertain instead of engage. We're so used to saying engage and it sounds like such a knitted knotted Arts Council, you know, funding proposal language, we're so used to using it. Community is another one I've got an issue with, but I don't know another word to use for that. But I love kind of replacing that with entertain and thinking about what that actually means. And like you say driving that idea of fun coming through. And with that in mind, really, I wanted to talk about two of your pieces from my perspective as a white woman, your work The Headwrap Diaries, Vicki and Shane, your piece Confessions of a Cockney Temple Dancer both gave me an opportunity to gain an insight into a part of your lives that I had no knowledge of. And actually both of those as I did, so were fun. Also, I learned about Afro hair wraps. And Shane, I learned about the complexity that you were straddling of a life where you felt British at school with your friends and South Asian at home, with your family. And so for those works, they appeared to share an aspect of your cultural heritage. But I wondered if that was their purpose, or how you feel as the authors of those work about that perception of mine in the audience. Vicki, how does that play out for you?

Vicki:

Oh, gosh. I mean, making The Headwrap Diaries started because of a journey that I was going on with my hair. So you know, I guess from like, maybe 16/17, I started with relaxers, which for anyone that doesn't know is like a chemical that you put in your hair to make it as bone straight as possible. And then went through a season of like braiding the hair, but basically wearing my hair in all styles, except for the natural one, like just the natural way that the hair grows out of my head and tries to touch the sun. And in 2014 I had just got my hair done in long braids. Anyone who knows the artist

Brandy, her kind of like classic look. I'd just got my hair done. And anyone who knows how long the investment in time that it is to do that. It could be anything up to eight hours that you're sitting...

Melanie:

Wow with someone pulling at your head.

Vicki:

Yeah, you could Eurostar and back I think, you know, a couple of times, I'm not sure exactly what the length of the journey is. But I remember telling someone and they went, Yeah, I could have gone to Paris and back again, twice. I was like, Yeah, I get it. And then I think a couple of days later, I was at a friend's house. And we were watching an American award show called Black Girls Rock and a celebration of black women in the States, black women in all their glory. So natural hair, black women that were being celebrated in all areas, not just entertainment for the amazing work that they're doing for the people and the communities around them. And I remember turning to my friend, her name is Selma, Selma Nicholls and I remember turning to Selma, and I just said, the next time you see me, I'm not going to have these braids in I'm going to go natural. And she looked at me and she went, but you just got your hair done because she knows the investment that's just been made. And I went I know but just watching the plethora of black women in all of their beauty. Something just hit me, evoked like a real emotion. And the next day I was staying at my aunt at this time, I woke up and just started chopping these braids out and remember my aunt coming in going? Are you okay? Didn't your friend just do your hair a few days ago? I was like yes Auntie I'm going natural. And that started the journey of The Headwrap Diaries because when I took the braids out, I then was looking at my hair going. I could care for my hair relaxed. I could care for my hair in braids, but I had no idea how to care for my hair, just in its natural state. Called another friend, an amazing woman called Sheila Atta and was like Sheila, okay, I've taken my braids out but I have no... what, what products do I need? And it just started this journey and like with anything, you know, if you say you want to change your diet or stop smoking or get active or learn an instrument, you start to realise there are other people in the world who were going on a similar journey to you. So you know, the people I was following on social media, the videos I was watching the conversations I was happening and just one day I thought okay, Vicki, you're really not that special. You won't be the only black woman that's going through this journey in terms of her hair. And then what happened was because I was learning how to do my natural hair some days I would wake up and like you know take I do like these little twist or they call them bantu knots, but when I was younger, we call them china bumps and I would take my hair out, and I'd go, that doesn't look like the picture that I was trying to emulate. So then what I would do was just take a piece of some of my mom's African cloth, you know, culturally, we wrap our hair, and I would just wrap my hair and go, okay, my hair didn't quite work. So it went from wrapping my hair and a bit of shame, because the hairstyle I was trying to make happen didn't happen. And something that process that I didn't even know was really happening to me went from shame into adornment. It went from shame into I'm actually putting this crown on my head. And then it became a real like, statement in terms of just like, how I would get ready. And then I did, like I said, that I just thought, Well, yeah, I can't be the only one. And then the title came first,

The Headwrap Diaries. And then I decided, like, I wanted to make a show that I was very clear, because also I started to find out there was a little bit of like hierarchy within the natural hair communities, but that this was a time when I started learning about like hair types. So you can go from like, 1 A, which is straight, kind of like that typical European standard long, no kinks, no curls right through to 4 C which I am, which is like tight curls, kinky, like, get the comb in there, you got it like softly, softly to like detangle it and I was like, Oh my gosh, then there was a whole thing with that. And I just remember going I want to make this show. But actually, it's not a show that's going to kind of get on the soapbox and go. Because that's what I started to hear, Oh, if you're not natural, you don't love yourself. Black women who don't have natural hair, they don't love themselves. They're trying to be white. They're trying to be European. And I was like, No, I want to make a show that 1: celebrates the diversity of black women celebrates the versatility of our hair. Because actually, that's one of our superpowers. You could see me seven days a week if I was this kind of black woman, and every day have a different style that is a superpower of ours, the versatility of our hair. And as I started doing the research, I realised, yes, I've got a particular perspective as a black woman. But actually, when I was speaking to women, I realised also with women, what I wanted the show to do. So it was celebrate diversity of black women, celebrate the versatility of Afro hair, and empower all women to love their hair. Because then as we started making the show, I remember there was an older white lady who came up to me in the foyer and she said, Oh my gosh, you know, I don't have the hair texture. But what your show is made me question is why did why she was dyeing her hair every six weeks. So she was like, Why do I just not embrace the grey? Yeah, so that was the starting point. And then, you know, as the show was happening, it very quickly became apparent that it was a universal topic. But you know, if anything, you know Mel, Shane, you will know if you try to speak to too many people, no one knows you're talking to them. So we made a conscious choice. As a creative team, we were creative team of black women. So we were going to tell the stories that we knew first-hand, our own experiences, our aunties, our sisters, even the experiences of uncles and husband, like watching wives and sisters get their hair done, and find a way to share that culture of black women in terms of African and Caribbean cultures. And also something that is universal so that any woman and men cuz I actually remember one guy coming up to me going, my girlfriend dragged me to see your show. And I'm so glad she did. Because actually, I feel like I've got to know her better. And like the women in his life, so yeah, that's a little bit intended.

Melanie:

I found a quote, Vicki, I think it's in your tour pack. A man said, I'm white. I'm a man. I'm bald, but I get it. I absolutely love.

Vicki:

And I remember, he was like, six foot no hair. And he was just like, yeah, I'm white, I'm a man. I'm bald. But, I totally get it. I was like, Can we quote you? He was like, Yeah, this show is amazing.

Melanie:

But I love that nugget that you've just bought in which you said very quickly, and I'm going to repeat just so I remember it. But you said if you don't say who you're talking to them, nobody thinks you're talking to them. So you just channelled that work to the audience you were talking to, but as you did, so you made it universal?

Vicki:

Yeah.

Melanie:

I want to remember that. Because that's such an incredible little thought to have in our toolkits, I think as we're thinking about what engagement means and what entertainment means, as you said Shane. How did your show come about?

Shane:

I mean, it's funny because the central thread of Confessions is actually about hair because I've got none Vicki. [Laughter] I'm sitting here going, I miss my hair.

Vicki:

Oh bless you!

Shane:

So I mean it didn't start with hair admittedly. For me, Confessions was a continuation of my work, really, that had happened up to that point. And I suppose the work prior to that I had created kind of propelled me to create the work because I had created a work... I did say this earlier on. I grew up in East London. And so the majority of friends I had around me were from different cultural background, but actually there weren't many white people around so that wasn't on my radar so much. So for me the whole sort of world of the arts is unfamiliar. I come from working class background, my parents didn't take me to theatre, they don't know what it is. And so, for me, I'm still navigating that journey as much as I am understanding how my Bharatanatyam language fits into the landscape. And so when it came to understanding my work, I got to a point where I got excited, I created this work in 2014, which is quite politically charged, which was called Power Games about a stock trading banker, and his life is witnessed through a reality TV game show and the audience get to decide what happens to him. Except they don't because the game was rigged, but a lot of people didn't get it. And a lot of questions arose about why you're not talking about your cultural identity. Why is it about this banker and why you're not talking about your Asian-ness? And I kind of felt quite angry about that, really, because why am I kind of in a position to always talk about my cultural identity, I don't have to talk about that. But there's this imposition expectation for me to do so. So I kind of had to go there. And then I realised that that experimentation in that piece was exploring my

Bharatanatyam language along with my theatre experience, a kind of movement language, that was an accumulation of my lived experiences of different art forms. And it didn't, is suppose gel, because I was working with different bodies and didn't know how to translate what I had embodied onto other bodies. So there was a process I needed to go through, I didn't actually develop it enough because I needed more time with it. And so I realised that programmers, promoters, audiences didn't really understand where my investigation was and how I'm working with my art form. And secondly, they just want me to talk about my cultural identity. And how can I challenge that. So when I started on Confessions, it was actually a lecture demonstration about what Indian dance is and how I use it, and what the sort of tenets of the form are and how you can utilise them in different ways. And I performed that on top of a pub - The Lion and Unicorn with a festival called go live, which Donald Hutera curated. And it's only a 20 minute snip, but as I was there, I was just making up some stuff because I didn't prepare properly. And I started making some jokes just to sort of fill the time and the audience were laughing. So I thought actually, this is quite good. I'm getting a response here from something. So I've held on to that. And then I moved it forward from there, really, but I kind of let the process of exploring my artistic language to understand how I would translate that to other bodies inform the work and what I'm actually speaking about, which became about cultural identity, but challenging the expectations placed upon me, but through humour. And so that kind of evolved really, and it's a kind of double edged sword, because on one hand, I'm talking about wanting to represent the art form by being a burden. On the other side, I'm kind of saying it's horrible, and it's really bad, the way that is taught and the way it is in this country and how it's passed on. And then also about how programmers, promoters respond to an artist like me and the struggles I have to endure. And yeah, so that's where the work came from. And I suppose sort of the hair thing, Vicki, really, for me was a universal theme that actually that sense of when it disappears, you don't have it anymore, which you have lovely hair both of you. But when you lose it, there's this nostalgia that you want it, it's part of you still when I think that's what I kind of held on in the work.

Melanie:

I can really empathise with that immense responsibility you feel of staying true to the cultural heritage that you have and your own. And then that feeling that you have to be the sort of flagpole holder for it, I suppose. And one of the things that we talked about Shane when we were talking in preparation for this was about authenticity, and how authentic you need to be. And you talk on your website about being curious and how that inquisitive nature has led you to explore outside of that known language that you have. And I wondered whether you could tell us a little bit more about what you found, as you explored that where is that taking you as you sort of carry your training this incredible knowledge you have of an art form, which you said earlier was a... What did you call it a cultural trademark?

Shane:

Cultural creative trademark

Melanie:

I love that. Because is that wanted? Or is that imposed?

Shane :

I think we will come to that. Yeah, I'm sorry. Did you want to...

Melanie:

...finish my question? It's a really evolving question, isn't it but it's just how does that feel to have all of that training to have that incredible knowledge that we perhaps as programmers come to you for but then also wanting that freedom to explore outside of that training and break down those boundaries and go where your curiosity is taking you, as you said, on that website? Where is that inquisitiveness coming and how does that feel as you navigate that? And perhaps I don't know whether your next work tells us more about that, because I think you're exploring male parenthood, aren't you? So I suppose it is still coming from an embodied experience that you own but it doesn't perhaps carry that trademark in so much of a way or maybe it does, perhaps you can tell us a bit about that.

Shane:

Wow, okay. [Laughter]

Vicki:

You alright there Shane?

Shane:

Yeah, I'm processing it might take the 45 minutes to process. I'll start with authenticity because I don't know about you Vicki and Melanie actually it's a slightly problematic word for me because we understand Yeah, we understand authenticity. But I think what we don't talk about is authenticity shifts in relation to context. So you know, you're authentic in relation to the context you're in, whether that's the geography, whether that's, I'm speaking to you two, though there's an authenticity that comes here. That is true. But it's not the same authenticity in a different context. And so what do we mean by authenticity? And what are people expecting from authenticity, and I always boil it down to the true self. I've got some notes here, because it confuses me a little bit. I think the true self is something that's only ever felt it's invisible. And so when we talk about it in terms of artistic practice, it's not what we see it's what we feel through the experience. And that's what I mean by authenticity. And for me, coming from a very specific cultural creative trademark, I think this can be problematic, because the expectation is that there is some Indianness quotation marks in it.

Melanie:

That you have to have in every piece is that what you mean?

Shane:

You don't have to no one's suggesting that. But it's something that's lived that you feel is expected of you. And so when you're trying to be honest with yourself, when you're creating, there's that voice externally going, but this is what's expected of you, and you're trying to sort of go, I don't want to do that. And that's a constant struggle. And I think it is a direct result of the colonial enterprise, to be honest. If we think of art in terms of you know, we go to theatres, there are tickets people are paying, it fits into that capitalist model now, and that's how we live in our world. And so that is a direct result of the colonial enterprise. So when we talk about Asian art forms, or African art forms, there is a specific idea and cultural framework, which that represents. And so if you don't represent that, are you then not authentic?

Melanie:

Yeah.

Shane:

Is the question, really, and I don't know the answers to these, I struggle with it a lot. I mean, the only way I can personally do this is start to systematically break down the Indian dance language I'm trained in and start to investigate in new ways. So that I know that the investigation is taking me somewhere. And it's not about pandering to the expectation. But I've gone through that journey to arrive there. But that's a lot of extra work that some others don't have to do. Vicki's just nodding.

Vicki:

I'm like, Brother, you are speaking all the truth right now. Because you know, some of our peers and counterparts just have the luxury of going in and making what you want. And if no one gets it, it's fine. I'm being a bit like, provocative now. You go and you sell the show, you get 10 people in the audience, but you know what, they will still get booked again, they will still get the opportunities. And there's so many things as you were speaking, Shane, I'm just like nodding, because I know the audience will not see that. Like I remember in the early days of making work, I was making work for the programmer for the venue, for the producer, which you will know, is impossible to please everybody. And the moment that I said, Okay, enough is enough. I can't be a bad copy of one of my white European counterparts. That's not my vibe. So for me, in terms of like authenticity, the way I look is actually just being my true self. Yes. You know, there may be times you know, I'm currently in Abu Dhabi. So culturally, there were certain things that I could do in London, or were in London that I wouldn't necessarily do here. No one is going to trouble me. But I'm also then just aware that I'm in a different, you know, surrounding, but I'm still me, and you know, drawing on and who I am. So for me, there was a moment where I said, I want to make the work that if I wasn't in this industry, and I

saw the flyer in front of me, I'd be like, I want to go and see that. So I had to start with me first, then it was about finding a team of people who saw the vision, you know, and again, you'll know this, Shane, who come in with their own expertise who will be like right we'll add and put the layers on to make that happen? Because there was a point for me where like, I get told all the time, oh, yeah, your work is for black audiences. I'm like my friend, were in the marketing pack does it tell you that this show is for black audiences? When I go to watch all of these shows, and it's white cast mainly, I'm not sitting there going, Oh, I can't be here. This is for white audiences. But the moment you have an all black or all Asian, it's suddenly pigeon holed. The amount of times promoters have gone, Yes, we'll see how we can get hold of our black audiences. And we're going no, why don't you just connect with all of your audience? Why don't you just connect with all of your audience and let them choose because I'm sure you will have some who are curious, who want to see something other than your best mate that you programme year in, year out? Because if I go back and look at your three previous seasons, I'm seeing the same names. And so even that just having those conversations and having to have them on a regular basis, and only after like even with doing The Headwrap Diaries, I won't name the name of the venue because it's a well known one, but I remember our marketing person and their marketing person having to go back and forth. And in the end, I said I need to step in, as director of the company just have this conversation because they were doing all sorts, they were trying to get a local black community group to come in. And with The Headwrap Diaries, we have like a head wrap bar that we do after the show when we have like an exhibition before. And they were like telling us that all this local community group had said, Oh, no, we shouldn't. Basically, they would like rearranging our format of how we presented the night. And I was like, Listen, I don't care who black person that you have now gone to as an expert on Uchenna Dance and our work. But I'm telling you, this is the package we're offering you. And this is how it's delivered. And you're like number 20, something on this tour, but I was having to justify the work and the way in which it was delivered, because this producer has just gone, it's for black people. So we just need to go and find our black audiences that actually we're not even really engaging. So there's something in there for me where I was going... But then at the same time, because of the expectation I was going, I don't want to change the way that I cast I don't want to change the type of people that I work with so that more doors can open because the door should open regardless. The work is the work. And you know, even if you don't get an inside joke in the work, because you know, one of the questions when I'm making work, and we're in a bit of a feedback session, one of the questions I always ask is, if you were lost in the storyline, or something didn't make sense, what else kept you engaged? Because there's an music, there's costume, you know, if there's a bit of spoken word in it, there's accent, you know, there's so many other layers to it. So feel like I've rambled a little bit, but as you were speaking, Shane, I was just going Yes, yes, yes, there's so much pressure to be the spokesperson for Africa, and be the spokesperson for blackness. And then also, when we talk about identity, like I was born in Nigeria, but I've actually only spent like a year 18 months, tops of my life there. I'm raised here in the UK. So my cultural heritage and identity is a unique blend of the two. Yeah, like sometimes my family back home will laugh when I go, I'm Nigerian, they go my sister, you're British. And I'm like no no no! Do you know, I mean, so that even this thing of like, our identities are only the Asian or the black. It's like Shane what you're talking about growing up in East London and that cultural mix, it all forms who we are. But again, there's this expectation that we just have to show the most like, ethnic side of it.

And I'm like, no, because then actually, then I wouldn't be being authentic, because I'm a melting pot of all of these experiences.

Melanie:

Yeah.

Shane:

Just what you're saying. But I mean, it's just really, I'm so pleased you are agreeing with me. I'm not happy that you've experienced it but...

Vicki:

Yeah, no, I know what you mean.

Shane:

I think it is felt across an artist's journey. I think we all are confronted with this expectation, but that is directly coming from institutions and organisation and those who hold those value systems. And I think one of the most problematic things in finding that voice and finding yourself as an artist is programming slots, because there are a plurality of voices within any given culture. But somehow we only have one representative for a culture. And so they will go on to and God forbid there should be you know, two Black artists at the time or, you know, it's just like, oh, no, no, we've got to be united colours of Benetton. You know, we've got one of everything. I mean, in some ways, I kind of value the representation, and actually it is represented, but how are we celebrating diversity in its broadest terms, in terms of the plurality of voices, the different ways in which artists explore themselves even though their cultural language or cultural histories may be similar? We won't ask the same questions of artists who don't have that cultural history that is outside of Britain the same thing. We accept their individual journeys, but somehow our I'm saying collectively, as artists of colour, have an expectation placed on us that we are lumped together to represent and it's a huge challenge when it comes to that authenticity, because how do you find your authenticity when the system itself isn't allowing for that individuality to surface and rise and be celebrated?

Vicki:

Yeah, and actually and the system and the people that are in those places of power making the decisions, I'm just gonna say it, don't have a bloody clue. Don't understand the nuance. Another amazing artist Alesandra Seutin. Like she's like a sister to me. And we had to have the conversation between the two of us which basically short version was, we are not each other's competition, because when we started, and then we became friends, it was almost like, oh, yeah, well, if Vocab and Alesandra are on Oh, well, we can't have Vicki and Uchenna. And when you look at and I'm just using her as an example, because she's a very good friend of mine. When you look at our work, there

were some similarities. And there are lots of differences. So you can have Vicki and Alesandra. You can have Uchenna and you can have Vocab on and guess what you're going to get to vary different pieces of work that will emote and bring themes and stories and conversations. But again, those that are in those power positions don't have this sophistication when it comes to and I'm just going to say our work because I can't think of anything better to understand. Vicki provides something, Alesandra provides something, Shane provide something. And you know what? That could be a beautiful season of work.

Shane:

Absolutely.

Vicki:

But no, as you said, what happens is it's like, oh, well, we've got Alesandra. So we've got our one. And so sorry, Shane, sorry, Vicki, sorry, everyone else. Get back in contact with us, do you know what I, mean in six months. But then I look at those programmes and I'm seeing contemporary companies more like Western traditional, however you want to call it and I'm going, it's the same thing. Just the costumes are different. So why is it good?

Melanie:

Over and over.

Vicki:

Yeah. Why is it good? And I'm being a bit provocative. You know, me, I'm about love for everyone. But it's just like, why is that afforded to one group, and then with another group, it's like, no, sorry, talk amongst yourselves, you got to decide which one of you wants this opportunity, and the others are gonna have to wait.

Shane:

And just to build on and come back to that cultural creative trademark I spoke about earlier, because I think that thinking of programming is also colonial thinking in that it's a British thing of divide and rule. If you cluster people together, you rule them. And so it's a competition. By putting us into a bracket, you are as competitors fighting for the same bit of food, and we can carry on doing the art, you fight. And it's hugely problematic because we are working to survive, we need income streams. And so if you're then fighting with each other, I don't know who that's benefiting. I really, really genuinely I don't know he's not helping audiences is not helping the artist is not helping cultural integration. So what is it actually doing? And I've failed to understand why I can't sort of be general about this. But there are programmers who are failing to listen to artists of colour

specifically, or ability or difference even of how those voices are individual and how to celebrate that individuality.

Melanie:

How free do you both feel, to completely step away from what is expected of you? You've talked about expectation a lot. And I think in your explanation of your work on *Altered Skin*, Shane, when you say exploration of language and identity, floating between and beyond cultural boundaries and expectations. And I wondered how free you felt if a programmer was to come to you to commission your work to step away from that completely? Or do you always feel that you are expected to bring Vicki African dance, Shane Bharatanatyam dance into your work? Can you just step away from that, if you so chose.

Vicki:

I would do it. And it's so funny that you said to me African dance. I have to say this as well, you know, unlike Shane, that has an extensive training within Bharatanatyam and your cultural dances, out of all of the styles, so we use house dance, whacking Vogue, contemporary and, you know, West African influences out of those five styles that I really love the African dance, and I'm just going to do that like general term is the one I've got the least formal training in.

Melanie:

It's just an element of...

Vicki:

Because it's part of my culture. I have grown up with it. It's in the food, it's in the music. It's in, you know, the weddings, the funerals, the birth, the christening. So I'm just like, it boggles me. So I always first of all, sometimes if I am speaking with like, a promoter that's doing this, Oh, you do this African house? I'm like, well, actually, it's the one that I'm trained the least in, but it's part of who I am. But in terms of going back to your question, Mel, and I think it really links in terms of like authenticity. For me, I do the best work, when I focus in on the story I want to tell. And I think about how I want my audience to feel at the end of it. And that's knowing that every person that comes in is going to see different things. But that's another thing that I always have with the collaborators, how we want the audience to feel what's the message, we go with that first. Whatever comes up in the studio, I'm not going oh, we need to have a whacking section. And we need to put house in that. No, that is a part of the movement vocabulary that through my training and travelling to New York specifically and working with some of the pioneers in these club styles. And then the training that I received from Middlesex University, and then culturally, like, I just have this unique palette, this movement and when we're working, what comes up, do you know what I mean, is what comes out so for me now, if anything, because I've had a couple of like commissions where you know, they've come from companies or organisations where I'm not your usual type. So if anything what I've had to say is if

you want me to do what your usual type does, I think it's best you go and commission, one of them. Because I'm going to give you like unfiltered not edited, like all in its glory Vicki and Uchenna and because also and no offence to all my peers and counterparts, I really don't care what we think. Because actually the most important person, the most important feedback for me is the audience. I learned a long time ago to stop seeking feedback and validation from my peers and peers in all walks, all shades, all abilities, all of that stuff, because we know too much. We see too much. And actually, my thing is, you know, I remember one of the shows, we did at The Place of The Headwrap Diaries for those performances. And there was a woman that came up to me and I said to her, how did you find out about it? And it was either in the Metro or Time Out, something like that. And I was just curious, what was it about the show, you don't know us, and I can't remember something in the, you know, the text or whatever, that's who I'm interested in. That is who I'm concerned about. So it's like, if you want me, you're going to get me. And whatever that palette is, is whatever that palette is, but it's going to be a strong story. It's going to evoke emotion, it's going to evoke conversation. So you know, we were having this conversation a few years ago, I was absolutely trying to fit myself into wherever I thought the programmer in front of me wanted. Now I go, Listen, you're gonna get the real deal with Uchenna. Your audiences are gonna love it. Hopefully you will, too. And yeah, that's that.

Melanie:

I love that word palette that's just a different way instead of those boxes. It's a palette, isn't it of colours. I'm looking at time. But I've got another couple of questions I'd love to put to you. I'm going to pick up on audience in a second. But Shane, I just wanted to give you that opportunity to talk as well about that freedom. Do you feel you have freedom? Or is that expectation weighing you down?

Shane:

I think I'm in an incredibly lucky and privileged position to be able to turn down work like that. I mean, I recently got asked by a company in Ireland, if I'll do this choreographic work with the theatre company, I thought was interesting. What is it some story about this elephant in India or something? And I just thought, you know what, no, no, I know what you expect of me. And I know why you've come to me. No. I think you need to read about what I do. And actually, what I'm interested in is the cross cultural collaboration, integration of culture that excites me, I'm on board with that. So I am doing some other projects that are got nothing to do with my Bharatanatyam training, or actually my cultural heritage, even. It's just about the work. And for me, that's yeah, I feel lucky to be in that position. But I also think there's other things that are really as a sort of mixed economy artist, because I mean, obviously, we have to think about how we sustain ourselves as artists. And so I'm artistic associated at CAT, Yuva Gati so all my sort of vested interest in trajectory and young people and where they go is about investing in that CAT programme, where those students are and what is the trajectory? And how can I feed it my experiences and the barriers that were there and sort of dismount them for the next generation to be able to find a smoother pathway towards professional careers, and also sort of working on this festival called Unleashed, which is opening up that discussion around some of the conversations we're having now, you know, programming, what is

dance today, in the 21st century? How do we understand it? What are the artist struggles? And so those support me in being able to actually choose the work I do creatively.

Melanie:

Yeah, that brings me so neatly onto that audience and discussion. So Vicki, you talk about one of your motivations is the ambition that your work might nurture conversations amongst audiences from diverse backgrounds, building community cohesion. And Shane, you, as you say, have started that dialogue and conversation as well through this conference programme that you're running. And I wondered whether you could just tell me a little bit more about how you feel dance can play that role in conversation with the people that are watching your work. It's an absolute obsession of mine, as I try and find ways for Greenwich Dance to have those better conversations with our audience, just as you've both been saying. It's what we're all about. And I'm so interested in how we engage stroke, entertain, and because I'm trying to play around with that word, though, I just hate it. But it feels like it's one of the only ones that's there as part of our toolkit, but I'm fascinated by how we get thoughts, interactions, responses from those audiences and those communities for whom we're making this work. And I thought that your bars Vicki was such a brilliant mechanism of engaging that conversation, a twist on the post show talk. It's a bar where you are teaching people how to use wraps. But then I suppose as you do that conversation about all kinds of things that have been evoked in the work start to come about.

Vicki:

I have had, I think, along with the two three times that we've like toured that particular show every one that's on the road, so when I was on the road with it myself the performers, our company rep Viviana Rocha, we've all had a woman or person if it's not the woman that's going through it had like a reveal in terms of a cancer diagnosis, just through conversation and going, oh my gosh, you know, I'm in this stage of the journey with chemo or losing my hair. I remember there was one lady that was sharing with one of the performers and she was saying that she had been given like a bit of a rag to go Like, yeah, you know, tie up your hair up. And you know, that would be fine and watching The Headwrap Diaries suddenly gave her hope. And it brought colour and it brought life to her. So those, because you talked about the post show talk, I despise the post show talk. I'm just like, it's just really flat, the performers have just given their life to the audience. And from the beginning. And I remember we used to have pushback from some venues when we were like, just starting, doing like the first leg of the tour, and I was going, listen, post show talks are not where it's at. We've got this amazing bar, if you let because that's the other thing programmers would say to us, oh, people will just leave after the show. Yeah, but that's because you're not providing a reason for them to stay. So if they know beforehand, get here half an hour early and you're going to have this exhibition and images and hair texture. And they were you know, we'd like the smoothies and conversation. And then after the show, there's a head wrap bar where you can get to play. Within the show, you see all of these different styles. And with some of them, we purposefully don't give you like the full way to do it. Because then we go, when we come out into the bar, that's when we can have those conversations. So many venues are like no, no, no, no. And we are just like will you just trust us.

Because we've been on the road with this, we know how this works. If people have a reason to stay, they will say. 10 times out of 10, the venue is having to go okay, people, you need to leave now. The music's gone off. So for me, and again, there was something in that thing about authenticity, and just being bold and going yes, this is how we've done it for years, a post show talk, audience sitting in their seats, performers, and choreographer and whoever on the stage. But what happens if we just get rid of that space and just be up close, and personal. And also, I have to say as well, I've had some like amazing conversations with audiences, there has been some amazing headwrap specialists, even as performers, we've picked up a new ways of wrapping hair. So for me, it was very important to move away from the way it has been done and go, if I really want to hear what the audience has to say, in a post show talk and I am generalising a little bit, you're only going to get the most confident of being in that space. Like my cousin. She's very confident. She's a manager, she manages teams, but being in that theatre realm, that's not her bag.

Melanie:

Yeah. No, with a microphone and the cast just staring at you. Yeah.

Vicki:

Exactly and then the rest of the audience. So there's no way she would speak even though if you see her in her day job, she's killing it. But get her out in an environment, you can have a drink, there's conversation, we're chatting with someone you don't you know, you don't even know, that's where we have got some of the best feedback, even if it's feedback where someone hasn't got the work, but you you know, you get the real truth. For me, it's super important. And what I've always really tried to do is just go let's not do it the way that dance or theatre has always told us it has to let's think about the people that we're actually engaging with entertaining with and go, What is it that little old Mavis needs, so she feels comfortable? What is it that Timothy needs, so he feels comfortable, and there's something can just having a conviction with that, because we could have allowed programmers or whatever, to lead us down another path. It would have totally changed the energy and the taste of that particular show. And so I'm just happy that as a company, and as an artist, we just went no, you know, we're doing it this way. And it's totally worked.

Melanie:

And that's because you've got that passion and knowledge and understand your audience, you've been able to bring that right to the forefront of your decision making, haven't you because I totally agree with you with post show talks. It's often about the programmer sitting there and interviewing. And it becomes about the choreographer just saying what their process was. And it's at the audience. It hasn't brought the audience into that mix. But what you've done so expertly is brought them straight into the middle of what you're doing. And then conversation comes out of that.

Vicki:

Yeah because it's about them. Talking to the performers, like we know too much like what does Mavis think about it? That's what I'm interested in.

Melanie:

And Shane, your conversations that you've been having through Unleashed, what's been happening there, what can you tell us about that?

Shane:

So Unleashed was initiated through my position at the CAT Yuva Gati and it was a series of conversations that started from the sort of cultural expectations placed on South Asian dancers. So we had an international panel of artists at each conversation, there was four scattered across Birmingham International Dance Festival, but you know what, I can't remember were the questions I will try. There was one that was what does authentic Indian dance actually mean and we had artists from India speaking about it because in India, what we don't understand is they are also shifting. I don't know if your listeners know this, but the Bharatanatyam language is a reformed language, it was actually abolished. We used to be called Sadhir and it was abolished by British saying was vulgar, and that sent Devadasi community underground and struggling for funds which led them to prostitution and they kept on calling it vulgar and tried to abolish it. And then it was someone in the 20s 30s that sort of tried to reform it who studied ballet first, and then it was sort of reformed and quotation marks purified to represent the national identity once India got its independence. And so what we talk about Bharatanatyam, and we call this classical, it has this sort of immense history that no one recognises. And so I wanted to open up that conversation in terms of British arts landscape and programming here. We looked at teaching methodologies and what it means to teach if you're diasporic art form, and how that's imparted that knowledge and then about the plurality of voices, you know, how do artists find the voice and this was aimed at programmers so that I invited free artists to come and share their practice that were South Asian dancers, but they had their own unique approach to exploring that, which on the surface for those who look like yeah brown, brown, brown, but actually, once they hear what the underpinnings of that work is, and where it's coming from, what those investigations are, there's a different appreciation for it. So that's where Unleashed took me but in conversation with DanceXchange, where I'm currently artists in residence I should mention, we are now considering it becoming more regular. So we are looking at another series this autumn and then one for next year's Birmingham International Dance Festival. This year's one I'm still formulating the thoughts and question, but it's throwing the net wider and looking at artists, regardless of ability, race, gender, anything is just about dance, and actually questioning things about dance and how it sits in the landscape currently and the questions we need to be asking. So that's sort of coming up. And that's something I'm investigating at the moment. And so I'm hoping that these conversations become... I don't want to say a platform is not a platform. It's a space where I would hope that artists and those engaged will feel free to start speaking up about things that we gen... When I say we I mean those who are often marginalised, feel free to start to vocalise. So it starts to become in the ether to create change, and specifically within those gatekeepers and the way they understand and relate to difference.

Melanie:

I look forward to those. Let us know when they happen. So I'm conscious that it feels like we're at the beginning of the conversation here and not at the end, but I have kept you for an hour. So I'm going to wrap up and with my last question, I just want to ask you, what advice would you give to your younger self on navigating the world that you're now so expertly working within, could you just give us one little nugget of advice that you might give?

Vicki:

Mine is, I would say, to my younger self is to just be you, I've realised like that is my superpower. That's what sets me apart from the others. The times when I can truly just be myself, I do my best work, whatever that work is not necessarily just choreography. So there is something in just the good, the bad, and the indifferent. It all makes you so just be you and really lean into that because your workout that actually that is your superpower.

Melanie:

Shane, how about you?

Shane:

I find this question really difficult. And I'll tell you why. It's because I can give my younger self advice. But I also know that advice is pointless because it is the journey that's to be lived through to arrive somewhere. And so if I had to say something, and I think we don't often talk about is failure, and actually seeing failure as success, and I think that's what I would say to my younger self is don't be disheartened or upset about something not panning out how you expected because that's actually the step towards achieving what you want to achieve.

Vicki:

Shane you've been dropping gems today. Yeah. Yeah. Yes. Absolutely. With that one, yes.

Melanie:

Dropping gems, I think that has summed up this conversation. It feels like such a good place to stop. But thank you for all of those gems. And if you'd like to hear more episodes about subjects moving artists of today, search for Talking Moves wherever you get your podcasts. Don't forget to subscribe, leave a review and spread the word. And for more information about Vicki and Shane, 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. Do join us next time for more Talking Moves. Thank you guys so very much any time for your honesty and your gems.

Vicki:

Pleasure

Shane:

Thank you Melanie