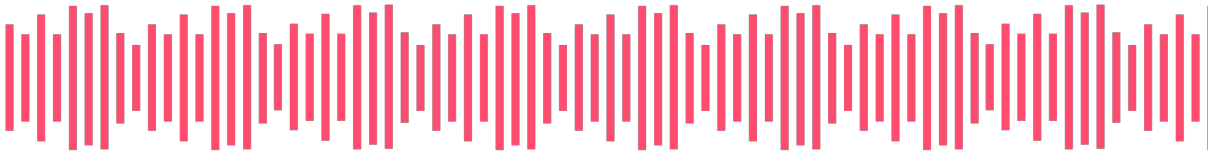


TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

Building Audiences S05 / E01

Episode Description

In this episode, we talk to Deborah Light and Tom Hobden about building audiences for your work.

We make art for people – and if we have no audience, what is the reason for the work? How do we then bring audiences to the work? How do we introduce dance to people who haven't had an opportunity to discover it? And what do we want of them other than to be spectators?

We begin by asking our guests more about their work and the work itself – Deborah making work in Wales with the company Light, Ladd and Emberton as well as being an independent maker and discussing the part installation, – part dance performance Seeds & Bones which incorporates both personal as well as audience stories.

We then move on to discussing the work of UNIT – where Tom Hobden is artistic director and how the pandemic shifted the very local audience to one that is online and from everywhere. We speak about how UNIT is making dance for the “everyday people” and what that means.

A big question that comes up is – what comes first? Do we make work with our audiences in mind, or do our audiences come to our work? We discuss the need to “make things”, regardless of the outcome and the audience participation, and how as makers we need to practice making things without the pressure of who will see it and who will like it.

We discuss how we invite and allow our audiences to participate in the work, and talk about a very special moment being one of a very few number of people experiencing a show.

Finally, we discuss whether everyone does want to dance or take part in dancing – is it for everyone? And who decides what dance is, and what dance isn't?

Talking Moves is a Greenwich Dance production

Presented by Melanie Precious

Production by Carmel Smith, Kajsa Sundström, 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 their issues which moves them. I'm Melanie Precious, and in this episode, I'm talking to two artists about building an audience for your work. We make art for people, don't we? And if we have no audience, then I guess there's no reason for the work. So how then do we bring audiences to the work? How do we introduce dance to people who haven't had an opportunity to discover it? And what do we ask of them other than to be spectators? To mull that over with us, we have Deborah Light: mover, maker, mother and artistic director of Light, Ladd and Emberton, and Tom Hobden. Choreographer, dance educationalist, mentor, a national leader in community dance practice. Welcome both of you. Thanks for finding the time to come together this morning.

Tom:

Hi Mel.

Melanie:

So before we talk about the audiences for your work, let's have a quick chat about the work itself. Deborah your company makes productions that move people physically and emotionally in castles, village halls, theatres, urban spaces and beaches in Wales and beyond. Sounds like somewhere I want to be right now. Tell us more about the work you make.

Deborah:

Bore da. Deborah ydw i. Diolch am y croeso. Good morning. So I'm Deborah, thank you very much for having me. It's lovely to be here. I'm based in Cardiff. And yeah, I refer to myself as a mover, maker and mother. So I make my own work as an individual artist, although that's taken a bit of a backseat while I've had children. And that also co direct a company called Light, Ladd and Emberton. So that's myself Deborah Light working together with Eddie Ladd, Gwyn Emberton and producer Laura

Drane, and we make work in Wales, our work is always bilingual. And none of our work has been for theatre spaces as in a sort of end on audience sat on one side and the performance on the other. Our work has always asked the audience to in some ways be an active participant in the work, or it's an immersive experience where the audience are part of the event.

Melanie:

I think that's going to be really relevant today as we talk about audiences, because you're absolutely right, we are talking about that complex relationship that we're having with audiences that we're asking much more often than just to come into that venue. You've got a piece of work called Seeds and Bones / An Archaeology of me. And I wondered if you've just told us a little bit about that piece that might give listeners a bit more of an understanding of the kind of work that you make, Deborah.

Deborah:

Yep, so this is one of my pieces as an individual artist. And in a way, it's an ongoing research project that helped me navigate having children. So there's been sort of research pockets in between giving birth to three children. And what happened there was I kind of investigated my own family tree, not an extensive family tree, but just to my parents, and my children and my siblings. And that involved bringing an object from each of those people into the space and using those objects to tell the story of my own connections with my own family, but really to reflect on a sort of broader evolutionary history that belongs to all of us. That's a shared history. And so what I really wanted to do was invite the audience into that space, as I'm telling their story alongside telling my own story. So that was set up as an installation space, where people were invited to come and sort of participate in activities, there was a knitting table, there was a table where there was a periodic table, but that asked people what they connected to, rather than the chemical elements. So the first invitation was to come and engage in activity with me in the space alongside them. And then that sort of shifted into a performative section, but people could carry on doing these activities if they wanted. And then what that opened up was a kind of exit into conversation. And that was one phase of it, but it feels like that project is something to go back to now and reimagine what that might be. Is it my story that still told or is it other people's stories that are told.

Melanie:

Really interesting. We're going to unpick some of those elements. I'm really interested in how that brings everything together that invitation, conversation. We'll find out much more about how we're all scaffolding that experience. Tom, UNIT makes exceptionally heartfelt and honest dance for everybody. Can you tell me more about that?

Tom:

Yeah, well sort of so much has changed for me across the pandemic, I sort of feel like there's three different artists, there's kind of something before there's something during and there's something

that's happening kind of now. And that's changed my relationships with audiences a lot as well. I think in the initial instance, there was that sort of sense of making work for theatres and in schools and in village halls, shipping containers, all kinds of sort of different places there. Then we were kind of removed from our audience. So then I kind of went online. I needed to make. I couldn't stop making. I needed to feel like I was doing something and this kind of very local audience I have because I'm based in Suffolk turned into kind of like this nation wide kind of experience, which surprised me and actually something in that was that I did a talk called Dance, Digital and Participation, did it to 450 Community artists all across the country, and then created a YouTube channel that just came out of that. And in that, I didn't really ask about who the audience was going to be at all, I just put it out there and saw what happened. And the audience found me, which has been really fascinating and interesting. And then this kind of third part, where I am now is that we create work that's live in kind of community settings. So we're about to be at the National Horseracing Museum. And we are making work in a school in a theatre again, but I also make work that's online now. And what's really interesting is before I always felt totally located in an area, and now that doesn't feel that way at all. And in fact, it felt something that felt quite perhaps limiting as a community artist at the time to always be stuck in a place, particularly when organisations around me had been really encouraging me to go further and to go in to meet other people. But that's quite hard to do to kind of like land yourself in lots of new areas all of the time. We hear about helicoptering all of the time. And actually, I don't like it. I don't know how to do that. So somehow this online experience has really begun to shift that for me.

Melanie:

That's really interesting. We're gonna get into a little bit of online as well. But you said something there Tom, which leads me so perfectly into my first big question for you both, which is, I think, the million dollar question in a way, what comes first, the dance or the audience? And I was quite interested in what you said about just that need to make and I wonder, it might not always be the same. It might be project related, you know, which comes first dance or audience? And it felt interesting that during the pandemic, the need to make perhaps came first and the audience came later. But yeah, I wondered if you'd talk us through that. And what your thinking process is, if you are considering that audience first before you make.

Tom:

I guess, so many of the times commissions are brought to UNIT, you know, the audience and the community is there. So I guess in a lot of the time, I start to think about who surrounds that community group who supports that community group who connects with that community group. The other thought that literally runs through my head the whole time with UNIT and all the work is, don't laugh, would my mum understand this? Would she come? I think about her a lot. Because in UNIT we talk about everyday people, and in my mind that's, you know, mechanics and shop workers and just everyday people that would kind of understand it. If you were sat at a wedding, at a wedding table, who are those people that would just kind of go, oh, yeah, I kind of connect with this. And I try to have those people in the back of my mind when creating things. Sometimes that can feel like a

little sort of stifling. And sometimes it can bring up quite awkward conversations in the producing of things. But sometimes it really grounds me back down to the earth. Because I think sometimes I've felt very excluded from a lot of dance work. In fact, huge quantities of dance work, where I just don't feel like that this is for me. And when somebody's saying to me, you spend your entire life doing this and you don't understand it, What chance have I got kind of thing, and I don't ever sometimes see it as a way of dumbing down or, you know, shifting it. But I think there are things just like Deborah was saying at the beginning that make things easier for people to be able to get into. So films can have incredibly contemporary complex ideas in them. But sometimes the nature of sitting at the cinema with popcorn makes it easier and more digestible to watch. But we don't do that in dance, we tell you come to an awkward space, come to something that's difficult, listen to some awkward music. And also, if you don't understand it, feel not very clever. And I find that very, very difficult. And I have wondered a lot recently about how we shift the parameters to make it easier. An example like farmers fairs. I love a farmer's fair because I love having a burger. I'm maybe not so interested in all the tables. And that's a way to draw people in. And I think why don't we do that in dance? Why don't we ever have something that kind of connects us immediately.

Melanie:

It's so true. And I think part of the reason for having you two here today as well is because you're already a step in that direction of building an infrastructure of making your dance that doesn't rely on that black box, as you say that awkward space that buying of the ticket. And I love that analogy of the farmer's fair We're thinking of doing something very similar this summer in Greenwich taking really high quality dance to a fete essentially. Deborah, what comes first for you?

Deborah:

Erm I think it might be useful to go back a bit because when I was first making work, it was something a bit like Tom was saying, we just made it because we had to make, wanted to make. I was lucky enough to have some support and people trusting me and going okay, make what you want to make as an artist, and then putting that in front of an audience then seeing how it meets an audience. And I think that's really important because what that did was allow me to develop my craft, you know, almost before being able to think about and see how things meet an audience, experience it, because now I can think about an audience because I've experienced it. You know, not all artists are necessarily ready or able to understand or have the experience to know how things meet an audience. And we still have to offer them the opportunity to make. So they learn that. That for me is a little bit frightening, maybe in some of the expectations on artists nowadays of, we have to know everything about how it meets an audience. But that's my sort of personal experience of I really value that time of being allowed to make what I wanted to make as an artist. And that has helped me develop a craft. But then as Light, Ladd, Emberton, I think in all of our works, the frame, the context has been crucial. And by that, I mean, how the audience meets the work? What is our expectation of the audience, and that has come very early on in the process. And they've all been quite different. So the first work we made was about Caitlin Thomas, wife of Dylan Thomas. And they had a very tumultuous relationship, he died quite early on, they were both alcoholics. And after he had died,

she went to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. So the frame that we set up for the work was an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. So a circle of chairs, and the audience are invited to sit in the circle. Now, what we realised quite early on in the process was we needed to break this circle, the action needed to go beyond the circle. So what we ended up with was a circle of 40, chairs, 20, of which the audience could sit on, and 20 of which became players in the performance. They got thrown, they became all sorts of things. So it became a very small audience, it became a show for 20 people. And because the activity was happening in the circle and beyond it, although we weren't asking them to do anything, the audience, they became players, they became the witnesses to Caitlin's journey, and they became witnesses to each other in a way. And then we had a commission that was from Cadw and Visit Wales. And that was to make something around the story of Owain Glyndwr who is the last Welsh Prince of Wales, rebel Prince of Wales. And we wanted very much to make something that was nowhere near the sort of maybe usual ways of telling these stories of reenactment. And so we came up with a silent disco format, where, basically club classics are smashed together with mediaeval history

Melanie:

I've taken part in this, and it's absolutely phenomenal.

Deborah:

Yeah, it's great fun. The audience become the participants, the other participants in a silent disco, not maybe a normal, silent disco in that sometimes you're invited to dance as you please, as you want. Sometimes there's very clear instructions, there's a twmpath section, which is the Welsh version of a ceilidh. And, again, some of the audience members are pulled out to be particular players in the narrative. And we take you on a journey through whatever space we're inhabiting. So the frame and how we think the audience will be meeting the work comes first. And then we sort of unpick the journey and the material that inhabits that frame

Melanie:

That's really helpful to understand I think, and that's a really lovely way of talking about that frame and how you've put such thought into how you're going to like design that experience in a way. Going back to the Caitlin Thomas work, and identifying the gap or the audience that you were going for, what were you trying to do with that particular work? Were you trying to find people that you wanted to tell that particular historical story to? Or were you trying to find an accessible way of making dance for people that hadn't experienced dance before? Or what was the target audience for that work? Do you think?

Deborah:

Well, it came as a commission, which is actually how most of Light, Ladd, Emberton works have come about.

Melanie:

It's a slightly different situation I think right, because you've got a brief coming around.

Deborah:

Yeah, yeah. So we were asked to make a work about Caitlin Thomas, or Eddie was asked to make work about Caitlin Thomas. And it was through that, that Light, Ladd, Emmerton essentially formed through making that work. And so we always knew that the initial context was for Dylan Thomas celebrations at the National Library of Wales. And I think it was then through making it, you then see, okay, well, this has potential to go here, here, here, here, here.

Melanie:

And in some ways, the dance becomes the paintbrush to tell the story, but actually, you might have chosen a different art form, it's almost irrelevant, isn't it? It's the structure.

Deborah:

I think what was really interesting about that work was although it was so rooted in this couple in this Welsh narrative, we also took that work to India, and showed it to young people in it like students in India, and it was still so powerful and so strong, essentially, because, you know, although the story is about Caitlin and her relationship with Dylan, it's also a story that is repeated over and over and over and over again of a difficult relationship where the woman almost puts aside her career puts aside her future for the husband and for the family. And you know, it's a story that although is specific, it also speaks to a much broader narrative as well.

Melanie:

Like an onion, you almost haven't picking the layers. That's the first layer you might encounter this particular story, but then actually, underneath that, there's something else. Tom, you were about to say something. I'm sorry if you can hear this drilling behind I know Carmel will work magic in the edit but might not be able to do as much as it is incessant. So apologies anyone that's hearing that. Tom you were about to say something.

Tom:

I think it was really interesting the word target audience, when I was thinking about joining this conversation today, I really find there's this tension between, in fact it's a journey that I'm on at the moment, between the kind of this entrepreneur and being an artist and it being a business, and it being some art that's being made. And some of the feelings that I have are that actually, you can't stop creativity, as much as I would love to try and you know, think about target audiences every five

minutes and make sure that the profit or the value is coming in from the project, actually, I'm still gonna make something. And I still find that, you know, like, I'd like to make a postcard or a talk or a thing on the outside and the thing that's doing it, and as an artist, I want to kind of keep that magic going, you know, like keep churning it all out. However, we exist in a landscape where we want our practice to go from one to the next, from one to the next, from one to the next, and to keep moving. And to do that there has to be some kind of value exchange. And previously, I used to sort of say, like a financial exchange, because sometimes always things come down to money. But actually, I think with community work, they can have much more political power and social power, which allows it to kind of move forward, which means you do need to think about your audience, you do need to keep them there, and you do need to kind of keep them engaged. So I find it's a little bit of a tension. And I'm sure that it's probably to do with kind of funding related things. But one thing that has definitely started to occur for UNIT is just about how you build that I don't want to say core audience, but you know, just those people that really love what you do. And they kind of come with you on those journeys. And then they kind of make those further recommendations to their friends to sort of come on, and then to be able to do that. And what's interesting is that we're now having this place between me finding new audiences, which feels like quite a perhaps an Arts Council term to do that, as well as just keeping the core audience that we have all of the time. And it's because when I think about a cupcake maker, they don't have the cupcake council to sort of respond to so they really have to think about their audience and the way that they do that. And that's something that I think about, again, a lot is a bit like, how do I have my people and then bring them along with me from project to project? And how do they trust me that it's okay that I made a postcard this week, and that I made a thing this weekend, I made something very difficult to watch this week. And something like a disco like you're talking about Deborah, the next week.

Melanie:

I love the cupcake analogy, because it does clarify it does cut through all the Arts Council speak that you just alluded to, and that idea of the new audiences versus retaining, which is one of my questions, which we may or may not get onto, because there is so much to talk about here. But I wonder about that cupcake maker, they obviously want to keep their existing customers. And so they'd be really trying hard to do that. And I wonder how much of their energy is spent, into finding new cupcake audiences, which we seem to spend 100% of our time, because that seems to be the golden ticket from someone like the cupcake council, that ask us to always be trying to find new audiences for dance. We are thinking a lot about that at Greenwich Dance at the moment, because for me, retaining my audiences is just as important as chasing those new ones. I want to do both in equal measure. And I don't just want to put every egg into the finding new audiences basket, I'm trying to create an experience where people can keep coming back and feeling familiar with us. But I wanted to drill down on to this tension that you talked about Tom, because I wondered, and I think it might be more relevant to you than Deborah, because of what you were saying about the commissioning Deborah, but I wondered how much of the work that you make, do you feel you need to make for the tour booker or programmer? And I'm being a bit cynical here. But I do think about the artists life a lot and think when you've got a business head on when you're thinking up a new work, are you thinking about that for the audience? Are you thinking about it for yourself? Or are you

thinking festivals would like this? You know, I'm going to make something for a tour because actually, we have to make money or if it's not money, you have to get commissions for your work, you know, you have to otherwise there's no point doing it. So I wondered how that tension plays out for you. Perhaps it is relevant to both of you. What do you think, is it relevant to you, Deborah?

Deborah:

Yeah, definitely. And, you know, for me as an individual artist in particular, in that I do feel like I'm about to enter this new phase, youngest child is now in school. It's like, okay, what's my work? My practice? Where's that gonna go? And it's like, oh, God, the funding cycles, you know, it's really a challenge and what do they want?

Melanie:

You need to make something that a venue wants, right? Otherwise, you know...

Deborah:

Yeah, absolutely. But how also do I begin to know what that is without being able to reinvest in an artistic practice maybe. I think, the process of understanding that is challenging. Where do we start? Where are we enabled to start in a way what comes first or

Melanie:

Tom what about you? Does that ever challenging you?

Tom:

Yeah, for me, it's hugely, hugely, hugely difficult because again, my very hoppy brain just wants me to make whatever I kind of wann make really. And actually, each time I have attempted to make something that feels very purposeful for a specific brief from an external, I don't know that I have the same integrity that goes into it, something is always a little off kilter. But I have witnessed other artists that have made fab Christmas shows that have just generated, you know, like the Mariah Carey story, you know, her whole life is sorted now, because she made that great song, you know, and that that is there. I mean, we have just recently landed upon making an online disco and an online class, we've just started to make a festival piece. And interestingly, so many people are coming towards us with those ideas, I find it difficult because it's like, we were making the same work before and after, it just so happens, this is what we want to be able to do in those bits. So I think that there's this difficulty or like relationship building that you have to do continuously with organisations to support you both with the popular things, and the less popular things to be able to kind of keep the connection and to kind of keep it growing. But I have to say, if I really work in collaboration with a venue that does take some of the power away from the artist, and interestingly, some of the online shows that we're making exist for UNIT entirely on Eventbrite. I'm allowed to put on a performance

whenever I like, and that has changed a lot of the game for us, and the newness of some of the technology that's coming forward will mean that that's going to happen even more so coming. And then this relationship between venue and artist is going to shift, you know, again.

Melanie:

That's so interesting, because a couple of things I wanted to sort of draw on from Greenwich Dance to feed into this conversation. One is, we're trying to move towards an artist in residence programme, where there's enough space built into the brief to the artist to enable them to make what they want to make. So there's a bit of Please can you deliver this programme because this is a programme we're funded for, and we have to do X, Y, Z, and we hope that that also chimes with your artistic values. And that's why we've chosen you to do it. But also, here's some space, some time, some money, some resource for you to do what you want to do, which we hope our communities will also love, because we know that you're connected to them and, and seeing if we can make that kind of dual relationship work. But the other thing that really came to my mind, as I was thinking about this dilemma of whether you're having to make work for your marketplace, if we're really going to start thinking about being a business is when we started pitching for ArtsUnboxed. So we'll talk a little bit more about this throughout this season of podcasts, actually, because it chimes with quite a lot of what we're trying to unpick in this series. But it was a platform that we built during the pandemic for a couple of reasons, one to get artists working again, two to tour ideas rather than people. So the idea is that an artist creates a format for something, whether that be a show or a participatory project or performance and can write the recipe down for it that somebody else can do somewhere else. So we're no longer having to shift that artists with their company in a van up north, a community up there couldn't do it. So it's also about supporting regional employment. But for that to work, someone needs to buy it, someone needs to want it and when they do the artists is remunerated. So when we had all of these artists in the interview process, we had to really ask them, who's the market for this? And what are you making? And why do they want to buy it? And it's a really uncomfortable thing to ask an artist because quite often they're starting from a different place. It's something that's burning, it's an expression. That's what art's about this, there's nothing wrong with that at all. That's why it's there. So we were really asking artists to put that to one side in a way and think about the market first. And on reflection, I think some of those have been more successful than others, because that's quite a hard thing to do. And we're still learning how that process works. I think there's no right or wrong. And I think it's about a kind of Rubik's Cube, isn't it that there's different facets, there's different sides, and you keep turning it.

Tom:

I'd say Mel, that erm on some of the entrepreneur courses that I've been on the creation period at the beginning can feel very exciting and fruitful and endless and lots of possibility. But generally it does come after the moment when we discover who the audience actually is. The thing is, sometimes we make huge things. And then we go who's this for? And actually one of the things that we're starting to shift to now is to make smaller, scrappier things and put it in front of people very, very quickly to go Who is this for? So I think sometimes asking who is this giant thing for getting all

the way through it and then going oh actually, it's not anymore is tricky. But actually getting it to a point before it's even ready and going, who's it for tends to give you a better answer. It's like the entrepreneurial trick of basically putting out a product before it's ready, and then seeing what the audience and market wants.

Melanie:

And that's what tech companies do all the time, isn't it? And I think that's also really interesting. And I think that's where your entrepreneurial eye is really coming out Tom is sometimes I find in dance that we won't do it until it's perfect. And so then you've missed the boat, haven't you? You've missed that curve. Whereas if you can shove it out there quickly, we have a little phrase that we've stolen from a book called Brave New Work, which we use at Greenwich Dance, which is Is this safe to try, and if we've made sure it's safe to try, we can test it. And we can see what the response is. And you can keep refining it, you don't have to wait until it's perfect. But that, again, is perhaps uncomfortable for artists, because when you put work out there you've got your name attached to it and all of that kind of thing.

Deborah:

I think it would be great, but I think maybe our, our funding models or our support structures don't really accommodate for that either, because we maybe have a research phase or a development phase, and then that money comes to an end, right. So there isn't an option of there's a research phase, and that might end with A, B or C, it's like it's done.

Melanie:

Yeah.

Deborah:

And then for example, the Seeds and Bones project, actually, when I got to that point of sharing was like, actually, this is safe. And I could do this. And I could have put that into a run of a week, you know, it was time sensitive, because I was heavily pregnant at the time. And actually, that version of the work has now gone because I'm not pregnant anymore.

Melanie:

You can't bring it back.

Deborah:

I can't bring it back. And it could have existed. And the same with research work that I did with my family. So during lockdown, we got a bit of seed funding to make work with the three children that

was called Who's in Charge, or I think that name appeared as we went through it. You know, we got to a point where we shared it in a park with other families. And actually, we could have done another little stretch and been able to put it in front of other people. But there isn't those sort of immediate like injection funds to go. Okay, let's run with it.

Melanie:

And I think you're absolutely right in terms of how particularly funders might want us to report against the work. There's this definite, whether it's implied or whether it's just what we feel, but it feels like you have to at the end of it say that was amazing. It was a success. And you're not allowed to say I didn't quite work out how I thought it would it did something different. And we went over here and sometimes you can maybe that is coming in. But certainly it does feel sometimes that that's a scary thing to do in case you didn't get it next time.

Tom:

That's where those kind of funding models for all of our practices begin to have that tension. And something that we're thinking a lot about at the moment, there is an American writer think this was written about 8 10 years ago, a guy called Kevin Kelly, and he talks about the 1000 true fans. The principle of it is is basically if you can make 1000 people pay in the American terms, \$100 or 100 pounds. And that's 100,000 pound business, which for the majority of artists will be a well over what we might need to be able to support our business. It's something that we've really thought a lot about at UNIT now like who are our first 100? And who are the second 200? And how do we kind of meet going those forwards. And I say this because I want to have a place between the sort of funded module, which allows for the bigger injections of cash, but also the smaller amounts of money which allow you to go with the flexibility of like, this project was great. Let's keep it going forward, it needs to turn very quickly and have something else involved. Let's make it go forward, rather than just feel suddenly rug from beneath your feet to be able to like go okay, but it does mean when I think about these 1000 true fans, what do they want?

Melanie:

Yeah

Tom:

How do I keep this? How do I make them be alongside me? What is it that they need from me to continue to purchase with things and that's felt, I have to say uncomfortable, like initially. But what's interesting is that now I look at the project as little worlds like little cultures rather than individual performances. So 20 Questions is one performance that we made whereby we go to a community, we ask them a set of 20 questions they answer and respond and perform in their own performance. And then put that out to an audience that feels like a format of something. But actually the process of 20 Questions we use in loads of multiple ways we use that in our business, we use it in other

commission's that we're given now. So we don't feel like we have to continually reinvent the wheel with different things. And also think about the applications of the creativity in different kinds of formats to be able to provide value.

Melanie:

I really like that idea of 100 special people, it made me think a little bit about that Simon Sinek TED talk we did about starting with why instead of the what and the how. If you talk about what you believe in, then people kind of follow you. And there are so many questions that when I realised I only want about question two of everything that want to ask you. So I'm going to hurtle on ahead. And I want to ask you, Deborah, about some of the tools that you might use to draw those new audiences to your work. And I wondered how much of that might be something to do with that bilingual aspect of your work, which I know is wholly important, particularly with your work with Light, Ladd and Emberton. And I wondered whether is that a conscious tool to make your work relevant to new audiences? Or is there something else that's informing that decision?

Deborah:

Yeah, I don't think we think of it necessarily as a tool to find new audiences. I think there's a commitment between us that all our work needs to be bilingual. I mean, Eddie is first language Welsh speaker, the rest of us that are Welsh learners. And our work has always been rooted in narratives from Wales belonging to Wales, and it just feels crucial that we bring that language to it. What I found really interesting is the journey of negotiating how and what that does to the audience experience. So for example, Caitlin exists either as an English version or a Welsh version. Whereas Disco Distaw Owain Glyndwr, the silent disco exists as an integrated Welsh language English language show. So everybody hears both languages. We have three different versions of that show. One that's it was initially written 5050, Welsh English. We then wrote a solely Welsh version for the Eisteddfod in Wales. And then we had a kind of 80% English version, that was the version that went to Surf the Wave, and that we would show in England or other English speaking places. But for that show, we would never have an English only version, because the Welsh language is so integral to the story that we're telling. So yeah, it's always a negotiation, you know, and then we had a Christmas lockdown set of performances, which is called Deliver a Dance or Danfona Ddawns. That was a series of seven shows across Wales that went to doorsteps. And the decision there was the Welsh language needed to be covered across the project, rather than necessarily within each micro performance. So for me, that's been the interesting journey of how we negotiate that bilingualism and what that offers an audience, again, how it meets an audience and considering it from the Welsh language speakers perspective. So when it is this integrated Welsh English that the Welsh isn't saying exactly the same as the English because there's no point they can understand the English as well. So it's almost belittling for them just to hear the same thing again. So we're adding an extra layer in the Welsh, but then we have to make sure of course, that the English language speakers are getting a clear narrative that gives them the full arc of the story. So there's a lot of complexities always to unpick in how we do this bilingualism, which has also has become trilingualism sometimes

as we incorporate BSL, or how audio description sits alongside that. So yeah, there's complexity in that piece.

Melanie:

Am I right in thinking that that piece was commissioned by Visit Wales year of Legends?

Deborah:

Yeah.

Melanie:

And I wondered when you put a piece like that on at a national heritage site, for example, do you feel that you have a role in building the audience for that work or because that was a very clear commission is that the responsibility then of the venue?

Deborah:

I mean, I think that was part of the commission that they would kind of host the ticketing and the marketing, but it's our responsibility to make sure they get good information, good images, good materials, that actually says what we want it to say. Actually, what happened was, they came up with a kind of stock image of some people doing a disco. And we looked at it when No, it's not communicating what this thing is, and we want people to come with the right expectations, because otherwise, the audience get disappointed or things don't work. So everything that we talk about has to meet what the work is otherwise.

Melanie:

So that's interesting roles, I'm going to try and repeat it back just from my own understanding. So we're thinking here about the company making the vehicle that is right to draw audiences to that site that's commissioned you. But also you need to design the thing that's going to make people come but you've also got to really take ownership of how that messaging is communicated. So that you're feeling that your product and I am really just talking in business, speak here aren't I? But your product is being represented and marketed in the right way. And that was something I wanted to ask you as well, Tom, is about that messaging and that communication of what you do. And I'm really conscious that you talk out everybody because I've this is a no way of criticism, because I share that vision. But I struggle internally with it. And I use it a lot of does everybody want to dance and I'm using this in my narrative, but going back to your mum, and whether she wants to take part in this thing that I'm creating or designing or thinking about? So I wondered about that. First, how can you make dancer everybody? Can you and where do you come up against a hurdle?

Tom:

So I'm asked this all the time. And actually one of the things that's really exciting for me, sorry, it's because it's a really contentious point, actually. So our phrase at UNIT is, we want to see everybody dancing every day. And what that means, actually is an entire life mission, an entire statement to be able to think about that. The other part is in the dance world is that we're absolutely completely obsessed with that dancing can only mean that it is done physically, and that it is done in witness of other people. I would challenge most people to understand that they probably dance quite regularly every day for themselves. From the moment of a little mini fist pump. From the moment of jiggling next to somebody but it is our and I'm going to be really mean here are snobbery in dance to be able to say that this is dancing and that this isn't dancing. And actually I'm thinking much more about the movement that's already happening for people. So for teenagers and beyond now with TikTok about the everyday dancing that's happening from going to weddings and parties to a little mini fist celebration, they actually already existed, it happens. And I think that when people become more conscious of their everyday movement that they become more connected to dance. But the problem is, is that I don't think the dance world is ready to let them have that. I think that we're here saying, Actually dance is this over here. And I say this, because I've sat I've straddled across lots and lots of worlds, I didn't have a particularly strong technical training, I had a really, really strong creative training. And I've ended up leading work for the Royal Ballet School and the Royal Opera House. And really, those meeting points have made me go, it's just dance, that's all it is, is just dancing. And actually, we need to let go of the fact of whether we see it or not to know whether it's actually happening as well. So my encouragement of everybody dancing every day is to be able to just make a playlist that makes somebody move to encourage somebody in their car to know that somebody is moving. And actually, we at UNIT now call ourselves activators. I am looking to get people from zero to one. And I want the rest of the dance world which is fairly brilliantly serviced to take them from one to 100. But I just need to get them from zero to one. And, and I feel that actually we have a lot of that missing in our dance industry.

Melanie:

Yeah, I love that too, that you are thinking about your place in the ecology and the positioning of everybody else. And I try and do this too. And I don't know whether I do as well as you but that idea of going our role is this. And then there is that organisation there is that artist and they can take these people there. And we don't have to do the whole thing. And in fact, we're better if we don't try and do the whole thing, because then you are trying to scoop up that marketplace. And actually what you're trying to do is find out what your niche is in it. There's so much to ask about. Deborah, I wanted to ask you about that messaging, again. Because I've noticed that you called yourself a mover and not a dancer, not a choreographer. And I wondered if that was conscious. Because I know we've talked about how the initial design of the event and you gave us these wonderful examples of frameworks and Tom's done similar in thinking about that you know zero to one and the playlist. I love that idea. So we've talked about how important that is. And then you made that point in one of your answers, Deborah, about how important that marketing, the imagery, the messaging, is that you then, encase that brilliant design with and I wondered if there were any things that you

don't do or don't say, or types of pictures don't use or do use to help communicate what it is that you do to the types of audiences that you're trying to reach?

Deborah:

I think the D word, you know, it's always a discussion. It's like, do we use it? Or don't we use it in this context?

Deborah:

I mean, personally, I say mover, because my dancing, my choreographing, is much more about finding physical languages than putting together a string of steps. And I call that dance. Those physical languages, that finding a way of moving that communicates something. But I'm not sure that other people do see it or recognise it as dance, which is why I choose to use movement or moving or to just be a bit more open about, you know, this isn't a set of steps that you have to be able to count to eight. Yeah, but the silent disco the disco does it for us. We don't necessarily need to say dance because we're saying disco.

Melanie:

Yeah.

Melanie:

Yes, yes. And people sort of understand what a silent disco is. And then of course, you've layered it up. And it is completely different to a silent disco. But you've hooked people already.

Deborah:

Yeah, yeah. Whereas the doorstep dance project, which was devised in COVID times as a sort of urgent, what do people need, and it was a very much about gifting. So we wanted to gift work to artists, and then those doorstep dances, the idea was that people could book them for someone else. So that was the journey. It wasn't you book it to come to your house, you book it as a gift for someone else. So that also was a kind of step of how do we reach beyond our close circle, you know, we don't want it to be our mates, the artists who are getting this but our mates the artists can give it to someone else. So it gets a bit wider. Now we did call that Deliver a Dance, we use the D word. And actually some of them were well one of them in particular was a song with a bit of movement, but very little with it, but it still felt like that deliver a dance kind of sat okay, because it was this physical arriving at someone's doorstep. That in itself is a dance really, it's like that physical gift giving.

Tom:

I think it's so brilliantly interesting because it's like, at the beginning of our conversation it's like we need to make what we need to make kind of thing. You've made those brilliant doorstep places and we can hear in ourselves. I do this all the time. Does it have enough dance? Is it dance is it is this I'm like, I don't think we should be asking ourselves these questions anymore. Like this is what I've made like who should watch this? Where can this be kind of thing because we want the categories and we want the venues, you know that have dance in their title to sort of like say that this can't or can't happen kind of thing. And it's a bit like actually a sort of going with a, you know, an ethos and an energy of a person to kind of connect to.

Melanie:

There's so much there. I love that idea at the doorstep, we did something similar. And we had a similar intention. And I'd love to talk to you more, perhaps another day about what worked for you about that gifting. Because I think in the end, it was households booking it for themselves. But accidentally, it became a gift for other people around because you had somebody in a top window looking out and there was one particular day when I was stood on a street corner in this old lady came out of her house, and she was like, what's going on? I said this woman has just booked our show, and it's gonna happen on the doorstep on the pavement here. Great. So she went in, and she grabbed a deck chair. And she came up with a tenner. And I was like, oh, no, no, no, you know, we did say that people could pay what they wanted online. But you know, it was the midst of COVID. And I couldn't take physically a tender off of an old lady in the street. It felt so against my principles, as well as that. No, sit down and enjoy it, sit down and enjoy. She just got this little dance performance turned up on her street. And I think I've said this on the podcast before, but I would love to use that as a marketing tool for another show that's somewhere else. Because when you think about that audience trajectory and how you might take them from the analogy, you had Tom of nought to one or maybe the one to two, you know, they've done their first bit they've done their fist bump they've danced along to a playlist, they've seen this accidental performance, they've decided, oh, dance isn't scary I quite like that. Where do I go for the next bit. And I'm really interested in how we then take that audience on a journey. But that's the hard bit, I think that's the bit where you need time, you need resources. We've just got a commission at Greenwich Dance to work with the Royal Parks. And one of the many ambitions of this product is to try and bring new audiences to the park. This is not to bring new audiences to dance, it's not to have dance in the park, it's to bring some particular new audiences and one of them is young people, you know, it's an honour for them to have chosen dance to be the vehicle to do that. But then how do we scaffold the experience? How do we build that experience that really does draw young people to the park? And I'm not sure we'll get it right the first time. And so I want more money, I want more time to be able to go this and then okay, if we did this, then how do we get them to that? And that's where, yeah, we need some time. And talking of time, I'm very conscious that we are running out. But I do want to ask you, oh perhaps two questions, that one does pick up on this idea of numbers and really follows through from your doorstep performance there because I imagined the numbers for that were really small. When we were doing it, obviously you didn't want more than six to be actually those physical audience because that was the bubbles. But you know, you hoped for a few people in windows. And one of the things I felt at coming through and living through this pandemic is that there's a sort of different

value now placed on the experience for those few. Whereas two years ago, I felt as an organisation, we've been very much asked to say how many millions of people are going to see this thing. And now it feels quite liberating to go, we're going to do this and there's going to be 30 people. And going back to that thing I was saying before about retention, I will say you know, there's not going to be millions of unique audiences either because I want the same people to be coming back. So actually, that sort of lowers numbers, and we went to a little panto at Christmas, there was nine in the audience and my son made up for the missing sort of 76 and with all of his heckling, but the company was so lovely at drawing his heckles into it and his banter. You know, they really bounced off each other. And for us as a family, I felt like crying with gratitude that this company had put on such a wonderful show, that was a highlight of our Christmas when everything else had been cancelled. And they did it for nine of us. And I wondered whether that's changed for you, when you're in front of an audience? Do you feel like you still want the numbers there? Or do you feel the value of having a really enriched experience? Five or six? I feel like I've really loaded that question. How does that feel for you now having lived through this last crazy two years?

Deborah:

I think for me, it comes back to the frame. Like if you've made a show, an event or something for 100 people and 10 come it doesn't work very well.

Melanie:

Your circle of chairs. If you're expecting 2, you got 3 that would be a hole, right? Yeah.

Deborah:

Yeah, or the disco is made for 100, really, that's the sort of optimum number so that you get this collective energy. And if only 10 come then that's hard work, you know, and the number of performers are almost the same as the number of participants. It's a strange dynamic, but the doorstep dances, those works are made to be intimate. And for example, the one that I did, again, did it with my children, because it was the only way I could work.

Melanie:

Became your company, I love that.

Deborah:

They became my company. So I was a polar bear with my two polar bear cubs. And we had a storyteller with us. So they were interfacing with the house owners. And it was a story of these polar bears having broken off their ice sheet and arrived in Cardiff. And what that meant was that the storyteller, Connor Allen, could really improvise with the audience. You know, they could have a conversation and a dialogue. We did do it once in a cul de sac and the whole cul de sac had come

out. And actually, it was quite hard to then navigate that seven, eight or nine groupings of people here to try to meet. So I think it depends on the frame. And if the audience numbers meets the frame, because if you've made it for something, and then it's something else, then that's where you encountered difficulties.

Melanie:

How about you, Tom? How does that pan out for you?

Tom:

So there's, there's the making it for the numbers that you kind of want to, but one of the things that I think a lot more about is that if I want to extend that when I want to go further, then I can just find a version that will potentially be online to have a more of a kind of a larger audience if I need to. So it can kind of like go up and down that scale. But something that I'm really wrangling with at the moment is in this everybody dancing every day, that is a lot of numbers. That's a lot of people that I'm trying to talk about there. That's a global world as with its ambition, so my sense is to make the very, very best thing that I can to make that first 1,000 people come and be really dedicated and with me, and what we know from kind of business or from anything that exponentially grows is that it becomes a tipping point of when quality and meeting people and understanding the audiences and it then exponentially sort of rise until you have like, you know, I guess our flagship company of somebody like New Adventures, where it's just a tipping point where it's like, of course, I go to that you don't need to sort of almost do anything, and audiences are sort of flooding towards it. But we have to do so much work in the early days. What is our messaging? What is our storytelling? Are we saying the right thing? Are we connecting in the right way? Are we doing all of those bits, and sometimes our funding structures sort of stop us and start us and stop us and start us and don't quite allow us to grow. Something recently, I've said to an organisation is I'd love for you to invest in me and the company and not the work. That will really help me because that means that you can go on the journey with me, which will allow the audience to rise, but if I keep cutting it off, curtailing it, then it will be sort of trickier. So I guess I mean, I've answered that in lots of different ways. But that's the mentality I have.

Melanie:

And I love it. And I think that that is a great place to stop. You've both been so inspirational. And filled me with so many thoughts and loads more questions, and I feel like I could put another two podcasts on this subject together. But thank you for your time. And 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 if you'd like to be part of the ArtsUnboxed family and do dance differently with us at Greenwich Dance, email us at info@greenwichdance.org.uk with podcast in the title and we'll get in touch. But for today, that's it from us and do join us next time for more Talking Moves. Thank you, Tom. Thank you, Deborah so very much.

Tom:

Thank you. That was great.

Melanie:

I've dotted all over my paper today but...