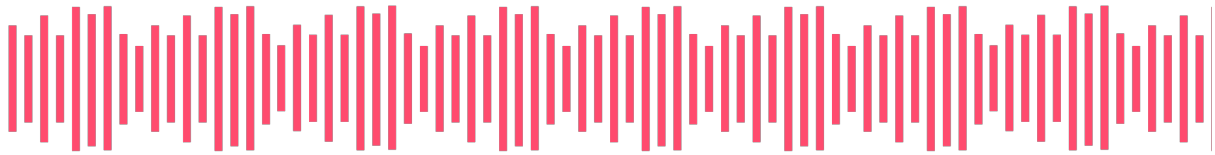


TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

Co-creating with Communities S04 / E04

Episode Description

In this episode, we talk to Nancy Hirst and Dan Canham about Co-creating with Communities.

Building cultural communities is at the heart of Arts Council England's Let's Create strategy and for many organisations, this kind of work is at the very heart of what we try to do. But it's not easy... it takes time, patience, diplomacy and care to do well. And sometimes, the funding and expectations of stakeholders around us, plus perhaps our own over-eager enthusiasm causes us to make mistakes. So we ask our guests to tell us more about how we might do this work better.

We start off with vocabulary... what and who do we mean by the all-encompassing word 'community' and indeed what do we mean by co-creation? None of us feel very comfortable with either terms but find ourselves using them anyway and so we explore the reasons why we do and the complexities that arise for us when we do.

We talk a lot about telling stories and the ethics of doing that, the juxtaposition of local stories linked to national conversations, of being authentic, of being of a place or an outsider to it and of finding a common purpose. We delve into Dan's epic gig-like work Session which he undertook in partnership with Empire Sounds and Steppaz Performing Arts in Tottenham, and we look at the ways in which Nancy and her company Icon build theatre around local tales such as The Chatham Witch and The Silk of 1000 Spiders with her Medway communities.

Both Nancy and Dan share some of the tools they use, show us where some of the traps and pitfalls can lie, and muse on the complexity of this work which we all agree felt different to simply 'seeking out stimuli' and mining material. The issue of ethics comes up for us, as does legacy and how we can continue to support a process even after the final curtain on the show has come down.

And finally we reflect on the joy – the moments where the stars align and the work comes together and the magic truly happens...

Talking Moves is a Greenwich Dance production

Presented by Melanie Precious

Production by Carmel Smith, Lucy White and Melanie Precious

Recording date: Wednesday 29 September 2021

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 co-creating with communities. Building cultural communities is at the heart of the Arts Council England, Let's Create strategy. And for many organisations, this kind of work is at the very heart of what we do, but it's not easy. It takes time, patience, and care to do well. And sometimes the funding and expectations of stakeholders around us plus perhaps our own over eager enthusiasm causes us to make mistakes. Two artists who have made this exciting place their home tell us a bit more about what it takes to do this work well. Nancy Hirst, artistic director of Icon Theatre, and Dan Canham, choreographer and artistic director of Still House welcome both of you. So Nancy, in your biography, you say that you set up Icon Theatre to develop accessible participatory and community theatre projects, which you felt were often overlooked. And Dan Still House is all about live performance and films, often in non theatrical settings, and built around the identities of the people performing. And I wonder if you'd each of you tell me just a little bit more about this work and the interest that you have in it, and how community sits at the heart of it, Nancy?

Nancy:

So I founded Icon in 2002. And I'll be honest, it took me a little while to figure out how I wanted to make the kind of work that I've ended up making. And I think actually, that is to do with, as you said in the introduction, it's difficult and can be challenging to work really effectively with communities. And to sort of get that balance between really honouring the voices of the people that you're working with, and getting that real quality of performance and production that makes everybody involved, proud and excited, which is where you want to end up. So yeah, I spent about 10 years trying different models of working and different ways of creating this work. And then we did a show

in about 2011, with ex offenders who were sort of talking about their experiences. Essentially, I think we gave it more r&d time really, that was the key for us was that it just had a longer build up and more time listening. And essentially, from there, we were like, oh, okay, actually, that works. And we built from then into like the core of our practice now. So it's really about listening and working with communities and making sure those voices are on stage.

Melanie:

And am I right, it's more theatrical based? I did say in my introduction, dance artists, we're actually widening that scope a little bit in this episode, which I thought was really great to try and take some learning from another art form.

Nancy:

Yes, we are. And we do big site specific collective community and professional shows. We do do dance as well. We're doing a big show coming up in February, which is movement based, really, it's a movement language that we're going to be using movement and video. So it's a mixture.

Melanie:

Lovely. And Dan how about you? How did this all start for you? And where did your interesting community begin, really?

Dan:

So I worked for a long time as a performer, as an actor and as a dancer for physical theatre companies devised work. And then when it came to making my own work, I made a show called 30 Cecil Street, which was about an old theatre in Limerick. And even though that was a solo, and the research process involved talking to people that had worked in that building, and knew it well, or had frequented it, or whatever, and already plugging into a kind of documentary aspect and made some other shows. And on that journey, the sense of like me, or a group of us kind of holding other people's stories, portraying other people's stories just started to feel less satisfying than creating a space in which those people could tell their own stories. And I was less interested in performing at that time. So yeah, the biggest or most, I guess, relevant example of that work is a show I made called Session, which involved me working with Steppaz Performing Arts Academy in Tottenham and Empire Sounds, also from Tottenham, it was a Lift Festival commission. And yeah, I spent three plus years working with those guys to make a show, it was an outdoor gig, and they were dancing, no text involved, but definitely still with that kind of documentary approach in the sense that, as you said, in the description of the work that I make the people performing is the material is the show. And for me, the power of performance comes in just that live act of showing yourself. And for me, dance is an incredibly powerful way of doing that. And it isn't always used to do that. But when you dance, you reveal something of, of your soul and of your kind of core identity. And I think there's an

amazing power to claim that space and to realise, yeah, it can be really powerful for you as a performer to own that space and to be seen. And so that's the thing that gets me excited.

Dan:

Already scribbling little titbits from you both. More time listening and being seen. So today's episode is all about that co-creation, but before we really get started looking at how you're doing that there are two words in there that I thought might warrant a closer look. Firstly, community, I wondered what that meant you? Who are you referring to you when you use the word in the context of your work? Who are the communities that you're working with? What do they look like, Nancy?

Nancy:

Well that's a really interesting question. I think it's a really tricky word actually, I feel like we like... what, what's the community? Are they separate from the professionals? Do you know what I mean? And then you start thinking about things like digital communities and you're like, who are they? Who the hell is the digital community? What is that? Mostly we work in Medway, we work in North Kent. So we're based in Chatham, and I think we're finding in a way that actually, the more we get sort of almost hyperlocal, the richer the work becomes. It feels like the more that we work with for want of a better word, the Chatham community, the more you understand about all the groups that really are not surfacing. And those are for me, the ones who are really exciting to work with. So we're sort of developing a project at the moment working with the housed gypsy and Romany and traveller community, who are a significant part of Chatham's community. But I think, in many senses, where we are at the moment as an organisation is realising that actually, the word community to sort of separate who the professionals are from who the other people are on the stage is not that helpful. And we've kind of started thinking actually, we're all Icon. So everybody on stage off stage, that's feeding into it, that's watching it, we're all Icon and actually starting with that as your starting point is really, really useful. Because everybody is equal, everybody's on the same page. And there isn't that sort of plums in a pudding feeling, do you know what I mean? Oh that's that diverse community, ooo that's that people with the background of such and such. We're all making a show together. We're all part of the community. We're all... we're all Icon. So that's where we are at the minute.

Melanie:

That's so interesting. Dan, you're nodding away while Nancy was talking there. How does that resonate for you?

Dan:

Yeah, I just wrote down there anyone with a common purpose. And when you're making a show, you have a common purpose.

Nancy:

Absolutely.

Dan:

And that makes you a community? And again, that thing you said about, well, how I interpreted it, while it can be reductive, to think of people as this community over there.

Nancy:

Exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

Dan:

It can be really dangerous to reduce people to other than with the word community. It is just anyone who has common interests, common purpose.

Melanie:

I love that. We use it so much and it's almost for want of a better word, isn't it? I'm still seeking the better word. In fact, people might just be a better word, but never sounds quite so nice in a sentence. It becomes a bit of a funding bid, you know, necessary word to drop in, doesn't it? I always think to myself, what community do I belong to? If somebody said, community, where would I fit personally in that, and I understand it as a sense of being when someone talks about my local neighbourhood and our community, and the fact we all talk to each other or whatever, but when we start saying things like the Nigerian community, the Nepalese community, and we bandy those phrases around, and I just think, what do you expect that this group of people are just all huddled together, walking down the street on their own, that they're not interspersed with modern society? You know, and as you say it, then it starts to put that otherness around, isn't it these fences around people? So yeah, I've got a real problem with that, too. But I wondered where you were with that. And so whilst we're on vocabulary, co-creation is another bit of sector vocabulary, which I'm guilty of using myself in this episode. It's been really popular in recent years. And I wanted to unpick a little bit more about what that means. And I think sometimes it's seen as using a community cast, but I think it's more than that. And I wondered you two felt about that word. And what does co-creation mean to you? What does it look like when you apply it to your work? Dan, do you want to jump in?

Dan:

Yeah, like any buzzword it's open to abuse, isn't it? You throw a label on it, and it suddenly makes your work more worthy or fundable or... I guess, I don't really know what that means that it can mean different things. I guess, you know, I question even with Session, like, how much is really co-creation? You know, I'm still the lead artist, I'm still directing this show. I think, of course, it is still possible to co create within a hierarchy in that way. But yeah, I guess I err on the side of caution of

this. But is it really like constantly questioning everything anyway? But yeah. Is it really co-creation? So yeah, that to one side, for me, it means an invitation to the people you're working with to help shape what you're doing and to bring themselves and to bring their full selves. And to not feel like they have to cut a part of themselves off in the process, and to feel enabled and emboldened to take it where they want it. And for me, as lead artist to be open to that and to be open to it shifting. Yeah, I guess there are more noble degrees, in terms of like, how much of that authority you give away, what place you put yourself as lead artists in the kind of mix. And that's why I question it, I guess. Because in my head, maybe the ideal co-creation is like, even terms like lead artist start to disappear, and you're just a team and all doing it. So I don't know. It's a question for me.

Melanie:

It's tricky, isn't it? Because I know even as a leader of an organisation trying to bring other ideas into the mix. There's a moment when you feel decision making has to happen or rather, maybe that's just ingrained in my being and there is a better and different way but finding it is hard. How about you Nancy? You're smiling.

Nancy:

I totally know what you mean Dan when you say this isn't an ideal world, isn't there a co-creation is like we're all sitting on chairs. I mean, we're all so equal, it's very difficult to actually make work like that. You can create those spaces where everybody is equal. But actually making work starts with funding bids. And with, you know, partners, and with programming commissions, things that might be happening years in advance, and it's really hard to start with this completely egalitarian setup. And then I think I've kind of realised recently that actually, that's kind of okay, as well. And that actually, a lot of co-created work that we do with different processes are on different scales aren't there. So there's that scale of which, you know, the lead artists hold all the power and the community cast hold none of the power, they get marched on to do their lines, and then they get marched off again. That's not how I enjoy working. But it's also there's a kind of that on one end, and then on the other end, is this kind of entirely free form, egalitarian, genuinely co-created set up. And that's amazing. And I love being in those spaces when that's actually happening. But you might get a different style of work. And it might not be the right process for all situations. And I think something as well that I sort of realised, again, in the last few years, it's been that actually, not everybody on the stage in a co-creative process wants to have all that, you know, I and I feel very strongly like, it's very important to me, like how the ending looks. I've got strong feelings about making sure that everybody is on stage. And actually, there's quite a lot of people that we've worked with in the last few productions when you say, so how do you think the ending looks or feels and they're like, well, it doesn't matter to them in the same way that it matters to me, other bits of it really matter. And it matters to me that their voices are in it, and that they are represented as they want to be represented. And that thing you were talking Dan about the sort of essential self and that kind of showing that, that for me, is the exciting thing. And then I think being okay with a range of different processes is also okay. The actual word co-creation I have issues with because it feels like, isn't everything basically co

created? You know what I mean? Like if you've got a live performer and an audience, that's co-creation, isn't it, really? But it is a bit of a buzzword at the moment isn't it.

Melanie:

What do you think about that, Dan? Does any of that resonate? There's something when you were talking about that about the different types of processes. And it made me think of that quote from Henry Ford about the car. And I think he said something like, if you asked people what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse. And what they got was the first motor car. So sometimes, if they don't have the vision, I think as you're saying, Nancy there, if you've got the vision of the ending, but other people don't have that experience that you have don't have the knowledge and the tools aren't familiar with that setting, then perhaps that will never be able to be seen to them in order for them to help you build it.

Dan:

I think any good collaboration, there has to be clarity of roles and responsibilities. And like you were saying, Nancy, it's fine for some people to have greater responsibility than others in order to make the thing work. And like you said, there Nancy, some people, they want to just sit within the role that you are asking of them. And I remember so when we made Session, you know, cast of 25 young people, the youngest was six, the eldest was at the time, 18 I think. And each of the performers were black, or mixed race. And obviously I'm white, male director, mostly all girls and young women, I had two other choreographers with me Abena Noel and Odilia Egyiawang. And I remember I was really, really paranoid at the beginning that like, who am I to lead this? You know, and well, I don't know quite how to lead this. And I was leaning on Odi and Abena a lot in the early days to run everything by them and to effectively co direct it with me, which they weren't really interested in. They wanted to choreograph. And they had no problem with me directing. Do you know what I mean?

Melanie:

Right.

Dan:

And if I was...

Melanie:

They were quite secure, in your knowledge

Dan:

Yeah, yeah, yeah,

Melanie:

And the comfort that perhaps, brought.

Dan:

Yeah. And so I'd had to then step into that and trust that it was okay. And that, you know, it didn't mean I suddenly went unilaterally making all the decisions. Whenever I'm leading, I like to think of it in terms of setting frames. And that's just another way of setting expectations or roles or responsibilities. And that goes for the performers, you know, if I was to go in on day one and say, Okay, what should we make? Well, we might be able to make something but it would take really long. And perhaps, especially for young people, that level of, you know, when you're really leaning on them to do all the legwork and conceptual work. I think it's tough, you know, it's tough to ask that, especially if they're not used to practising it in that way. So you set a frame and you say, Okay, I'm interested in sisterhood, or I'm interested in friendship, obviously, we all know this, when making work but you find ways in and then how you shape it, you let it be known throughout consciously and subconsciously, that you're open. All ideas are welcome. And you know, anyone can say whatever they want, and you create an environment where no one feels like they have to be quiet if something comes into their head, and that works on trust. And in thinking about this, you know, just trust is like, everything for me. And it's the same with any kind of relationships in life. But in this case, especially because, you know, when we started Session, the performers, they couldn't conceive of what it would be because they'd never seen it and they had no idea where it was really going to go and that's super scary for them, you know, for me to ask them to effectively expose themselves. To be unashamed, as young black women are incredibly scary. And the last thing they wanted was to look ridiculous. And anytime we'd step out of their comfort zone, anytime we'd step out of what they were used to doing, it was tough because they really weren't used to it. And that was a delicate balance, once we got to that point, which only really landed in performance, then to see them then take it and to really feel viscerally the power in stepping out in that way, and that there were more and more and more levels was kind of incredible. But it only works on trust, it only works on them being able to trust me as a leader and the team and me trusting that they'll be fine. And they can do it.

Nancy:

Everything you say I totally relate to. And I think also for me realising as well, that when being able to call things when they're not working is really important. And actually, in a way, that's how I build trust. You know what I mean? You set up an exercise with all the best intentions, and you get actually this kind of mess, and everybody feels a bit like eggy and a bit they sort of look at each other like, Oh, this is going a bit badly, isn't it? And actually just being able to say, Okay, that didn't really work out, let's take a little break, let's reset. Why do we think that didn't really work? What felt odd about that, and that actually just relaxes everybody to the point where they have to go, Okay, we're not making a rubbish piece of work, we're making a good piece of work, and we're calling it you know, each time it doesn't work, we just say, okay, that didn't work. That's fine. And that's key I think to that sense of

trust. And that sense of like, are we going to put ourselves out here, once you know that whoever's sitting back slightly in the room and watching stuff or leading, you know, that they're going to call it and say, That's good, that's not quite working.

Melanie:

That's really nice. So you've got that kind of safety net, they've got that safety net in you. That's really interesting. And Nancy when I look at your portfolio of work, it seems to be telling local stories, and you said that your community of people with their common purpose are Medway, living and Chatham, and I can see as I look at that, how you might be able to hook in interest and secure commitment to your project because those stories resonate with the people that are living there. And I wondered how important that felt to you about finding a local story as being part of the key to successful co-creation? And indeed, would you describe those pieces that you did, 23 Submarines, The Chatham Witch were those co-created? Do you think?

Nancy:

Yes, absolutely. I think the local stories are really important, and particularly when doing site specific work? Because otherwise, why are we all there? You know I mean? Why are you watching this show in a disused Castle when we could be in a nice warm theatre, for instance? And if you don't make it about, you just lack that sense of resonance, you lack a depth of engagement, I guess, with the audience. And yeah, to keep coming back to it, why are we all there? Why are we doing this if it's not local? I would say that most of the work we make also connects to, I think, kind of national conversations about issues that are prevalent. So it is kind of the local Flashpoint or something that's happened locally, that actually is telling the story of something on a bigger scale. So we did one called Silk of 1000 Spiders at the time of the Brexit referendum. And we discovered this amazing history of immigration in the area. And it turns out Chatham, which kind of thinks of itself now, as quite white working class, I would say, you know, again, one of his plums in the pudding labels, but actually had a massive history of immigration. And the census from the 19th century repeatedly shows hugely, lovely, diverse community living together and kind of exploring some of that and exploring who lived in your house 150 years ago, and actually those conversations and kind of through that we were able to question, you know, actually, what is the Brexit narrative? Or is this idea that we're coming back to an earlier sense of England, that was this monolithic culture, and that isn't true, that isn't the historical accuracy is not there. But we were kind of able to challenge that through this very localised thing of like who was in your house, who was in next door's house. And that, for me, is the kind of exciting thing when you get that kind of spark of individual experience, and kind of, oh, that's me. That's where I live that's connected. But it also connects to things that everybody's hearing about on the news. And, you know.

Melanie:

I love that link, local national, I can really understand how that would resonate that. And Dan, so I'm fascinated taking you back to Session again, which I absolutely loved. So I know that you said that

you collaborated over a long period, so one, I'm really interested in that because often you don't get the funding or support to do something for that long. So I wondered perhaps if you'd tell us a little bit about how that came about. But also you're based in Bristol, and you were working in Tottenham? So did you find that not having the local knowledge of Tottenham and those girls stood in your way? Or how did you get across that as Nancy's been talking about how that local connection has really flavoured her work but in a way you've done the opposite.

Dan:

Yeah, I think I couldn't help but be I mean, they're not all from Tottenham the performers. But Steppaz is pretty much their spiritual home and most of them were definitely North London and in asking them to like I say, bring themselves to the piece then it couldn't help but be a Tottenham show. The same with the band who were like fully embedded there.

Melanie:

And were you brought into work specifically for them then or did you?

Dan:

Yeah that's the thing. So in terms of the process, lift festival were commissioning a long time ago now they said rather than do they would never call it outreach, I guess, but outreach work across different places in London, let's just commit to one area for six years to make work there with local artists with international artists coming in showing work there, etc, etc, over this six year period. And so I was really lucky. And again, in terms of the funding, Lift we're really good at managing to just leverage pockets from different European funding Jerwood to enable like each step on the process to happen, I guess. So the initial step was a residency in Tottenham, for which I'll be forever indebted to Selma Nichols, who was working at Lift as producer at the time, and effectively just a fixer on that residency. And I said to her, Who are the like 10 people in Tottenham that I have to meet that everyone knows, will have a story to tell. And Selma is from Tottenham, she grew up there, she knows that like the back of her hand, she's just embedded there. And so I was meeting all sorts of people on this No Strings Attached residency. And yeah, I was fully aware of my kind of outsider status, and the fact that I was unfamiliar with the area at all, and aware that if I was going to make work there, there are all sorts of potential pitfalls because of that. And I think the first major one for me was if I'm going to be asked to come to Tottenham, and make work here, the first and primary thing I need to do is celebrate what's already happening, not to just kind of bring my art in. And, you know, as I say, bless the local population with my artistry, when it's already happening, and we're talking about money, you know, to take all of those resources for myself, and then just kind of put it to the community, rather, just how do I spread that to people that are already doing stuff here that don't have access to those pockets of money, don't write those funding bids, so on and so forth. So of the many, many people Selma introduced me to Empire Sounds were Desty and Josh at Empire Sounds one and Afrobeats live band. I did a little film interview with them as part of the residency. I then met Stacey McKnight at Steppaz, watched one of their shows, which just blew my socks off at

Bernie Grant Arts Centre, it was incredible. And they knew each other a little bit, but I just said, How about the three of us as kind of organisations collaborate together to make something? And yeah, I don't know, that was maybe four years before the show actually came to fruition. And I remember saying to them, like, this isn't going to happen for another four years, and them saying, I've got no idea what we'll be doing in four years, I was just like, well, let's take it a step at a time and see how we go. We did some r&ds. And then we I think we did like two r&ds. It was just kind of checking in. So I became an expert in the Airbnbs of North London. And just making sure you know, because that's one of the things is just consistency, isn't it not just kind of parachuting in and trying to make it, it's like, I'm here, you know, I've committed to this. And yeah, I live in Bristol, but Tottenham became my second home, you know, just be there. And even outside of when it was funded, I'd go down and watch Steppaz shows, or, you know, go and watch Empire Sounds play at the Jazz Cafe or whatever, just to keep it alive. And then eventually, when it came to making and getting the funding to make it and then tour it, we took 10 weeks to shape the material, working on Thursday evenings and weekends, over those 10 weeks, which was quite intense. And then the first shows were at Bernie Grant Arts Centre outdoors there. So yeah, I think I could never pretend to be a Tottenham resident, I could never pretend to know it as any of those do. But yeah, I just took the time to really spend time and get to know people and be open to that. And yeah, that was the process.

Melanie:

I think that's fascinating. I love that bit of the building blocks and it being step by step and the idea of the fixer coming in and supporting you, introducing you and then that long term relationship that you were able to build up with those people before even the show was around. Nancy, do you have the luxury of such a long creation period? What kind of timeframe are you usually working to?

Nancy:

Probably a year. And I feel like Yeah, we were hoping that we get a show up in November, the show that came kind of out of lockdown and out of Black Lives Matter and some of the local things that happened in Chatham as a result of that, and we felt really oh, it's got to be autumn, it's got to be autumn. And then about six weeks ago, we just took a decision and said, actually, it's not gonna be embedded and it's not going to be quality if we try and do it in November. We're postponing it into May, that felt like a really tricky decision. But then actually, when I look back at the timeframe, I was like, Oh, that makes a lot of sense that we've had to do that. Because co-creation, for want of a better word is not a short process, and actually building up those trusts and getting those voices that isn't something you can just whip out and everybody tries a bit harder, and it happens overnight. It's about trust, as you say, I'm building up those relationships and really getting to know people. Yeah, and I think it's interesting when you were talking about being an outsider as well, Dan, I think when we work with different communities, we're always trying to work with new people and with new communities, even in Chatham, and I quite often feel like an outsider coming into a group just because we have met, our paths haven't crossed and we, you know, we live in the same place, but it is that sense of what makes us a community actually, we've still got to do that same work of going, Oh, tell me about yourself, you know.

Melanie:

I was going to say actually then what sort of tools do you use? Literally, in that first rehearsal when you are feeling at your most outsider ish. When you're faced with people that you don't know, how do you break that ice? And how do you start that process of finding your common ground?

Nancy:

I think the most important thing for me is about getting people to relax and laugh, actually, do you know what I mean? The moment you start laughing together, it feels a lot easier to then start volunteering stuff, doesn't it? I've got this exercise, I'm aware of anybody who's worked with me who's listening to this to be like oh that bloody thing. But it essentially involves people being really stupid and then praising each other, it's called, I hear you've got the moves, essentially, people can do like a little wiggle of their finger, and then their partner needs to go, that is the most amazing finger wiggling I have ever seen. And you stretch it out. So that really it gets incredibly over the top. And people are just really have been hysterics. And that's always for me a first day of rehearsal thing. So just everybody looks like an absolute fool. And that's part of the process.

Melanie:

I love that. Dan, what about you? How do you when you walk into a studio for the first time, what sort of tools do you have in your armoury to start finding that commonality?

Dan:

Definitely making it fun, definitely. Getting out of your brain and into your body and getting a good sweat on. Yes, I mean, Ned Glasier from Company Three, a company I absolutely love. He said, there's loads of things he said that I've taken on. And obviously he does it all the time. But one of the things he said was like make your first session really hard. Because you don't want to set expectations that this is just a laugh. And then suddenly you have to like ramp it up as you go. He's like, make your first session just work really hard. So people know what they're in for. Counterintuitive, isn't it?

Melanie:

But I like it!

Dan:

Yeah, I mean, doesn't mean you're not being kind. But you know, the work culture for Steppaz is incredibly exacting, and Abena, as I said, Abena Noel, the artistic director, at Steppaz, you know, even with the young people, like when they're choreographing, and when they're working, they're

there to work. And I think on that show, because we were collaborating, of course, I also had to be mindful of what was the work culture that was already in place, and not just kind of come and go, Okay, this is how we're doing things. And I'm going to ignore what you do all the time, which is the thing that I loved, so.

Melanie:

Yeah, yeah. But you're going to do what I want to do now, you've got to try and

Dan:

Yeah so it's as much about finding out how they're already working at me adapting to that.

Melanie:

Yeah, yeah. And we've talked about authenticity on this podcast a couple of times, it's another one of our favourite hated words. And I wondered, how do you make sure that you really are hearing these voices that it really does belong to the people that you're trying to work with? Nancy, are your cast involved in the selection of stories? Or are they involved in the creation of dialogue within those stories? And Dan, you have explained that process actually with Steppaz I think, but I'm conscious that you also created a piece Ours Was the Fen Country, and again, completely different landscapes to where you're from, and what was it about that work and those stories that drew you to them, but also how you were able to draw that authenticity of the cast and the place out into your work? So how are we making sure that it really truly is coming from those people in the room rather than them acting out your...

Nancy:

Yeah. For me, the people performing it, like they write it. Yeah, they write it. And I quite often come with really feeling like Dan was saying, like, you know, the whole show looks at this, what's your thoughts about that? You know, it totally is that. I quite often have a uncomfortable moment before rehearsals start when I think, Okay, tomorrow, I'm making a scene about something I know nothing about, and walking into that room and kind of going, so I think the scene is, is looking at this... is that a thing? Do you know what I mean, having absolutely no information about that, it has to come from them. So if it comes from me, it's my voice. There are points in productions where there'll be like a little bit of a dead moment or something. And I'll think oh actually that's because I suggested this line here that is not in their voice, and it sticks out a mile, and we'll go back and go, that's my voice, isn't it? That's me talking.

Melanie:

Yeah. So Dan, Ours Was the Fen Country. How were you able to bring community voices into that piece?

Dan:

So yeah, Ours Was the Fen Country. I grew up in the Fens, this area of East Anglia. And I wanted to make a piece about where I grew up, given that I didn't really care that much about that rural side of life when I was... but it shaped me massively. And so I think it's about the research and again time I know I have the luxury of that. But yeah, I spent a good year and a half just talking to people and each person I'd speak to would be a recommendation of the person before. Some people I like, you, I wanted to speak to those a guy who was the last traditional eel catcher. He caught eels with willow traps that he made and his family have been doing it for 400 years and he was the last one and and so I interviewed each of these people about their ways of life. It's interesting though, because of course, and I don't know if I'd do it like that again. But again, that thing about representation like who am I to then represent their stories given that that's not my life, how much am my bringing my own worldview or biases to this story and how much is my agenda of what narrative I want to see, colouring this and so it has authenticity problematic is that word is or truthfulness of their stories. You know, it's like how much am I able to have my worldview or my biases, my expectation shaken up, you know, because here was me wanting to go out there and make this nostalgic, rural elegy for something dying. And we did that and it was really beautiful and really, really proud of it. One of the people I interviewed, Tony Forster who runs a Pig Dyke Molly, who are Molly dancing group.

Melanie:

A Molly dancing group?

Dan:

Molly yeah. So kind of like Morris dancing, but a bit more... a bit more wild.

Nancy:

Sounds amazing.

Dan:

And, you know, they all dress up, you know, like members of Kiss or something. They're quite an incredible group. And in fact, they had a Wild Card at Sadler's Wells. I had Pig Dyke Molly performing in the foyer. They got to play at Sadler's Wells and stuff. So I mean, but Tony, you know, he said to me, after seeing the show, it was great and everything. But where are the stories of the new tech that's happening in the Fen or the more diverse communities because what you're representing is just a real tiny proportion. And at the time, I think I was like, Well, that wasn't the story I wanted to tell. So and it wasn't and story wanted to tell was what we told and like I say, had an integrity to it. But it was really important for me to then go away with what he said and be like, ah, yeah, how much did I know the story I wanted before I went there, you know, and I think this question about authenticity is

exactly that. It's about what is the nature of the exchange that you are asking from anyone who's contributing to the work? And how much are you going in trying to extract the goods. And I've been in rooms, and I've seen that even in a professional context where people are being asked to bring themselves, you know, where I see a director who has just eyes on a prize, and they're not really looking at the people who are in the room with them, or picking up on the signs of what's unspoken, in terms of consent, and in terms of that power relationship. And, yeah, it's about what the nature of that exchange is and I think, for it, to have authenticity for it to have integrity. And if you're asking people to bring their fullness, you have to be open to your own blind spots to where you're getting too crazed on getting the good stuff. And you're immediately turning people's lives into material before you're even recognising that these are people's lives. And do they know what you're asking of them? Do they know. And again, I think back to Fen Country we performed... I got Peter Carter to come along and some of the other interviewees, and it was a really meaningful experience. So it's not to say that these exchanges can't be incredibly meaningful in both ways. And that's part of what really draws me to them. But in a way, I feel like we were lucky that it worked like that because it might not have. Someone might have come and gone, I didn't know that you were going to put my life in front of loads of people, you know, I thought we were just having a chat. So it's about clarity and not trying to pull the wool over the eyes of people to get the good stuff.

Melanie:

Yeah.

Dan:

And I think, yeah, all of that is just in the mix when we're talking about authenticity.

Melanie:

It's so true. I was thinking as you were talking that there's this sort of fine balance nuance between being an artist wanting to make work and seeking stimuli, as you said, mining your material. And doing so ethically, or what we've been talking about in this podcast about co-creation, trying to create that equal. And I think if you do the first one, ethically, there's nothing wrong with that. But you do it, as you said with transparency. But what we're talking about here is actually that balance of not approaching it in that way. And how hard as you've said, That truly is actually and I think it is really hard work that you're trying to do and doing so well. And with that in mind, and I will come back to ethics because I've got another question around that. But with that in mind thinking about that little titbit that your colleague from Company Three had given you about going in with a hard thing first, what might be your advice to someone trying to do this work similar to what he gave you, but drawing from your own experience.

Dan:

I was listening to one of your podcasts the other day, and I think it was Temujin Gill who said Be yourself or something like that they weren't the word he used, but the sentiment of you have to do you. And you can't second guess what the people you're working with might want to see from you. Especially if you're different, like a teacher, isn't it a teacher who wants to be down with the kids, you know, goes in and suddenly loses all credibility, because it's just a performance.

Melanie:

Yeah.

Dan:

And so trusting yourself, backing yourself, even if you don't know exactly what you're doing? No, I didn't. When we started session, I thought it'd be way easier. I was really green. I thought my charisma, my natural charisma would just carry the room.

Melanie:

See me through this.

Dan:

It really didn't. Trusting myself, trusting the people around you is just fundamental and being able to adapt as you go. And the other thing for me which goes on any kind of process is just trying to create a space in which you can tune into what you're curious about what excites you and follow that to find the heart of what you're working on. Again, rather than what you've written in the funding application, rather than what you think it might have been. Before you go in. You know, we want to cling, we want to know. We want to know what the show is before we start because that's the safe place but any kind of devising and especially with people who might not be used to that kind of process is messy and you're in the unknown for so long. And just trust the process holding your nerve. And the thing that helps me do that is just to keep tuning into what I'm curious about and what excites me. And just following that, even if it feels insubstantial, even if it feels like, is that enough to hang a show on? Or that move, but actually, that's where all the beautiful stuff comes from, you can build whole scenes whole, you know, things from just a move if it really excites you.

Nancy:

Yeah, absolutely.

Melanie:

How about you Nancy, what traps would you recommend people avoid? Or what tools would you recommend they take with them?

Nancy:

Yeah, I think, very similar to Dan, really, I think for me, it really is about listening and trusting the process, it's about really making sure that I'm listening to people trusting the process, even when it feels like it's absolutely falling apart. So when I'm working with a group of people who are like, actually, we don't really want to do that, we want to actually do this in this entirely different way. And it's not actually going to be in the show, but it's going to be something else. And it's going to be a different art form. And kind of having this moment where you go, that's not what I was thinking, how is that going to work? That's not, and going actually trust the process, if that's what they're saying, then follow it because that's where the good stuff is gonna be. And then I think the other thing for me is about actually not underestimating the audience. And Dan like you were saying about following those things that actually genuinely excite and interest and get me thinking, thinking, actually, those aren't different to what the audience are going to be interested in as well. And I think when you're making work, and we work with quite big community casts, and lots of young people, and they've got family and friends coming, who I don't know what their backgrounds all are, I don't know what you know, how much work they see in the theatre or outside the theatre. And I think there is a bit of a trap sometimes about thinking, Oh, no, that's a bit too radical, or that's a bit too sort of academic, it's asking too much of the audience. And actually, every single time when I think actually nah sod it, I'm gonna just go with this. I think they'll follow it. And I think they'll get it and be excited in the same way that I am. And every time that is the right choice, and it's about not being patronising, I think to your audiences in your head, when you're making work and saying that, they'll get this, like, I'm interested in it. And I think also, there's a real difference. I think audiences in live work are up for thinking they've made a journey. They're there, they're live, they're present. It's not like watching a Marvel movie or sloping in front of the TV, people are there to engage in it. And I think keeping that in mind is really key.

Melanie:

That's all interesting. I'm going to ask you something now. You might not have come across this. But we recently had a bid we responded to which talked quite a bit, well A the timeline, just impossible, where you'd think you physically can't do that in the time that you're suggesting that we can. But if you truly want community voice in it, because of all the things we talked about the time it takes for those relationships, also this thing about developing talent within communities, I don't know whether you've come across this on somebody's wish list. And I think that's wonderful. But again, it has alarm bells for me in that, how do we navigate the ethics of that? How do you find out people want to have their talent developed? What aspirations they might have for their talents? Have you come across this?

Nancy:

Yeah.

Melanie:

How do you work this one out?

Nancy:

I've come across this. It feels to me very patronising as well, because it assumes that the talent isn't developed. And that's right back into that, like your artists are here. And then your community are down here. And you're going to develop the talent by for me, that's a bit of anathema that also presupposes that your commissioned artists or your funders or the you know, the people holding that power, know what the best way to develop that talent is. And that's, again, like it is a patronising approach, I think. In terms of developing talent, my response to that is about asking and listening to people, what they want to do. Do they need support with that? Are there people that we know that we can connect them to that is useful, but we're not going to slap that on the table, and then sort of, ah, you're young theatre actors. So you definitely like to talk to a professional. That isn't how that works. But, yeah, it's quite controversial. I think the idea of developing talent.

Melanie:

It is, isn't it? We're even trying to move away from that as a terminology with artists, because again, there's something in that vocabulary isn't there that suggests that they're not already developed. Exactly. As you said, Nancy, you know, I'm we're trying to talk about artists support instead and enabling

Nancy:

Yeah, yeah. And developing careers. That's a thing that you know, you might be able to support with, but developing talent is icky, isn't it?

Melanie:

Yeah, it is a bit. Dan, have you come across that and if you have how have you side stepped it?

Dan:

I haven't luckily, but yeah, we definitely spoke about professional development, but that was for all of us.

Melanie:

Yeah, yeah.

Dan:

For me as well as anyone, you know, the opportunity for us to develop as professionals

Melanie:

Goes back to that helicoptering doesn't it I can just imagine somebody using it in the context of Session actually, we'll bringing Dan in we're dropping down into this company here will escalate them into different heights. And, and that's not what the ethos of the work is for or where the beauty of it has come out. But it's how funders might frame it in some ways. It's always a navigation to have to be had. We have talked about some of the hard things but what about the successes? Could you just give me one story that lifted your heart, one anecdote, perhaps something that has just made you sing because I think as we said, right back at the introduction of this podcast, this kind of work is what makes us think all the time. It's what makes us get out of bed in the morning. What is it that keeps feeding you to do it?

Dan:

Oh, there's loads. And it is really meaningful and joyous. I mean, on Session what the one that burns brightest, well, not burns but is really clear to me is probably about five weeks into that 10 week process, we put the first 20 minutes together for the first time. And it was so live. And I can't even remember if we had the band with us or not, I like to think we did. I have it on film so I'll check. But it was so live. And it was like, Oh, wow, this is gonna be something and we didn't know. And we didn't know if the performers we're gonna go with us. And like, physically, it was exhausting for them at that time, because they were used to doing like, two three minutes sets max. And this was like 20 minutes of like escalating energy already staying at like eight or nine. And I was so high off it, you know, catching the bus home and stuff. I remember I was just so high, and just the feeling of like, some glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel and of everyone being on board and have just something live. And in that room in that moment. It was an incredible performance, you know, the first time through and to be on the inside like that. And to be privy to those kind of moments is just incredible, you know, incredible. So there's loads, there's absolutely loads, but that I do remember that as just a real marker for like, what might be coming and what might be possible.

Nancy:

Yeah, yeah.

Melanie:

Wonderful. And Nancy, how about you?

Nancy:

I think it's people's reactions and people talking about the effect something had on them after the event. So two years ago, we did a show called Chatham Witch and it was it at Fort Amhurst, local landmark Napoleonic grade one listed, you know, and it's got this incredibly military history. Medway, as a whole, it's had very sort of masculine institutions. So it's had Fort Amhurst. And it's got this Norman castle, and it's got Rochester Cathedral, and it's got the Royal Engineers, and it's these very patriarchal kind of institutions. And the more we looked into the history of Fort Amhurst, because it was a commission about relaunching, they were renovating and restoring a section of the fort for public use, a large amount of work. And the more we looked at it, the more we were like, we're not as interested in all the guns and the masculine kind of military thing. And actually, what were the women doing at all these points in history, they were still 50% of the population, where are their stories, and that became what the production was about. And it was one of the most difficult shows I've ever done in terms of the sheer scale and the size of it. It was the largest work we've done. We had 160 participants, I think, and the site was a construction site until the first day of tech week. So actually accessing the site rehearsing and in place, incredibly stressful. And we were under rehearsed going in, and the dress rehearsal was one of those ones where you go, actually, I'm in the wrong job, I just should go and train as an accountant, because this is pointless. And we had the Arts Council coming on the next day as well. So it was all like, oh, wait, we just should we just cancel. And actually, it was one of those amazing moments where it really did come together. And it became something that I was incredibly proud of. And since lockdown starting to meet people again, you know, just on the street, and people are saying, oh, when's the next Chatham Witch? Because that was amazing. And what we're doing next, Nancy, like we're really missing it. And just hearing that it was so lovely. Having come from the evening of the dress rehearsal was one of the worst, I think professional moments in my life. And coming from that, and hearing people saying that was really important for me. That was really the most magical experience and knowing that people are talking about it now is just magical. It's just a lovely, lovely experience.

Melanie:

It's those lovely, warm moments. And finally, we asked Zoie Golding and Anthony Missen this question, which is a good episode to listen to actually in conjunction with this one, because we talked about measuring impact. But one of the questions I asked them, and I'll ask it to you here is what is the legacy of this work? What do you do when final day submitted your invoice, you've been paid. They've been paid. The show's been on the curtains come down. And then what, Dan, what happened for you in Tottenham?

Dan:

So, obviously Steppaz continue. One of the benefits of collaborating with a pre existing organisation that when things finish on that project, it doesn't finish for the participants they carry on. But of all the horrendous things as a result of COVID one of the benefits that I had was to be able to work on a film that was a kind of documentary of the piece mixing footage from performances with then interviews and backstage footage and stuff. And I interviewed loads of the people involved across the cast and creatives and put that into the film and that process in and of itself as a kind of

evaluation tool. But beyond a kind of this is for the Arts Council so we can get the rest of our money. A proper evaluation in the sense of we could sit and talk for an hour or more with I don't know, I probably interviewed about 10 different people across the project more actually about what it meant to them and about where it was difficult where it was good, you know, all this stuff about their journey through it. And I mean, to have the time and space to be able to work on that film and to have those kinds of conversations was for me personally just incredibly meaningful and a brilliant way to let that pass, I guess. Yeah, I mean, they the one of the things they all kept saying was, let's just do it again. And they kept trying to convince me to be like come on let's do it again. And like, if it wasn't so expensive and so difficult logistically then maybe. We have had offers, but like trying to tour 30 plus people is really expensive. And that's why no one really does it.

Melanie:

I love that juicy kind of bit there where you said, because you've worked with an established group, the legacy is built in, in a way so that they will continue to do what they're doing. And it's, it's not quite the same as just sort of letting a group disappear. And Nancy, in some ways, I suppose you're rooted in the community, you keep doing shows. So actually, there's a sense of a constantly turning wheel. Is that part of your legacy?

Nancy:

Absolutely. And I think it's one of the reasons that we've developed as a company in the way that we have is because I hate that feeling of being a helicopter coming in and going here's the circus, here's the circus! And then disappearing again, over the years, I think we've been better at creating legacy and ongoing work for young people. And one of the things that we are looking at the moment is building like a neighbourhood theatre, that is also and it's a slightly different model for us to it's kind of ongoing drop in access, just come and we'll just do some theatre and drama. We're in the Brook Theatre, let's just do something together. And just having that as an access point. And then for me, it makes them a lot more sense of the kind of more traditional outreach for want of a better word. You know, when we're going into venues, working with specific groups to then say, you can come and just drop in. We're around on a Tuesday evening, just come along. And for me, that's a really important part of where we should be going. And I don't think we've done enough of it in the past, and it's something that's a key part of what we're going to be building on in the next few years. Neighbourhood theatre. That's where we're going.

Melanie:

Neighbourhood theatre. What a lovely term to end on. Thank you so much that feels like a good place to stop. If you'd like to hear more episodes about subjects moving artists of today. Search for Talking Moves wherever you get your podcasts. And don't forget to subscribe, leave a review and spread the word. And for more information about Nancy and Dan, head on over to greenwichdance.org.uk. And do remember if you know someone you think we should talk to or have

a topic you'd like us to talk about. Please tweet us @GreenwichDance. But for today, that's it from us and join us next time for more Talking Moves. Thank you guys so very much.

Nancy:

Thank you very much. It was fun.

Dan:

Yeah, it was a nice chat.