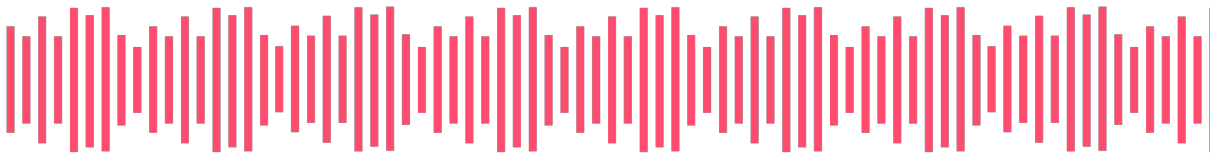


TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

Breaking Through S04 / E05

Episode Description

In this episode, we talk to **Katie Serridge** and **Nafisah Baba** about Breaking Through.

This episode was put together at Katie's request, who took the initiative and emailed us offering to talk about the challenges she has been presented with as a young artist trying to break into an industry that effectively shut down only minutes after her graduation. Nafisah Baba, BBC Young Dancer 2017, joins us to share her observations of the world of work thus far.

We start off by discussing how Katie and Nafisah came to dance, the courses and training they embarked upon to prepare them for the industry and the opportunities they had to start making or performing in work pre-Covid. We reflect back on lockdown 1.0 and how it felt for them both returning to childhood bedrooms as adults.

Most performers find a need to supplement their earnings with what Nafisah described as a 'Muggle job' and Katie talks about how for her these dried up as cafes and theatres closed. We discuss how they now think about 'training' which might once have meant daily class but is now weighted towards the maintenance of strong and positive mental health. We talk about resilience, networking, the pleasures and pitfalls of social media and how best to manage it.

But these are two remarkable young women and, presented with the challenge of a global pandemic, they both set about finding creative ways to manage. Both are already making their mark on the world through their art, are politically and globally aware and have voices that are starting to be heard. Katie, along with a collective she formed at Laban, has already begun making films and

sharing these in festivals and Nafisah talked about how she has enjoyed experiences of working with artists such as Akram Khan who have inspired her to break away from years of codified training.

This is no 'woe-is-me' episode. This is an episode filled with hope, love, care and possibility. Yes ...we talk about what the industry is demanding of young dancers right now but most excitingly we talk about how these young dancers are starting to push back against that expectation and make changes in a world that, let's be honest, is ready for the shake-up.

Talking Moves is a Greenwich Dance production

Presented by Melanie Precious

Production by Carmel Smith, Lucy White and Melanie Precious

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Intro

Melanie:

Hello and welcome to Talking Moves a podcast from Greenwich Dance where dance artists come together to talk about their work and practice, the things that matter and the issues which move them. I'm Melanie Precious and in this episode, I'll be talking to two artists about breaking through. I've not needed to write this episode's introduction, it was done for me by guest Katie Serridge, who emailed me with an offer to discuss the challenges facing emerging artists at this time. Although the impact of COVID has been widespread and deeply felt across our industry Katie said, it has uniquely upended the attempts of emerging artists to enter the sector. I believe that the perspectives and reflections of new artists is a unique opportunity to engage with the challenges revealed to us this past year. And it's our pleasure to say that here she is, along with Nafisah Baba, BBC Young Dancer 2017 to talk about those very challenges. Welcome both of you.

Katie:

Thank you so much Melanie.

Nafisah:

Thank you for having us.

Melanie:

Pleasure. So both of you are early in very exciting careers. Katie, you graduated from Laban in 2019. So just minutes before the sector shut down. I wondered if you could briefly tell us how you came to dance and what your training course was like. So just remind us of the reason you're here really.

Katie:

I think my journey into dance, it felt really necessary. I was always very academically minded, and it was always something that was more my trajectory. And then I kind of got to it was like, actually, I really hate maths. And I really hate biology, in fact, but this entire time, I was always doing youth classes and had like local dance school that I was very heavily involved in. And then it was in a youth company and then went to Laban. And then after Laban, I did a post grad at Copenhagen Contemporary Dance School, which finished in December 2019. So it was straight out of that move back to London. And then eight weeks later, nothing. I was back in my childhood home with Barbie on the walls.

Melanie:

Wow. Almost literally as soon as you finished your training bang, the doors came down. So let's hop over to Nafisah then so admittedly you've had a few more years in the business and you won BBC Young Dancer in 2017. How did you choose dance as your career? Take us through what that's consisted of so far.

Nafisah:

It's a big question. I think I feel like dance kind of chose me without sounding too cringy. I've always done it. It was the thing my mum put me into to keep me still, I'll never forget, my mom showed me this. I think it's an episode of the Teletubbies where they used to have these guest people coming in to like juggle or dance or do different acts. And I remember well, my mum remembers seeing a tap dancer on the TV. And she just came in and found me at two and a half years old trying to copy. I think from there she thought okay, well this could be something. She took me to my first class. I refused to dance. I was standing there in my small tutu and I was just so nervous to have people watching but found beauty and the relief in dance from such a young age. And I loved it. So from there, I started doing tap and ballet and modern through the ISTD and RAD grades. And then when I was also juggling my exams and schoolwork as well and my violin. So I remember having my violin bag, my music folder, my ballet stuff, my swimming bag, like running to class after school, it was all very hectic, but I loved every minute of it. So from there, I joined the West London School of Dance, where I started taking ballet bit more seriously and I would say that's where my passion and true artistry really grew and developed there. I was really lucky to have incredible teachers. And from there, I joined Tring Park School for the Performing Arts for three years just for sixth form. And then that was just a whole whirlwind of you know, as you can imagine, a performing art school can be of a whirlwind of so many experiences, people and dance training as well. I'd never done contemporary before. So you know, when the teacher first said, Okay, take your socks off, I was kind of like perfect dancing, but my pointe shoes. So it's just a very new experience. I'm very grateful for the friends and the training, the experiences I had. I would say they've definitely been a foundation for who I am now as an artist and as a person. And then from there, unfortunately, I had a back injury. So I wasn't able to audition for as many ballet companies as that was my endtime goal. And one audition I did was for a postgraduate contemporary company called Chrysalis London, and I knew I would be able to

recover safely there. So I stayed still doing ballet classes, thinking you know, I'm going to be in Alvin Ailey or English National Ballet, but also deep down knowing my path, but not being able to admit it. And from there, that's when I won BBC Young Dancer. And overnight it was just being thrown into a world and it was manic, beautiful. So many different ways to describe it. From there. I would say that's where my real life journey really started. And I delved into the world contemporary dance, and I've been lucky to perform and tour and work with many different choreographers and companies. Most recently, I was working with ZooNation in Message in a Bottle which unfortunately, like Katie we arrived there and were expecting to go on tour and you know, new journey and then obviously COVID kind of ruined things. So yeah, who I am now.

Melanie:

So you were in Messaging in a Bottle, were you when COVID hit? That's...

Nafisah:

Yes, yeah, just one week before going on tour.

Melanie:

Goodness me. Goodness me. Katie, can you remember back to lockdown 1.0? What happened? What did you feel? Tell us a bit more about that period.

Katie:

Oh, goodness, it feels like a kind of lifetime ago. It was such a bizarre period of uncertainty. I feel like with lockdowns now it's like we know what it is we know what's coming, we know how to navigate it a little bit more. Whereas it was such an open ended period of confusion. And so I was working at the time in a cafe, I got fired because they didn't want to pay me furlough. So I didn't have a job. Nothing was open of course. All my housemates in London had gone home. So I didn't want to be in the flat by myself. So I went back to my parents house, you know, I just moved back from Copenhagen. I was living independently, I was beginning to get auditions, beginning to get some thing happening, just out of graduating and I was back in London ready to explore the scene a bit. You know, take professional classes and work, try the freelance thing try and work it out. But absolutely swept out from under my feet. It was really, really hard. And it hit so differently for me and my friends, my peer group, as well as those who were in the year below me. It was just a case of like, we didn't have any jobs lined up that were cancelled, didn't have any tours lined up that were, it's okay, I've always got that to go back to it was like I was trying to make something and now everyone's like clinging to their resources as tightly to their chest as possible. Because of course, please do that, because it's perilous and unknown. But it was like there was no room for us to grab or hold on to anything, every single grant, like self employed, like benefits, nothing was available, because you all had to be a freelancer for at least a year. It was a complete crash of everything that I'd worked up for. That's not to say that it was entirely awful. And it sounds very melodramatic when I say it like that. But I think it

really was hard. But it did give me a lot of opportunity to rather than running at full speed. It gave me a lot of time to stop and think and look and analyse what the dance industry was what was I about to enter into? What did I think of that? What is it like to see these really successful companies them struggling and how, as a society, we had to take this pause, we had to stop, it wasn't so go, go go, we had to pause and stop and reflect. And I think that that really opened itself to new possibilities. And it's sort of throwing all the pieces up in the air and seeing where they fall and seeing how we can change or what could we do better. And I think that I found really valuable and really exciting and I think as we're beginning to open up now I don't want it to go back to how it was I don't want there to be this aspiration of we need to get back to February 2020 and then build from there. I think it's like we have an opportunity now we can do better. There's so many more voices that are important that need to be heard. And it's not just those who have the financial means to speak it's like there's so many more.

Melanie:

I'm going to find out from you both a little bit later what your perspective is on that sector given your place in it and what's just happened but your story is really heart wrenching actually because we have talked on this podcast to a number of artists about cancelling. But you're saying something quite different happened to you. There wasn't anything to cancel. Those doors just didn't open at the end of your training course where for other years before you they would have done. Opportunities would have started to line up, you would have started to get in your queues for your auditions send your CVs away, all that kind of thing and you had no one to send them to. Yeah, that's quite a unique position you found yourself in. Nafisah, what did it feel like for you? Admittedly you were on contract and so your contract was cancelled but how did you cope back then and lockdown 1.0? And did you also do a Katie and come home? For a bit of support?

Nafisah:

Yes. Before I say that, I just want to say Katie just said that so perfectly! Yeah, just the way you worded that especially the second half it just then yeah, I really felt that. Got a bit emotional listening to that. And so just to remember that like even speaking to some of my friends like like, however we feel it's just so valid no matter what external factors may downplay that validity, like everything we felt as an industry is very valid. Yeah, it's want to say very well said. But how I coped, I against was living independently. I'd moved to Plaistow or Plaistow, I don't know how to say it, to be near for rehearsals. Everything was sweet. And then it was Friday the 13th. We were told there may be a possibility we will have to sit down in the theatre but we all thought I would be okay and then Saturday we just said see you guys tomorrow. Can't wait for the last show and that was the last time we really saw each other. But that was it, there was no goodbye it was just come and pick up your stuff. So at first it was like someone literally just taken scissors and just cut the string. I felt like I was in a bit of a limbo kind of like okay, well I'm living here I've got all my stuff in the theatre. You know what's happening. Was trying to get information from Sadler's Wells and but nobody had the information to give. So we just thought we'll be back in three weeks time. It'll be okay. You know, I think the reality of it hadn't really started yet. Of course, as there was more news reports being

offloaded onto us as well. So I moved back to my family home. And if I'm honest, just for personal reasons, I would have said lockdown one, as stressful as it was, was the most calm for me, because I, for the first time realised, I haven't stopped for four years. So I'd never had a break to really just be and be still and to process and reflect before moving on to the next thing. So I discovered many tools to find calm within that chaos. So I wasn't on social media, not that I cut myself off, but I just started prioritising myself and what I'm allowing into my space. I'm very spiritual. So I was really trying to not control but modify what I was allowing into my aura to affect me because I was just getting so anxious having panic attacks, too scared to go out. So I thought, okay, Nafisah, you've got to remove the gangrene if I can say that before it spreads to the body, and then you can't get out of bed. And I know when I discussed it with many other artists, they felt the same way. They just had to kind of remove and distance themselves a little. So I bought a bike or went out for walks, I was really lucky I have a job. It's not very glamorous, I call it my muggle job. But it's working in like a bookstore, warehouse. But it's not a quaint bookstore where you have nice coffee is like a warehouse, very manual, it's cold, there's no heating, spiders, all that kind of thing. So my boss, luckily was like, I understand what's happening. I respect the arts, he always says, if you need to take time off, just let me know and go and do your thing and come back and I'll put you on furlough. So I went back to there, which was great. So I was really able to distance myself from what was really happening in a sense. But then without going too into detail, unfortunately, in June, due to a siblings mental health, I then had to leave my home that day and was living out of a suitcase, I was homeless until I found a place for after two, three months. So then after that lockdown just completely took a different turn. And it was more focusing on family, self and stability and security rather than the dance world. So it's really weird to have fond memories of lockdown one. But I believe it's purely because of the calm I was able to find before everything happened. And it's interesting talking to many other people who have had similar issues with themselves or other family members, I think what hasn't really been spoken about almost the traumas that have happened during lockdown. So families may be passing away or friends, dealing with that or having to be uprooted, perhaps domestic violence, all those kinds of things that are really important. Even children who if they weren't at school, would anyone really know they were alive? If that makes sense? I don't know. So there's a lot of things within that, that hadn't really been spoken about yet I think.

Melanie:

You're so right Nafisah, and both of you have really got as I said, heart wrenching stories there in that thing about trauma. I think it's so true. We haven't given ourselves much time yet, have we, to process it. And as you pointed out, Katie, we feel a bit expert in lockdowns now. Where as that first one, what was a lockdown? We'd never experienced a lockdown before someone to tell us we weren't allowed to go out of our houses. So we really have come on a journey in this last year. And that's without all of those other multiple and complex layers that you've both been talking about in terms of family and finances and your career, this thing that you love that is part of you. And I think that's what we've come to so many times on the podcast is about how dance isn't just the job we do. It's the people that we are and so it's so wrapped up. So thinking about some of that it made me smile wryly to myself when I was reading things about people making bread and knitting and finding all these skills, which I certainly didn't have time to do. It was just existing. But Katie, you said in your

email that you formed a collective with some like minded graduates, and you started to seek funding not to pay yourselves, but I think you put it as something to do, which I thought was really interesting. Could you tell us a little bit more about that and what you did together?

Katie:

Well, it was with a collective that I've already been a part of we formed at Laban, it's called the mass hysteria collective. And we're 12 female, identifying dance artists and our hysterical movement makers, and what's really amazing, actually, after Laban we all went across eight or nine different countries that we all come from, and I was at home in my childhood bedroom, and I really related to so much of what you said Nafisah in that I did have those weeks where I didn't get out of bed. And that was what I did. But then reaching out and seeing my friends or even just to meet to chat online and to hear their experiences. And then we were like, We're all in this together. We were 12 of us all struggling and I think we got asked by Laban to make a work and we like, jumped on it and it was for tiny, tiny fee like pennies, and we were like yes, all in Let's go do it. It was nothing, you know, the amount that we got, but we just wanted to make something we wanted to do something and it was better than lying in bed on TikTok because I mean, that was what I was doing. But it's those tiny things or they're sort of like passion projects that have happened in lockdown rather than a big commission or a funding opportunity that the things that have happened have all been out of pure love and like I'm passionate about this thing, therefore I'm going to make it across the whole sector really. And it's like that's really beautiful especially in the first lockdown where it was this period of uncertainty that it was like okay, we had to really strip everything back and be like okay, what needs to happen and what we contribute in terms of what we need is the things that are most important to us. So it was like sharing those tiny projects and those things that we really could put all of ourselves into because we had nothing else to do.

Melanie:

You had nothing else. And when you did that, so is Tulips for Polly one of those films because that's been at a couple of little festivals so actually, I know you're thinking you haven't done very much but as I read what you'd done I was super impressed at what you've managed to do at a time when the industry's literally been at standstill.

Katie:

Yeah, I mean Tulips for Polly was such a passion project and I can't really believe it even like it was filmed on my friend Polly's phone, and I'm still applying with it to little small festivals and things like this today like it was shown a week ago at The Point in Eastleigh and it's like I can't believe it's still going almost but it came from nothing this tiny little film but it kind of really speaks to the need to make and my need to get something out and that resilience of when there's nothing else to do we still make and I find that really amazing as artists and yeah.

Melanie:

And so Nafisah, thinking about you and how you were staying creative at that time those seeds as Katie was talking about that, that then stand to grow. Were you making anything? How did you stay sane?

Nafisah:

I stayed creative, but I honed in on to things that I always wanted to do but didn't have time. So it sounds really silly, but I am really big into my crystals and wearing my crystal jewellery. So I got into... you as well Katie?

Katie:

Yeah, I love Yeah. Oh, God,

Nafisah:

That makes me smile.

Katie:

Incense, crystals. Love it, love it.

Nafisah:

Yes, sage. Cool when I tell some of my friends they're like, are you okay? You going through something?

Katie:

So true. But it's like, obviously, when you like live, sleep, eat in your room, and like, I need to change the vibe. So I'm like getting my incense out. And I'm like, Okay, now I'm ready to relax or totally.

Nafisah:

And it makes such a difference as well. It's almost like it's a nice guide to have, even if it's not real, or whatever it is. It's just, I believe when something is real to you, when there's evidence that it works. And it's a guide, I guess, almost like an invisible mentor, I think you have to cling on to anything that gets you through.

Katie:

Yeah.

Nafisah:

And I also wanted to say congratulations as well to you. And I feel like that's proof that like an artist isn't necessarily about you know, being on stage and constantly working and doing that you don't need to have the external validation to be an artist. It's what comes from within. And I wish I'd known that or been aware of that from years ago. But to be able to be in your position, considering everything you've gone through, I think you should be really proud of yourself.

Katie:

Thank you,

Nafisah:

And your friends.

Melanie:

Nafisah I was gonna talk to you about the getting a break. So you know, we were talking about this episode as being breaking through and I feel that you absolutely you've talked about it got your breakthrough that BBC Young Dancer. But that's quite a new way for dancers to get their break and reality TV I can imagine perhaps isn't as sympathetic or maybe it was, how did that feel for you? Was it awesome? Was it terrifying? What was that experience, like in terms of you breaking into the industry and how supported were you as you came out of that experience?

Nafisah:

I would say the whole experience so many emotions, it was terrifying. It was beautiful. It was welcoming, I couldn't have been more supported during that competition from the Sadler's Wells team, the staff, and also the other, I don't want to say competitors because I didn't see it as a competition. But my friends, we were so supportive of each other and there was no bad blood or energy at all, which was amazing. But I came from, you know, not even being able to look at myself in the mirror dancing to suddenly having to overnight, turn my phone off from the messages and things like that. So it was there was no in between it was just suddenly being catapulted. And of course, I'm very grateful for that. And I don't know where I would be without it. But I wish I'd had more tools on coping and also finding familiarity of the dance world. Because suddenly, there was all these opportunities. I didn't have an agent, my mum was my PA. So my mum doesn't really know anything about dance. So she's like, Well, why can't you just go to a heels audition for five hours for free. And it's like mum, like the first thing is I'm not a heels dancer. The last I put on my heels was to go to the nightclub. And that's not the kind of dancing and they want to see for five hours, it was being completely thrown into a world that I felt a bit like Bambi with skates on ice. And I did so many things for free and so many opportunities and thinking I had to go for everything. So I wish I'd had more

support in terms of bridging the gap between everything that happened and what's the next step, and also the maturity of it because I would have said I was not mature at all. And not that I was immature. I just was so inexperienced, and very fragile and vulnerable. I just wish I had had a mentor I guess I know I did. But it's more having somebody more like an agent than a mentor. You can reach out if you need help, because as somebody who is almost afraid to reach out or difficult to reach out it would have been nice to have someone by my side to say this is right, this isn't right. But I wouldn't take anything away from that experience. Definitely.

Melanie:

It's an interesting thing that actually isn't it when you say that about a mentor or someone that can be out there in front that perhaps knows that sector that has got perhaps some of that maturity, allowing you to grow up allowing you to be immature, you're meant to be immature at that age, but we talked a few podcasts back to Andrew Gardiner and Charlotte Edmonds, about resilience and the need for it in our industry. And then a bit later, with Jorge Crecis and Claire Cunningham, they talked about resilience as well. And we touched on the demands of training and the versatility that the sector is expecting from dancers like yourself, and I wondered really picking up on what you said earlier, Katie, about your standing your viewpoint of the sector, from where you are now, what do you think the sector is asking of you? And how do you remain resilient? Under the pressure of those demands? Do you think?

Katie:

I think when there was that period of like upheaval, and letting the pieces fall, and as someone who is inexperienced in the industry, looking at it, and then asking why, to a lot of things, I really found myself disagreeing with the martyrdom of the dancer and the I will do anything for you this person, this white sis, hetero normative, neurotypical, non disabled white man, like, inherently, it just did not sit right. And I was reluctant to kind of follow that path of like, I will film the kind of things I think you want to see. And you know, spend hours editing show reels and CVs. And because it was so much work for absolutely nothing at the end of it. Because if I'm in an application process, and there's someone who's already had three years experience in the industry, touring and performing, of course, they'll pick them over me. So what's the like, it was just like really difficult to compete against any of that, but also that thing of freelancers constantly competing against each other for roles to be in a certain position, but no, I kind of really wish that the industry would support all of us individually, rather than jarring us against each other. I think I saw that the industry demanded me to be a certain type of person, it demanded that I was extroverted and big and colourful and constantly online. And I'm really not that I'm really a quiet person. I love to think, I love to read, I fill scores of notebooks. But all of a sudden, I was demanded to know exactly who I was as an artist, know exactly what I stood for. And this is all something that evolves and changes constantly. And I felt very intimidated, especially at first. But it was also realising that I found it very elitist and very exclusive. And I also have a real interest in inclusive practices and inclusive teaching especially but then from that, also realising how inaccessible a lot of the sector is how inaccessible it is to be able to spend weeks and weeks and weeks on an application, then wait three months for a response and still

maybe not get it like I need to pay rent in that time. And what do I do in the meantime, that I do have my muggle job as I love how you call it Nafisah. And I think we should talk about it more like Don't be ashamed, like, tell me how you pay your rent, because but even that, it's like, you know, if I spend four days of my week at my muggle job, then I only have three days to be able to fully be in my creative thing. And then it just takes so much longer because I need to work than it would from someone who is like a regularly funded company or has a secure job, or who's already being artistic in a studio already flexing and working and building those muscles. Rather than I have about four different muggle jobs. But I'm mainly a nanny. I know that everyone in the industry has had those really difficult starting years of it's hard to break through. But I think when all of my online sharings, or my work has been shared online, it loses its validity at the moment almost or like it doesn't have the same weight as I toured here, or I did this workshop and this workshop, and I did this, this and this. My CV is still majority online work, like because I had like three or four performances in those eight weeks that I was in London and it wasn't COVID times yet. But it's not viewed in the same way these online iterations and performances and things that I had so. So many different tangents and so sorry.

Melanie:

No, you're not at all. You're really painting a picture of what you're struggling with. I mean, I remember back to being that jobbing dancer myself and the muggle jobs and I had millions of them. And like you say, if you're a nanny, you can't just dip off to an audition even if there were auditions so easily. And I remember something that I always used to ask myself of my friends who were much better at staying industry fit than I was they would go to class every day and I was like, a, how do you afford it and b, how on earth are you building your day around that because I'm at work I can't do that. And that was another question that I had for you both really is how did you imagine staying industry ready pre COVID? But how are you doing that now? How are you training and stay fit to dance in the situation that we're in now? Nafisah, there's lots in the air. And I know that there's a reaction to what Katie's just said, which is quite immense as well. What are you feeling?

Nafisah:

I completely resonate, I understand, I hear what you're saying. And I think how you feel is very valid, totally. Where you are now is, first of all, something that's helped me is remembering that like, everything is temporary. Positive, maybe some negative, everything is temporary. But also, you have to do what you have to do to survive and to get by. And I've had those same points where I'm like, oh, everyone has the time, the freedom to be on social media and to be there and to do this, and I feel that pressure, but it's like, if it's not, you, don't do it. Because I found, I mean, for me, social media makes me itch. I hate having to promote and to always be like, Hey, look at me, guys. I'm doing this and doing that. And when I do that, it's some of it's for myself, but it's kind of for the validation to show, I am still here, look at me. And I think when you get so lost into that you can lose yourself in it, because validity isn't going to pay the bills. I mean, it could give you stability, in some senses, but in other senses, in the practical sense, it might not I mean, how real is social media, really. So it's to remind yourself that just because other people or people around you, maybe in your eyes, doing

everything, and then never undermines your position or your place, or what you've done or how you're feeling is just something that they are doing, and you are just in your position. And it's really difficult.

Melanie:

Is it something you use Nafisah, do you use social media to promote yourself as a dancer very much? Or do you use it just as a recreational tool? Or do you just avoid completely?

Nafisah:

I mean, a bit of all three, because now I'm teaching Danceworks really want me to promote and to share my class. So I do that sometimes. And I started turning off my notifications, and hiding how many people can see who's likes my post, because as weird as that sounds, that used to really affect me. So I've made it more my professional account rather than personal. And it's really benefited me for my mental health, just not feeling that pressure. But I know it's important. I know, I'm able sometimes to get more not jobs, but opportunities come or collaborations from sharing my work. So it's like a catch 22.

Melanie:

So it's a tool, but you need to put your protections around it. I like that idea of taking away the visibility of likes as a part of that resilience. It's going right, that's going to affect me, so I'm going to find a little protection.

Nafisah:

It's a boundary. And I think boundaries are, I mean, personal boundaries, internet, social media, boundaries really need to be put into place and focused on. I think it's important.

Melanie:

And what else do you think the sector is demanding of you going to the question that I've put over there to Katie, in terms of flexibility, perhaps versatility? Do you find that? Pigeonholing has come up in a number of other podcasts with other artists that they just feel that they get put in a box and find it hard to break out of that box. That affect you at all? Or are you able to navigate that?

Nafisah:

Definitely it can be hard sometimes when people will see you in a certain light and think that's who they are. And it's always people that don't really know you. But I feel like in that case, You've almost got to create your own box. And in that sense, not meaning to go out there and say, This is who I am, everyone looked at me but just internally know who you are. Because I think when you're so strong

rooted in who you are, easier said than done to say, Oh, nothing can break you down. That's very easy to say. But it's when you have a strong core and sense of who you are, it's almost like the external can't affect you as much because you know who you are. And you've validated yourself rather than needing it from external factors. But I would say the requirements, what I found is to have a really open mind, strong improvisational skills, and weirdly found the last half year auditions asking dancers and creatives to have a strong presence. So I don't know if I can look in the mirror and say yes, I've got a strong presence. That's the right thing for me. It's a very strange thing I've seen. Or stage presence. I would say to be adaptable, almost be like a sponge to take corrections quickly. Because we don't have time to go over for 50 million times, unfortunately, for people like me who are a bit slow, but also the ability to really hone in on to skills that you may not have trained in before or worked in. And I did a bit of r&d with Akram Khan, I haven't been working much at all, that's just one of the very few projects I've had over lockdown. And I thought great, I can be calm we're gonna be doing contemporary, and I was so excited. And then because it was for Jungle Book the first day was like okay, take out your phone, and we're going to look at a video of a bear for an hour. And you're going to be the bear and be the bear not as a human, but being the animal. And so at first people were like, hang on what's going on here? We thought we'd be like spinning and doing this. But it was really cool to almost strip off that training and having to stand in first and to really almost kind of go back was an evolution to what we were before being programmed to turn off feet and to do this. So it was a really interesting experience. And I've never had to work like that before. So that was another stark reminder for years and graduating that I can't be expected to always know what I'm doing will be the expert in everything I do. And there's a beauty in that if you allow yourself to immerse in it, but I would also say how to stay industry ready. I would say mental health is a huge part to play in this industry and not practising self care, whatever that may be. Personally that really affected me prior to COVID and I will even aware of it. So while it's so stuck in our faces, I believe the best way to move forward and to be industry ready, and in quotation marks is to truly unintentionally take time for yourself, mind body, spirit, everything, especially as a creative, but I know when I'm the best version of myself, I just benefits mean short term and long term as well as the environments I'm in and the people I'm around or working with. And it's just healthy rather than thinking about body and staying fit. Yeah, so I've spoken a lot.

Melanie:

No, no, no, there's some amazing advice there. And I really liked that synergy of Katie, you saying I don't know how I can be expected to know the artist I am and Nafisah you saying you need to know the person you are. And I think there is a difference. But that's really interesting to think maybe you don't need to know what artist you are. But as long as you know the person you are, you know, you'll have the space and time to find the artists through your journey. And then all those other excellent pieces of advice you had there Nafisah, about how to deal with that versatility and that beautiful idea of trying to leave the training behind. And I suppose everybody has been in that very same boat as well over this last year soon. So it's not like one person's been scooping up all the jobs. So there might be some sort of calm to be found in that shared experience, perhaps.

Nafisah:

And also, it's really quickly just wanted to say what you said about the person and the artist when it comes from the person and you are your person no one can take that away from you because it's yours. And no one is you. I'm being a massive hypocrite. I always say to people do as I say not what I do. But it's something that helps me when I think Oh god, I'm not doing this. I'm not getting this many likes, and I'm like, hang on a minute, am I thinking of the artist? Perhaps? Am I thinking about my ego? Am I thinking about the person I am, the experiences I've had, and that really humbles me sometimes.

Melanie:

Yeah, I think that Katie, even you emailed her hope you don't mind me quoting you, okay, on your CV and the little bio that you sent over to me, it felt that you are already making your artistic mark on the world through your art, and you do have something very much to say and want to be heard. And you described yourself as an emerging queer dance artist and choreographer passionate about the power of storytelling to convey the diverse experiences of those othered by inherited structures and societal norms. And I wondered if you'd tell us more about those issues that you're trying to uncover and talk about and explore through the making of your art. As and when you have funding to be able to do it, tell us what it is you want to say.

Katie:

Gosh, I think that the like societally or speaking a bit more broadly, there's a lot that we have inherited in terms of structures and ways of doing things that they weren't made by us, and don't serve us in the same way. Maybe it'd be good actually, for me to talk through my most recent work, going back to crystals and looking into witchcraft, and the femicide of the 1600s of European witch trials. And a research I've been doing is kind of exploring how the elimination of women's voices led to the beginnings of a kind of more capitalist societal model was only made by men, and only made by white, again, heterosexual non disabled voices. And these kind of pillars of how we kind of begun have been kind of bled through the generations. And the kind of impact of this femicide is still being affected today. And I think, through my craft, and through my research, I want to be able to represent an option of not doing that, I want to show that there are other possibilities to existing other than by the ones pre dictated to us, for us and kind of putting women's voices first and I am passionate about sharing women's voices and young women's voices. As often it feels as though we need to have other people backing us in order for our own voice to be heard. So I need to have the support of this organisation, or I need to have already worked with this company, or I need to have, you know, these bigger companies and regularly funded organisations to and these are the people that have the most audiences and the most views and but then there's the freelance cohort of people who are incredibly socially relevant and politically involved and making really great work. And I think I just want to amplify voices and opinions and subject matters that aren't so much heard. And I think this is what I mean, I still haven't really nailed it yet. I feel like I'm still in the process, because I kind of have this vision of wanting to do so much. And I know that is all like, I've not really had the opportunity yet to really flex it or really, like get into it yet just because of lack of funding and doing

my muggle jobs. And so it's all subject to change and it's all subject to flux, but it's kind of hopefully that made some kind of sense.

Melanie:

I'm in awe as I listen to you, because I remember graduating from college and not having a single thought in my head, other than going along to an audition. I wasn't thinking about society or my political voice or my place in the world, anything like that. And I think there's something quite amazing happening in schools at the moment, in terms of the generation of dancers, the intelligence that's coming through is just wonderful. And the questioning you have of the world and your place in it. And what you might be able to do with your art to make a difference is amazing. I was never thinking about making a difference. I was just coming out as a selfish dancer wanting to be in cats or something, you know, I really was not thinking anything bigger than that. And I never got there. BTW. So I have so much respect for what you're doing. And I can recognise that building that CV as you've talked about is really tricky at the moment through the past year you've had and that feels like something that you really need to do, but it feels to me like you are really making headway getting there. Nafisah, you have enjoyed a career thus far of various productions and companies. And I wondered whether, and I say this really cautiously because we've had a guest on the podcast that's talked about the hierarchy of dancer and choreographer, and how there's this sort of implied sense that you are a dancer, and then you graduate to choreographer, which isn't the case at all. But do you have any interest in making or is dance for you an outlet for you to express yourself? What is it doing to you in terms of how it's feeding you? And where do you see, do you see your future mapped out ahead of you? And what might that look like?

Nafisah:

Well, gosh. That's a big question.

Melanie:

I'm not asking small questions in this podcast, am I. They're all big questions. They're all multiple questions.

Nafisah:

It's good though.

Melanie:

Just when we're all feeling nothing, if not challenging,

Nafisah:

No it's good. I don't know where to start. I think lockdown was definitely a pivotal moment for many people, but myself personally, but it's really weird. I don't know, if you have seen the film Soul? The new Disney film, the meaning behind it is just there just so many quotes in it. And from watching that it was like something clicked. And I was at a stage when I kind of thought, right, well, I've been a vessel for other people's voices and stories for so many years. And I've loved it. And it's been great. But I kind of thought, where's my voice in all of it? And how can I articulate it because I realise in college, maybe it's different now. But we were never really taught how to articulate our voices and our concerns and our needs. We're taught to articulate our left finger and you know, our back and everything in our body. But what about the thing that matters the most, which is our voice. And I see the voice of it houses the building. That was a really big form of while everything I thought I in quotation marks should be doing, you know, graduating, getting a job and staying in that job for years, and then graduating to principal and doing all of that. And that was my thoughts upon leaving college. But then I realised, well from watching Soul, it's like, what's my purpose? What's my legacy? What do I want people to say about me? And not in an egotistical way, but like, what have I done for the community? If I'm not here, what is left? Basically, what's my legacy? I really wanted to get into teaching and I love choreographing as well. But something that I'll never forget from the competition was a Facebook post. And they just mentioned that I had won. And there's a girl who commented and she must have been about 12 or 13. But she said she won and she looks like me. I mean, it still gives me shivers to this day thinking about it. But back then, I was like, wow, the pressure, oh my gosh, I've got this responsibility. But now I'm looking back. And it's like the beauty of it. And the doors I can open for other people who look like me or who don't look like me. And so taking baby steps, I would love to have a company or a mentoring scheme, specifically something that bridges the gap between graduating and then postgraduate into the professional world because that's where I feel like I needed the most help and speaking to other people, and also my peers, like we've really struggled with the mentality and the physicality. It's almost like the rug gets pulled under you when you leave college. It's like, okay, off, you go into the world. And it's like, well, how do I find my feet and manage and you kind of realise everything or some things you learned in college, aren't real for everybody. It's like this one path. But it's like, there's 50 people in my year, we all cannot go down that path, or what if you don't want to go down that path. So I've jumped around a little bit. And I've started teaching and getting confident and choreographing and then I'm hoping to somehow have a collective or small company and I want to say apply for funding. Someone once said to me really recently that you don't have to go to the big funding people. There are other means to get funding so you could get a patron or be sponsored or directly get in contact with somebody who has an appreciation for the arts and respect rather than having to go through the gruelling process. So yeah, basically to answer the question, I'm in the baby steps of it, but I recently applied to be an ISTD trustee. As I grew up in ISTD, and RAD environment and as much as it's great to have the foundation, I would love to see more variety on the courses. So maybe like African dance or things that haven't really been thought about because everything there's Greek, there's disco dancing, rock and roll, but it's like, I know when I graduated, I had this dream of being in Alvin Ailey. That's I have the posters everywhere and I learned all the dances but when I told my head of year, it was well Nafisah, you have to work very hard to get there. There was never okay, how can you do it? It's only when I left college. I met a teacher who said okay, have you done Horton before. And I was like, who? What's Horton? Not realising that's the core thing in Alvin Ailey. And to know for years, I've been

communicating this to the people around me and no one had once mentioned it, it really hit me. I said it. Yeah. So without going down that path, it's just like, Well, okay, how can I be that person I didn't have. And that's what's really pushing me forward into this path is an unknown path right now. I'm on the pathway, like UK to you, it can feel like all these things are above us sometimes. And we have all these desires. And we feel like, gosh, how can I do it, but it's taking the small steps rather than trying to reach the bigger picture straight away, just really want to see change that as well as saying, I want to be the change and very active. So there's a very long answer. I don't know, what's the question.

Melanie:

But absolutely, I just wanted to pick up on that thing you said then about being a trustee because thinking about some tips for listeners that might be thinking about how to build that CV, how to try and network at a time when that's so difficult things like applying for trustees, places on boards is really interesting. Obviously, there's a drawback you're probably not paid, right? So there's, that to factor in but there's some really clever ways that you're getting yourself seen and heard that people might not have thought about and I wondered if there's anything else from either of you really tips that you found things that you've done that help you to build the sphere of influence that you have around yourselves.

Nafisah:

The people I have around me, it's so important to have not only supportive people, but people that hear you understand, listen, care and want to see win as well. Having those balanced friendships, whether they are creatives or not, is vital. And I found over lockdown being very isolated from the dance world, and then doing certain things and almost like finding soulmates in every single dance environment I've been in, it's like, wow, I really realised the importance of the people I allow in my space and the spaces that I put myself into. Because I see conversations and meetings as energy exchanges. So if you have great energy, and have a, an incredible bounce and conversation, it's like, wow, I've learned so much from you, I'm so inspired, that rubs off on me, and you can feel it. And sometimes it's what you feel but also it's subconscious. So it's been very wary of who you are around the time you spend and what you allow into your system. Spiritually, mentally and emotionally.

Melanie:

I love that analogy, energy exchanges, it should be what meetings are now renamed and any that are not energetic could just be binned. Waste of time especially on Zoom when they're all sapped through those rectangles. Katie, how about you have you got anything that you've learned over the past year tips for other people that are struggling as you have done, but you found some really creative ways that I don't think you're quite giving yourself enough credit for?

Katie:

Yeah, immediately what comes to mind is just to echo Nafisa is, who you have around, you already are invaluable who you surround yourself with who you align with on many different levels, whether that's you think the same way or you have the same opinions about certain things or know who is in your tribe, or like you know, who you have around you like and it could be in places you wouldn't expect or know you've still got a cheerleader in your old dance school or you've still got your peers or maybe there's someone in the year below or the year above you at school who you always admired or they always admired you or a friend you met at a show once or someone who you were in a breakout room with on Zoom that you connected with and and speak to them and talk about your ideas and talk about where you are and don't insulate yourself from verbalised things, because then it's out in the world. And then something listens and something comes back and keep talking. Especially, because sometimes the talking is the first part of the making. Maybe there's nothing groundbreaking in that. But I think it's really valuable. And I know that it has been hard, especially when all of my opportunities have been online to really feel as you say, the piece of this like energy exchange that I really understand exactly what you mean by that. And I know that that's been hard to replicate in an online setting, but it's still been there. And I think we know when we connect with someone. Yeah. And I think if nothing else, do it for yourself.

Melanie:

And I think talking can be the first part of making as another fantastic soundbite to take from what your perception of that last year has given us. I think it's very true. So I always end these podcasts are tried to by asking about the ways that an organisation like Greenwich Dance can do things differently and better. Part of the reason for putting these podcasts together is to have these conversations and open my view of how we can support artists like yourself, as well as hear everything that you've got. And hopefully what you've got then is shared with other people that are listening. So I wanted to ask, What do you think you need as a young artist breaking through from an organisation like Greenwich Dance? What could we do better to serve you?

Katie:

I think as a creative or someone that makes, the support in terms of, and I know that that takes many different forms and I know that that can mean many different things, but I think showing up for independent artists and standing by them. Because there's so many different applications, it's who are you with? Just being by yourself is not enough. Who can prove to us that you can do this job well, or who is supporting you that validates you, you know, just showing up for artists, respond to emails, even if it's just we approach and ask for a partnership of some kind, even if that's not available, let us know. And really, especially online, that's been my only way of getting to know people like, of course, I can join a Zoom call. But if we're all have to be on mute, then there's only so much I can do in that setting. So I think it's like engaging with freelancers and allowing a conversation to be had essentially. Not this, I want to protect my own or keep who I have close to me, as an industry, we're always fluid. We're a fluid body of artists and people and embracing that discussion and change and hybridity of conversations. And I think these kind of pillars of organisations to kind of engage in that fluidity, I think. But just allow for more honest and open

conversation, which, again, is just to quote myself talking is the beginning of making so just to allow that to happen.

Melanie:

Thank you. Nafisah, how about yourself?

Nafisah:

That's a great one. So the first thing that comes to mind for all organisations could be for more like workshops, and more, I don't want to say intensives, I hate the word but things like that, perhaps not just dance, maybe for digital things or not just the superficial and when I say superficial, I don't mean fake, I mean, just on the surface, how to build a profile workshops that are tailored to each individual at every level, so that everybody can be catered for, and to feel like they first of all matter, but also they are still able to do what they love and their passion. And I think the two really important people to focus on would be people just coming out of college, but also people who would be maybe they think they're nearing the end of their career, or they think in their words, my friend says oh I'm an old artist, and they are like 30 and it's like, well, your life is just beginning how can you say you're old. So it's the experiences they've had that have made them think maybe it's my time to end, you know, I would love to prolong my dance career, but I don't have the tools to keep going. So I think focus on that would be great for all organisations.

Katie:

I think also, a lot of support that comes from organisations is like we support one lucky person. It's like, there's so much more than that they're like if you give us pennies, so much can come from that. And it's like, of course you want that. And I really agree in terms of the individualism and these kind of learning methods. But I think there's also the on the job learning, which is invaluable. I also understand it's a funding thing. But what about the people who are unsuccessful who don't get the commission or who don't get that week residency? Yes, please support those. And yes, please, still make those accessible, but there's a whole sector outside of those who are supported. Make it more accessible, make it more inclusive, is close to my heart in terms of like my own values. So it's sort of like how can that

Nafisah:

What you're saying makes sense. I know I totally see it, because it's so easy to say, we need to make it accessible. Let's say, we have four categories, you've got to make sure we fill all these four, but there's more than four categories of all kinds of accessibility and inclusivity. And I don't really like using the word diversity, but I guess inclusivity. So it's very difficult, but I think more conversation, there's so much conversation, but it's okay, now how do we bridge the gap between conversation and then actually putting in the work? Short term, but also long term as well?

Katie:

Exactly.

Nafisah:

I even think to myself, like how can that happen? Like who's in charge, but I don't think anyone is really in charge. I mean, there are gatekeepers, but I think we have to relinquish the power from these gatekeepers for everybody. And then that's where true change can really authentically happen. Does that make sense?

Katie:

Definitely.

Melanie:

So I think we've decided inclusivity, accessibility and bespoke personal support, but I think there's something big about power there Nafisah, about trying to spread that out a little more. And that feels like a really good place to stop. You've both been so generous with your time and your thoughts and your thinking. But if you would like to hear more episodes about subjects moving artists of today, search for Talking Moves wherever you get your podcasts. Don't forget to subscribe, leave a review and spread the word and for more information about Nafisah and Katie, 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 both so very much.