

# TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

## **Working Across Genres** **S05 / E02**

### **Episode Description**

In this episode, we talk to Harriet Waghorn and Kamala Devam about their experience working across different genres of dance.

As dancers we often train in streams of dance genres – often there are expected routes mapped out for us and aesthetics we are expected to achieve. It’s therefore refreshing to find artists whose work transcends those divides, fuses aspects of styles together to make new aesthetics, new vocabulary. What does that mean in terms of training for themselves, as well as making work, working with dancers who may not have the same experiences?

We begin by asking our guests how they came to find dance – both Kamala and Harriet mention their mothers and how they facilitated their first steps on their journeys. We discuss their training and how they came to build their experience across the genres of contemporary, ballroom, Bharatanatyam, acrobatics and contact improvisation.

We ask our guests why are they drawn to the styles in which they work, and how stepping away from the usual framing of genres and fusing other styles relates to their audiences. We find similarities that may not be obvious such as the constant flow and trust that is needed in both contact improvisation as well as ballroom – and how important the connection with your partner is.

We move on to discuss their own teaching practices and what they are looking for in dancers when they choreograph work. The importance of training is a huge part of any dancer and artists life and we discuss how they train across such different genres of dance.

Finally, we are intrigued to hear what's next for our two artists on their journey working across genres.

### **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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#### **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 them. I'm Melanie Precious and in this episode, I'm talking to two artists about finding your vocabulary. As dancers, we often train in streams of dance genres, and often there are expected routes mapped out for us and aesthetics we're expected to achieve, but it's refreshing to find artists whose work transcends those divides, fuses aspects of styles together to make new aesthetics, new vocabulary, and we're going to talk to two artists who have done just that. So today we have with us Kamala Devam, international and multilingual dancer, performing artist and Harriet Waghorn, choreographer, performer and artistic director of Edifice Dance Theatre. Welcome both of you. So firstly, I wanted to find out a little bit about how you came to dance, what age you found it, and what drew you to it, and Kamala, I wondered if you'd start us off?

#### **Kamala:**

Absolutely. So my mother was a dancer in jazz and ballet. And my father is was a musician. And so they're both definitely coming from an appreciation of the arts and theatre and dance and movement. And I think they had like a band together in the 60s. Anyway, I diverge. Yeah, it was great. And they also came together in their seeking of a belief system that they could really invest in, which ended up becoming Hinduism. And so they converted the year I was born, actually and I have two older sisters. So they all converted into Hinduism in 1979. And through that all of the families in our community, which were mostly white converted families in this community to South Indian culture, and Hindu culture. So within that, I started learning the classical South Indian form, Bharatanatyam, and then that was at five years old.

#### **Melanie:**

Wow.

**Kamala:**

And then I started doing contemporary when I was 18.

**Melanie:**

That's an amazing story. And how about you, Harriet, how did you find dance?

**Harriet:**

Well I started ballet as a young person of like, three years old, and me and my twin went together, and she decided she wasn't going to hang around, and she was going to go off and do football instead. And I stayed and did ballet until about 10 years old when I decided I hated it. And I was going to completely leave the discipline. And for three years, I sort of spent time just exploring myself, I was more interested in like visual arts. I mean, I was still quite a young teenager. And then I watched Billy Elliot. And I think my mum saw something in my eyes as I watched it, and she took me aside to one room, it was like Harriet, it's okay, if you want to dance again, we can do that. And so I started back dancing, I started street dance, which is not one of my strengths now. Went back into ballet and contemporary. And then I actually did my degree in History of Art. And when I was doing that, I started doing ballroom. And this sort of really brought the passion back for me of what I was really wanting to do, because it seemed like one of the main avenues for you continuing contemporary dance or professional dance is often through a contemporary valve. And whilst I enjoyed it, it wasn't a thing that sung to me. And then when I went to university, and I found ballroom, I started competing, and this sort of brought the fire back in me. And then I went to Laban.

**Melanie:**

Wonderful. We're recording this a day after Mother's Day. And both of you have got stories that really celebrate your mother in that actually and also Harriet a little synergy. I went to ballet at three and my sister did too. She's younger than me. And she told my mum, it was a waste of her playtime. So I do love finding out about people's journeys into dance it colours I think so much of our life going forward. Whether it's just been recreational or professional. But anyway, both of you have found yourselves I think, and to my clearly untrained eye when it comes to anything outside of well ballet. I trained in ballet, as a three year old and then into contemporary. So I get really interested as soon as I discover other styles, and you both appear to building yourselves quite unique vocabulary that's drawing upon a range of other styles and investigating them in perhaps new ways. And Kamala when I was reading through your biography, I was taken aback by the versatility. So you talk about Bharatanatyam, acrobatics, martial arts, and then lecturing as part of the urban dance programme. And you also talked about those dance styles colliding. Tell me a bit more about that, because it sounds so forceful.

**Kamala:**

Yeah, I think each project is different. Each choreography asks for something different of the way that the forms meet with each other. But yeah, sometimes it is a collision. We'll probably talk about this a bit later in the way that we train. But because of the way that funding works, and everything with running a dance company, it's all very project driven. And so we have a very small amount of time with my dancers to train in the forms and also to create something at the end of it and that will hopefully be seen by audiences around the country. So I mean, it's a broad question. So I guess I'm just going to broadly answer that the way that I have to approach being economic with time is that I have a basis of understanding of skill with my dancers, that is first in release technique and partnering, so they have to, I think, come from a contemporary background, and then have facility acrobatically, because those are the two things that I think in the work at this time with Kamala Devam Company is what I'm trying to connect things through is the kind of network, the pillars. And then we train, and they have to be very intelligent in their bodies in order to pick this up, maybe with some classical background already from the Western sphere, maybe ballet, so we train in Bharatanatyam in very fundamental levels, and we train in what's called Adavus or steps. And so then we can take that feeling of the Adavus, and ignite the work in that way. And sometimes there's also Kalaripayattu training, which is South Indian martial arts from Kerala, and or martial art training from Capoeira from Brazil.

**Melanie:**

And to pick you up from that word colliding. And those styles coming together so forcefully, it must have been a conscious decision to use that word within the description of your work. But it did sound so powerful. Is that part of what you're hoping that the work looks like?

**Kamala:**

I think that when people see the language, again, it's different with each different choreography depending on the themes. But the work is impactful because of the way that I was trained in Bharatanatyam, all of that will come through in the contemporary spectrum as well. And just in my sensibility with things, I tend to have an urgency in the work and then find places of arresting, that will focus on a change in pace or a change in geometry. And so it's very much about the pacing of things being impactful.

**Melanie:**

Yeah, that's really interesting. And Harriet, you describe yourself as being classically trained. And you've just talked us through that. And I've made the assumption of ballet when I read it. And then he went on to say that you went into primarily contemporary dancing, but then contact improvisation came in there. And I wondered how you came to build that? Was that through Laban at the beginning of that part of your training, or was that as far back as university?

**Harriet:**

So contact improvisation was something really spoke to me when I was training at Laban. And it was the most natural fit for me when you walk into a room and you try something new. And you're like, I instantly enjoy this, because it just speaks to me at a very organic level. And I started that at Laban. And previously, I had started ballroom which was partnering based. And I've recently I was doing the Akram Khan development programme. And I've been working a lot with my mentor, Nancy Berti, who is a Latin coach, and she was like, Why do you need to be with somebody else? Why does it jar with you so much? When you're dancing next to somebody and you don't feel that energy? Or you feel like they're not in time with you? Or why is that? Why is it so important? And part of it is I think because I'm a twin, you're always seeking this like really fundamental connection with somebody. And I think you're really in tune when it's not there. And I direct the company with another with Carmine De Amicis, who's an amazing choreographer and dancer, as well as director. And I think I found the sort of soulmate in him in a way. We first danced together and it felt like it clicked because we were dancing in contemporary and ballroom in this sort of hybrid language. And I'd never found anyone that I could share both sides of me with and so that was the sort of basis of our connection was contemporary and the ballroom. And then the contact improvisation gives us more space to explore the hybrid language of contemporary and Latin because it's inherently partnering. And I don't know if this is going too far into a technical language.

**Melanie:**

No, go for it. I'm finding this really fascinating. One of my questions was going to be contact improvisation and ballroom dancing. They seem such unnatural bedfellows. But as you're describing it, they actually seem perfect bedfellows, I can completely see what you're saying. That partnering, that call and response, that conversation you're almost having through your movement, as opposed to being on your own. So no, keep going. It's fascinating, it's starting to unravel this lovely melting pot of where those inspirations have come from.

**Harriet:**

I think one of the common misconceptions when you watch ballroom, especially like Latin, or if you go to visually think of Strictly Come Dancing, it's all the positions and the external facing. Whereas in the dancing, you are always moving, the connection is always speaking and always sharing energy, like you're speaking mostly through hand to hand connection, but you're never like ever fully putting on the brakes, or there's always this fluid relationship. And you know, really instinctively if your partner's not listening to you, or if they've disconnected and it's the same with contact, you need this constant flow, this constant trust because you're expanding your mass to another person, you're not just relying on your own form. And so those things are the same with both. Your points of connection are different. In contact, you're sharing much more body surface and you're giving more release. And then in ballroom there is more spring and tension and release. So you can get those fast spins and drops and change of directions, like you're my mentor describes, if we're dancing, she says, I want you to be like a Ferrari and not a Skoda. Because you have to be like, you have to have your engine ready, and you have to be able to move and respond quickly. And so that's something

sort of energetically charged within the Latin, but you don't have so much in the contact, you have to be really aware with contact, but you don't have to have that energetic charging in the body.

**Melanie:**

Yes, yes. And Kamala, would you tell me a little bit more about Bharatanatyam. And as I say, to someone that doesn't know about the form, tell me what's important to know about it, and what's been instrumental to them, perhaps how you're using it within your vocabulary?

**Kamala:**

Well, the thing about Bharatanatyam is, it's a very kind of contradictory form, because it has this really ancient origin, the 2000 year old origins, and if you go to the temples in South India you'll see the dancers on the fresco of the front of the temples. And these are Devadasis, who were given at a very young age to the temple communities and they would be raised to dance and celebrate the gods being worshipped in those temples at specific holidays. And then then also later on, they were drawn into the courts in South India, and were very much part of the court culture, they were always the most literate and educated women in society at that time. So that's the sort of origin and of course one of our main gods of Hinduism is Lord Shiva, who is the god of dance. And he literally danced into Hindu mythology the world into being so it's already a very big part of Hindu culture. But having said that, Bharatanatyam itself was only codified and called Bharatanatyam, since the 1930s, and 40s. And that was after it was sort of stuffed down by the British colonisation of India and then brought out later on with Indian independence and then taken from the Devadasi caste into the Brahmin caste, which is very much the scholarly considered one of the higher castes in India. So even that was an appropriation of sorts from one part of society into another. And there's all this sort of, not controversy, but questions around who owns Bharatanatyam, you know, at this point, so it's a very modern form. And at this point, it's also I consider a hybrid form, because inside of Bharatanatyam, is aesthetics borrowed from ballet and other parts of Indian classical styles, because there's eight of them, you know, there's eight classical styles just in the subcontinent of India. So it's very rich already, and already has a lot to draw from each other. So yeah, that's the history of it. And it now is a global dance form that seen all over the stage. And you can see that it's being changed very much by the people who are doing it like any form. But inside the form itself, it has three distinct aspects. One is pure dance, which is called Nritta, one is the storytelling aspect, which is called Nritya. And then there's Natya, which is a dance drama aspect with sets and costumes, and poetry and music and everything up on stage that often depicts dance dramas, and Hindu epics that are important in Hindu culture. But what I work with in my work, since it's such a huge form, you can talk about this with Mavin, Harriet, is that when you put your toe in, you just drown, you know, like, you can just go into the storytelling aspect of it and look at the characterisation of one specific heroine thinking about her lover, or Krishna, or God, or whatever it is in that particular story, and you could analyse the character. And it's that kind of work that Oscar award winning actors do in their work. And that itself is also Bharatanatyam. What I work with in my work is the Nritta aspect, because I have to focus on something and because I feel like Nritta, or pure dance, is what I was the strongest and the strongest in my career. As a Bharatanatyam artist, I

work with those geometric forms of the actual virtuosic steps used within Bharatanatyam. But every contemporary South Asian artist is different in the way that they use the work.

**Melanie:**

I find it really fascinating learning about that openness of the style, because I think there's a misconception probably for the uneducated, like myself that it's so purely set in traditional. But as you're saying Kamala, it's actually really modern. And I'm finding that quite fascinating to find out about that. And of course, it makes so much sense. And that's a form that has been used as a framework to play within in terms of what the new versions contemporary, because contemporary just means new anyway doesn't it. You know, we think about contemporary dance as being a thing, but actually the word just means new. And it's just about evolving and how that's happening in a similar way.

**Kamala:**

Yeah.

**Melanie:**

So one of the things I found particularly interesting is about your role on the urban dance programme. It just felt incredibly cool. And I wondered whether you could sum up the essence of your lectures for that programme and perhaps almost like a sneaky peek into what that module might be, but also relating that back to this dance form that you're working within and the relevance that that has within urban dance. Could you tell us a little bit about that connection?

**Kamala:**

Yeah, so the urban dance programme, it's called urban dance practice is at the University of East London. And when I came in as a lecturer, the head of department was Dr. Jyoti Argade who was a Bharatanatyam dancer and a good friend of mine, currently now living in California, and she brought in Bharatanatyam and also Kalaripayattu, which is from Kerala at South Indian martial arts, to the undergraduate hip hop degree students. And I'm not exactly sure her motives on that. But I feel that it is very important and a worthy thing that the only classical dance form that these hip hop students are learning in their three years in the degree is from India, and it's not ballet. And what does this give hip hop dance students? It gives them a musicality outside of the 4448 that we're working with, because I always work fives and sevens, and nines inside Bharatanatyam. And I also teach third years contemporary technique as well. So that's release, but we're always working within structures that are not in the box shape of what we're living in, you know, we literally live in boxes as well. And yeah, we work in these musical structures of boxes. So we're always trying to work in odd numbers within Bharatanatyam and into contemporary that I work in. What else does it give them? If I could flip it, that would be really great, because...

**Melanie:**

Do yes.

**Kamala:**

As a Bharatanatyam artist, I'm always amazed that the skill of the depth of what we call Araimandi, which is the half sitting position in Bharatanatyam is sort of like a demi-plié in ballet, is the deepest that I've found of any of the genres of university students that I've worked in. I also work at the University of Surrey, which are mostly contemporary students. And there's something even with students who have done ballet all their lives, the sort of groundedness, and connection to the earth isn't as attuned as it is with street dance artists. I find that they come into the learning and I teach them very basic Bharatanatyam technique, which also includes understanding the musicality of classical Indian dance and the bracing of different time signatures on top of another time signature. So there's polyrhythms happening there, they always come into it with such respect. And I don't ask for that respect, they come into it, because I don't know because they think that it's worthy of that respect. I don't think they have any history of it in their minds. But even still, they always come out with a deeper understanding of how to use their body in connection to music and in connection to the floor.

**Melanie:**

That's fascinating. And so really those benefits across both parties within that studio. I love hearing about that. And Harriet, one of the things I wanted to ask you as you pursue the authoring of your own style, are there any aspects of ballroom or perhaps even contact improvisation that you feel you have to honour or keep sacred? Or is everything open for invention and exploration? And I suppose then I'm talking about some of the rules, and is rules, the right word? I'm not sure. Sometimes there are kind of expectations and the way that you might do things and the certain shape of movements. And do you feel that you can break them? Or are there certain things about the style that you would always work within?

**Harriet:**

That's a good question, because I'm also asking that question at the moment for myself and for our style. So I established our company in 2015. And from that point, till maybe a year ago, we invested a lot of focus into the partnering and that will always be there. And the sense that the partnering has to be a communication of sorts, and it has to be whenever we bring dancers in, can you listen, is the first question. So that will always be there. But over the past year, I've been looking really into, because we've been on our own what this solo practice looks like how does the spine sit in and what's going on with the pelvis and the connection with the floor, we have the pendulum action in ballroom, which, because ballroom is a travelling form. Essentially, you're meant to be going through a ballroom, that the spine always has this forward projection, which means you're ready to meet your partner, but you're also travelling and the pendulum action of the hips, which is almost like a figure

of eight is the engine for this. So if you keep the spine forward, and you maintain this pendulum action you are moving. And this is one of the core principles of ballroom that I've been looking at. And what it gives is it gives this three dimensionality of form in the body in somebody's solo practice and this undulation through the spine, which is something I really want to keep. So this is a new three dimensionality that we're trying to introduce more consciously into our practice now that Carmine and I may have been doing naturally, and that we can pull out more. And now we understand what it is we can inform our dancers so that they have this specific language as well. So when you look at our work, it can speak its artistic message, but you are also seeing its technicality as something new for your eye. And that's tricky is because Kamala was saying that you have such a small period of time and you get maybe new dancers for this new work and you have to create a new work but you also want them to be specific and sophisticated in your language style. So I've sort of spent the last year with Carmine and my mentor and with Akram understanding what the basic of it So how we can put it into a class structure? What's the fundamentals that's really underpinning this so we can be efficient and grounded in the practice. So we can then teach it. But there's so many things like the position of the paso doble the pelvis in that is different to say a rumba and a cha cha. And then you have the samba. And you're using the floor and the hips and the spine differently in all of them.

**Melanie:**

Yeah

**Harriet:**

So I've maybe taken one part and really dug in and the others are bubbling away all the time. And then we'll go deeper into each because if you have a piece that's like paso doble and contemporary, and then one that's Rumba and contemporary that looks so different.

**Melanie:**

Yeah. Yeah, there's so much to unpick in that. I'm going to come back to you in a second. Kamala, same question to you. Is there anything within your vocabulary that you wouldn't touch? That is a structure that you would keep in tact and your exploration is within that? Or do you give yourself permission to reimagine everything?

**Kamala:**

This is a really touchy subject, I think, for classicists. And I feel like I ran away from classicism in America, in order to join the rebellion community in Britain. Because I feel like and rightly so, because of the structure of American society, when immigrants come there from any country, including my grandmother from Hungary, you have to assimilate. And if you don't hold on very tightly to your culture, it will be wiped away, or your language and that is also movement language. My grandmother was born in Budapest, but she never spoken lick of Hungarian in Ohio. As soon as they

were there, they just dropped it all, you know, and I don't have a vestige of my Hungarian culture, I'm so very much more attached to Indian culture than I am, my Hungarian culture, or my German or my British culture, you know, anything that's attached to in my skin. So when I actually saw Akram Khan Company perform Kaash, in San Francisco in 2003. You know, I graduated with a university degree in contemporary dance, and I've been doing 15 years of Bharatanatyam before that and I just was like, How can I Where can I do it all? You know, is there a place for me in the world and there was and it was here, I literally saw Akram perform. And then I went on Londondance.com I'll never forget this.

**Melanie:**

Yeah

**Kamala:**

In my room in San Francisco. And there was Shobana Jeyasingh Dance, Akram Khan, Mavin Khoo Dance, and Angika. Like all these different people who are giving themselves that permission to step outside that sphere of this being sacred and Bharatanatyam in itself, just working within the form. And there were artists who were just trying to work within the form itself, because you can do that then there is like Harriet says, it's a world that you can go into when itself and people make whole careers and research inside of that, and never get bored. But I was really interested in what we can do with the form and how we can sort of test those things that are sacred. So now within the work, I think there are things that are really important to me to not keep sacred, but to keep clear...

**Melanie:**

Yeah

**Kamala:**

... so it can be read. Things like the basis of the Araimandi, that diamond shape position with the legs. It's the clarity of the gestures, because that in itself, they're like words. And if I was to talk to you like this, you couldn't understand anything I was saying. But if I enunciate and finish my words, like I do my gestures and make them clear to the audience, then I'm really saying something you can understand what I'm saying. So those are the things that are on the top of this sort of surface that are important to me to keep legible. Outside of that. Let's rip it up.

**Harriet:**

Love it.

**Kamala:**

Yeah.

**Melanie:**

That analogy you've just given us of the words, that's really clear. And as you've both been talking them so passionately about the vocabulary that you're making, it made me think of something that I hadn't thought of as I was preparing this podcast. And it was a conversation I had with Erion Kruja. And it was similar. We were also talking with him and Annie Hanauer about how they have come to their vocabulary. And he was lamenting the lack of time and space that he has access to as an independent maker to drill down into this vocabulary in order to hone it. Because all of the questions that you're both asking of yourself and of your dancers, you need time, I'm imagining to play with those to work with those. And he was talking about just that lack of it. And you both alluded to this earlier on in the conversation about training and how you approach bringing other dancers into this exploration that you might be having. And it feels to me like you're miss living and breathing it both of you so invested in these pursuits that you have of your vocabulary that you might be thinking, breathing, playing with them at different times. But then you bring in a dancer to make a work and you've got to somehow bring them onto the same page. Talk me through that and your frustrations and your celebrations with that work. Harriet, you've talked about the challenge you have bringing new dancers on. How long do you get with them roughly? I suppose it's different for every project, but how is that playing out for you?

**Harriet:**

It is very different for every project.

**Melanie:**

Yeah

**Harriet:**

You might have five weeks sometimes you might have four days. And it is frustrating because anything fruitful was really at its root. So you do have to start from the basics. And when you don't want the artwork you're making to look basic. You've got this juxtaposition of things you're valuing, which is your artistic level of the work and the fundamental truth of what you're aiming at. And these things are always in conflict with one or the other in our industry. And what I have to do and what the people I work with, what Kamala needs to do as well is to have these ideas always bubbling for ourselves, so that they really mature for us. So we can be succinct when we communicate.

**Melanie:**

When you've got the time.

**Harriet:**

Yeah, so I'm training all the time. Like, I've even started playing with American smooth, which is a ballroom form. That's more play right now. But we try and have sessions were Carmine and I meet with our Latin coach every week to make sure we've got some momentum going for the research, but it's hard when you bring in new people. Yeah, sometimes we work with the same dancers.

**Melanie:**

Because I suppose you've already invested a little bit in the journey, whether that's training or whether it's a kind of psychological or mental understanding of your vision, right?

**Harriet:**

Yeah. But even if we come to audition people for the work, you think, okay, who do I know that can already do these styles? And then it's really limited. And then how do you post an audition where I feel like I'm not testing but trying out all the things that I need from a dancer? Do you make a contemporary work, and you've got people that have trained in contemporary everyday for three years, and the years before from when they were five? You've got a really sophisticated dancer in that form already to work with.

**Melanie:**

Yes, really hard. How do you cope with that Kamala? Have you got dancers on salary or you're project based as well?

**Kamala:**

Project based as well.

**Melanie:**

So similar situation I'm imagining?

**Kamala:**

Yeah, definitely. And I think yes, being very, very smart in looking at what's needed for that particular work with its theme when it's being created, for instance, that my newest research and development newest meeting, this was January 2020, before the pandemic hit, before birth of my first child, we made a squeeze that in right before the pandemic, thank God, it's amazing. Good timing, man. Right.

**Melanie:**

Congratulations!

**Kamala:**

Thanks. Yeah, we were still doing education work when it hit in March. So I feel like we got to squeeze that right in beforehand. But for that particular project is called Centrica. And I was looking at the way that life comes from the centre of things often in biology and in art and in science. And that's often using the Fibonacci sequence or golden ratio, and that sequence of numbers. And so the phenomenon of the galaxy shape being the same as the wavelength and the way the sound enters our ear, and the spiral of the snail shell, all those things are all connected to the mathematics of the Fibonacci sequence. And in contradiction to that, I was also looking at how our centric perspectives as human beings working from our own perspective often is the thing that creates conflict among us as humans in the world. So those kind of like art versus humanity, and how we can try to maybe look at math in order to be able to survive as humans. So in that work, we're looking a lot at circles. So I needed to find dancers, who had a contemporary basis with acrobatic abilities, who are intelligent enough to take on the fundamentals very quickly of the geometric preciseness of the Adavus or steps from Bharatanatyam that I'm using, but also are really organically already working in this fluid circular way in their own work. So all those things I had to think of before I went into the audition process to find dancers.

**Melanie:**

And that's quite specific. How did you get on?

**Kamala:**

Yeah, great. I mean, they're all scattered to the wind now. So I don't know if I'll ever work with them ever, ever again. Particularly there is a Bharatanatyam artist in Malta named Moritz Zavan Stoeckle, who is an amazing Bharatanatyam dancer. And he also had a background in contemporary dance and acrobatics. And so I basically built the piece around him. And you know, because he has this very particular very pure Bharatanatyam segment in the piece, which makes it. But to find that dancer, you know, again, with Brexit and the pandemic, and everything, and now he's also a father with a full time University dance job. These are the things that we have to be very aware of when we're making work.

**Melanie:**

Yeah. And as choreographers both of you, how much of the dancers style do you bring into your work? What you just said, there really made me think about that, Kamala, because sometimes I think about choreographers going into a space and they've got a really clear sense of the structure that they might want to bring to that space. And it sounds to me because of your really unique pursuit of this movement vocabulary that that might be similar to what you bring in. You'd have a really clear

idea of what you're trying to create, then you might have another choreographer who comes in and is literally looking at who they've got in the room and drawing the movement from them. And I wondered where in that kind of Venn diagram Do you think you sit as a choreographer? How much of what the dancers are bringing in their own bodies ends up in the work that you make, Harriet?

**Harriet:**

It's a really good question. I'm not sure. Is there is an answer to this because I want the artistic purpose of the scene, let's say because I work a lot with narrative pieces, or things that are thematic. So I'm not saying in the abstract, let my technique speak and there's your piece. It has to be driven by the idea or the theme of the narrative needed in that scene. So my dream is that in class, we prepare the dancers and it's already in their bodies, this way of moving is already ingrained, and that I can work in the middle of this triangle with the dancer in front of me with the technique I've put in their body in the morning, and hopefully for, I don't know, six months before, and then the artistic idea and that this triangle is working in balance would be my ideal.

**Melanie:**

Yeah, I can see that how about you Kamala?

**Kamala:**

I very much work with the dancers that I bring in, I think it's really important, especially in the kind of hybrid choreographic way that we're working to work with what's already very much ingrained inside of the dancers bodies.

**Melanie:**

Yeah.

**Kamala:**

Otherwise, it ends up looking and the audience feels and I can really feel as a choreographer that it's very much superficial,

**Melanie:**

Yeah.

**Kamala:**

That the technique is superficial on their bodies. The way that I have been enjoying the most with choreographers that I work with and learned the most was the task based creation. So they're

devising things based on a very specific or a very open task that I give them. And then I go into their language. But what they're working with, as Harriet says, is something that we've been training in to make it the most integrated as possible in the morning time. And we allow that to be open so that other professionals or graduates can also come in and study all the techniques that we're working with. And that is Bharatanatyam release based contemporary acrobatics. And then sometimes the martial arts as well Kalaripayattu and capoeira. And so we take turns skill sharing in the morning. And so that's all integrated. And in fact, the phrase that we do at the end of that class, which usually ends up somewhere between an hour and a half and two hours is a big chunk of the day, but it needs to be in order for the work to be good, is a conglomeration, is a phrase of all those disciplines put together. So we use that language because it's already in their body. And then I give them tasks that bring out and if I need to bring out specific elements of different parts of the language a little bit more, that is my duty as an artist, but in that way, I'm a designer. I'm editing what they create, but it has to be coming from them.

**Melanie:**

Yeah, that's a lovely analogy about being a designer and just kicking out so that you want to give extra enunciation to. So it made me think about your own training, I can't imagine that the open class structure that we have in London, is flexible enough for your training needs. Do you find that it is? Do you have to create your own? How do you train yourself to stay within your aesthetic, Harriet?

**Harriet:**

I am still moving as a freelance dancer as well. So I get to class every day. And I will do two or three ballet classes. And then I'll train in ballroom, maybe three times a week as well. And I try to get in... there's no time there's not enough time. Because when your practice is broad, because I also tried to get into contact classes as well, which has not been happening through lockdown. So my ambitions is sounds like is to take like 10 classes a week. But I try and just make sure I've done something every day.

**Melanie:**

Yeah. And the ballroom classes. Is that you in the studio with a few of your dancers, or are you attending somebody's open ballroom class?

**Harriet:**

Yeah. And that's quite difficult too as well because with ballroom, you're looking for a partner and my partner is in Italy.

**Melanie:**

Right!

**Harriet:**

So we do a zoom class online every week together to just look at the fundamental actions that we want to do. Maybe we'll look at swing one week and paso doble another week. And then I'm also doing ballroom. So I do have somebody I'm newly dancing with where we'll do two or three times a week, you just do need that space to bring it all together at some point.

**Melanie:**

Yeah. How about you Kamala? And what kind of training do you do for yourself?

**Kamala:**

Well, coming out of having a child, I feel like I'm very much rediscovering my body and what I want to do with it, you know? I've been on this road of the rat race of running from one project to the another and then trying to do my own stuff like you Harriet, on top of that with other people. It is exhausting. And it has been exhausting for the last 20 years now. I'm 42. So there's a very strange transition that I'm going through now where I'm rediscovering my body I know a lot more about my pelvic floor now. I've never brought that into Bharatanatyam training but I am now with my you know 18 to 20 year old students in Bharatanatyam at UEL and Surrey. Like do you guys know about your pelvic floor? Right! We're all adults, you know those holes, no. So we talk a lot about our pelvic floor. And so for me, really in the last year and a half, it's been gentle yoga, tuning in back with my abdominals, because all kinds of things separate and this isn't something that we often talk about is how the body expands and finds its way of opening. I literally felt like when this life was growing inside of me like I was being cracked open very slowly. And now I'm pulling myself back together. And that is like a metaphor for everything in life post birth. Career wise, body wise, entering the world again after a pandemic, where I felt like the world great was on maternity leave, I was have very happy to go on maternity leave with the world.

**Melanie:**

Yeah.

**Kamala:**

But now that is finished, how do I enter back in and sort of not feel isolated, away from the dance culture that is very much about the self. Now I'm no longer about myself. So what does that mean for my very specific and self centred, which is not a bad thing, self centred interest in creating a new language?

**Harriet:**

Yeah.

**Kamala:**

Yeah, I'm trying to find a new relationship with my body. I don't train every day like I used to. But I train three times a week just to keep strong and be able to lift my daughter and not get a cramp in my back from that old dance injury that never healed. So yeah, just sort of rediscovering that now.

**Melanie:**

I was once in a company in Amsterdam, that was a folk dance company, actually. And they embarked on this training at one point where they decided that we were all going to do really non dance training in order to strengthen ourselves. And so there was one moment I remember with horror, where we all had to go swimming in this ice cold swimming pool. I've never been a particularly strong swimmer. And doing it outside in the cold in Amsterdam wasn't great either. But cycling was a big one and some running. And it was really new to me and my body, you know, to be working like that. And I wondered whether your own training had kind of transcended into things that were non dance, particularly because both of you has such strength in your work. And I'm not saying that dance doesn't give you that it does, but with the martial arts, that you're practising Kamala. But yeah, I have wondered whether you were looking more broadly at other exercise forms that might be becoming part of that jigsaw puzzle that makes you who you are. And it's interesting to think about yoga in that way. Because I think that's mind and body too, right. And that must be so important, particularly as you're talking about coming out with having had a baby as well to be training the holistic body, for the work that you're doing fascinating. And I also noticed, as I looked at both of you, you might think me wrong here, but it feels to me that you're also challenging how your work is disseminated. So I wasn't seeing as I read through your company's biographies, your biographies, just lots of theatre spaces. I was reading about Netflix, I was reading about Adidas, I was reading about music videos, I was reading about being rehearsal director in operas and all kinds of interesting things. And it felt to me that you'd kind of moved your work out of just that traditional theatre space, and perhaps expectation of where a dancer should be putting their work and perhaps even transcending commercial and the more publicly funded work. And I wondered whether that felt true to you. Whether you agreed with that perception of your work, and perhaps why you think that your aesthetic, your vocabulary yourself are able to move between these different spaces. Harriet, would you like to tackle that one first? I think you worked with a Michaela Coel on... She's nodding proudly, eminently cool as ever. Tell us about that.

**Harriet:**

Yeah, I worked with Michaela Coel and Arinzé Kene, who were the leads in *Been So Long*, which was a Netflix film, and I love being on set. It's just a very different way of working. I am as much into film as I am into theatre. And had I not explored film, I don't think my career would have had momentum from the very beginning when I graduated from Laban I had done a two year course. And before that, I'd done a degree in History of Art. So I was coming out as like a, an all right contemporary

dancer, but I had to find out what I was good at, and not just try and get through the gate of getting into like contemporary companies, I had to find something else. So the first bits of work I did were actually in film, and they were choreographing and dancing on film sets. And I think it's just such a great way to share your work. Our first film is like 7, 8 million views. And there's no way as a young startup company or your first work, you're ever gonna get that audience. No way. And it was through these that we've had more international relationships, bigger projects come through, because people have seen the work on film. And however well you document a live performance, film work is made for film and it just shows your work very well I think. I mean, that's slightly incorrect, because you can get amazing theatre recordings. But yeah, and this is something we're wanting to do. Our next work, we want to make a feature film that is a dance theatre piece. So we're looking at that, but it's a simultaneous relationship of these parts always moving forward.

**Melanie:**

Kamala the same you've made some dance films, I think with Seeta Patel as well.

**Kamala:**

Yeah, we made a dance film called The Art of Defining Me in 2013 with a filmmaker named Maria Åkesson from Sweden and yeah, I mean half of it was scripted by the fabulous Ankur Bhal, who also works with his partner Wayne Parsons for VOXED at this point. And yeah, so it was definitely a collaborative effort. And Harriet's totally right dance on screen is very different, differently choreographed and created for the lens. It's just a completely different kettle of fish. And you can reach so many different audiences that you never thought you would. At one point, our work was translated into Taiwanese. Seeta went to Taiwan and it was just so wonderful to see the audience expand in that way that we'd never done before for our own duets that just went around the country basically, and I think a little bit to Germany, but I've also recently worked on an opera by Helen Caddick based on the female artist, Sophie Taeuber-Arp who was a dancer with Laban herself, but she was also a sculptor, and textile artist and multimedia artist of many sorts and didn't get the recognition she needed back in the 20s. Because her husband, Jean Arp was a very famous sculptor at the time and so he took all the limelight. But I was brought into that project because I was doing a solo dance on an earlier incarnation of the opera, which is just about Jean Arp and his work at the Turner Contemporary in Margate. And so, Helen brought me on because I am a Bharatanatyam artist. And so when I did a solo that was a contemporary Bharatanatyam thing at the Southbank Centre, she was also performing there, and she saw a need to bring in an artist who could do many characters inside their bodies. And that is a very instinctual thing that we do as Bharatanatyam artists. So now that I'm working or had worked earlier this year on an r&d of the opera, I'm trying to find the language of what this amazing dancer slash multimedia artist would have done with her own body, having trained at Laban, but be very different in the way that she dances at that time in history under certain circumstances.

**Melanie:**

That's fascinating. So that really has taken you through and do you think Harriet that the ability to work in those two worlds? And I think I'm asking this question coming out of a conversation we had with Ivan Blackstock right back in series one, where he was talking about feeling like he didn't fit in, in the sort of contemporary world, and just not having the aesthetic that was expected of him. So moving into music videos, in the world of film, there was much more acceptance of the person that he was, and being able to have an identity that he had made for himself, rather than feeling like you had to conform in some way to what was expected. And so I don't know if that feels true of you or your work. But I wanted to ask you whether that had been a similar experience for you.

**Harriet:**

Film was where I started to understand my own identity. First, it was through creating choreography for film, that I understood my hybrid language.

**Melanie:**

Right.

**Harriet:**

I feel like the contemporary world is a bit more open to different styles now. So I don't feel restricted by the discipline. I do in terms of its infrastructure. I really look up to Wayne McGregor and Akram Khan and people that are making global work in different forms. And Wayne McGregor, in particular, his commercial structure, or his financial structure for his company, I really aspire to that you can work with commercial works, and you can still have a really high end artistic product at the end of it, and that he can look after freelancers with Here East, but then also make operas that are making... I just think it's a very forward and innovative way of thinking. And I think the industry needs people like this. And I think knowing that you can branch out to film or commercial or theatre, teaching that these are all options for you, you don't just have to be a contemporary dancer in contemporary institute's and maintain your income by what equity standard is, because you're doing Arts Council project basing, and this is how you understand how much money you get. I think there's bigger ideas out there that aren't integrated yet. But I think there are people showing the way I want to follow.

**Melanie:**

Yeah, yeah, I truly agree. And I think you're right, the world or s expects us to want us to go into these channels, because it's easier for the world to sort information that way. If we're all in these compartments, and to go down our lines, and the minute we will start to sort of branch across that's quite hard for people to understand that. But I think you're right, breaking that down is an exciting place to be. So just to finish, Kamala, what are your hopes for this next couple of years as we emerge out of the pandemic, as you bring your company back together, you've got a child now that you're also responsible for. I loved how you talked about how that's changed your perception of the

work. I'm also a mother of two and I can completely empathise with that feeling of this isn't just about me now. This is about all of us. So what's on the cards for you?

**Kamala:**

Well, like I said, we started with the r&d for Centrica in January 2020. And so I am the type of person that really needs to finish things.

**Melanie:**

Yeah ok.

**Kamala:**

Whether I continue in the same structure as I have for the last five years with my company, whether I continue with that I do feel like I really want to finish this piece. One of the things that's really holding me back is a missing link thematically that I just haven't solidified yet in my brain and in my heart. And I feel like once that clicks, everything will be off and it will be worth the time and all of the hours ignoring my daughter and putting her in nursery instead. And not being able to afford, you know, all those things that have to happen in order to create work, especially this work that Harriet and I are doing, which needs so much research and so much development in order to create something of our own expectation to put out on stage and into the world. So yeah, I'd like to finish Centrica, I'd also really love to continue my role as a mentor and a coach with contemporary and or classical Indian dance artists that I've been doing in the last few years, had a really wonderful project created by Nupur Arts Youth Association, headed by Smita Vadnerkar up in Leicester. She brought six lovely artists together from all different genres contemporary to classical Indian, and I was able to do six weeks of mentoring with them. And at the end, they had their own solos to perform on Leicester stage at the Curve, and then they performed it online. And I think through that, I'd really love to hone my own ability to facilitate others manifesting their dreams within the art. Yeah, that's what's on the cards so far... might do my Masters, we'll see.

**Melanie:**

Wow, wow. And Harriet, how about you what's on the cards for you in this next sort of year or so as we sort ourselves out after being in isolation for what feels like two years.

**Harriet:**

The next year, I am keeping up a daily practice of research that's has to happen. And then there are bigger goals where I'm making a new work with my company Edifice. We're currently researching with an excellent dramaturg, Lou Cope. And we...

**Kamala:**

Awesome

**Melanie:**

I know her well. She's brilliant.

**Harriet:**

Yeah, we've worked briefly with Hannes as well. Hannes Langolf. To work a little bit in a more theatrical body. So we're trying to make this new work. And we will go down the wonderful Arts Council application.

**Kamala:**

Oh, the joy.

**Harriet:**

Yeah, that route and we're also wanting to make a previous work into a film. So starting these things.

**Melanie:**

Lovely. Well, I'm wishing both of you loads of luck, and that feels like a good place to stop. If you'd like to hear more episodes about subjects moving artists of today. Search for Talking Moves wherever you get your podcasts. Don't forget to subscribe, leave a review and spread the word. And if you would like to be part of the ArtsUnboxed family and do dance differently with us at Greenwich Dance, email us at [info@greenwichdance.org.uk](mailto: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 so much. It's been fascinating finding out more about what you're both doing.

**Kamala:**

Thank you so much. That was so great. I wish that we've been able to find more ways of communicating with each other Harriet.

**Harriet:**

Yeah, I know I had questions for you as well.