SCENE

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Global Learning Through Theatre and the Arts


The courage to stay
still

Editor's Note

There is a particular quality to work that has taken time to grow. You can feel it in a dancer whose technique carries history and tradition in their body, in a rehearsal room where silence is comfortable and attentive, in a collaboration that has been built slowly, through trust rather than urgency.

As I reflect on the articles for this issue of **SCENE**, I find myself returning to one idea, the value and courage of staying still. Perhaps staying still with a question, with the craft, with each other long enough for something deeper to emerge. We are surrounded by systems that celebrate speed and momentum. The next project, the next post, the next most visible move. Yet the artists gathered amongst these pages offer a quieter invitation. They suggest that meaning deepens through sustained attention. That artistry is less about constant reinvention and more about refining, listening, and staying present.

In the dance studio, this takes the form of interrogating training cultures. How do we nurture resilience without replicating harm? How do we preserve rigour while building safe work ethics? Across cultural contexts, expectations shift, but the underlying question remains the same: what kind of depth are we cultivating in our artists?

In rehearsal spaces shaped by connection-first practices, performers are asked not to 'show' emotion, but to experience it and remain emotionally responsive.

Technique becomes a means of sustaining presence rather than controlling it in order to create something alive. Live art forms are not meant to feel like you could rewind and see the exact same thing again, that you could come on a different night and the performers hit the exact same delivery without a single beat open to the here and now.

Elsewhere, repetition emerges as a site of wonder rather than stagnation. The workshop run again to perfect it. The story retold to discover more. The line rehearsed once more to try a different nuance. When structures are familiar, attention sharpens, subtleties are found, and collaboration deepens. Staying with something long enough often reveals layers that would not, otherwise, surface.

Questions of voice and access are also present through this issue. Ethical collaboration, embodied knowledge, visual language, improvisation, cultural memory, etc. They require time and intentional listening. They ask artists and educators to resist the pressure to move on before new findings have had the time to be discovered.

As you read this issue, I invite you to notice where the reflections ask you to slow down. Where it challenges you to examine your own habits of making and teaching. Where it encourages you not to leap immediately toward the next idea, but to linger with the one already unfolding.

Warm regards,

Helen Abbott

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Finding wonder in *repetition*

By Awelani Moyo

I have told this story before. I will probably tell it again.

By the third time of running the same workshop in one morning, something usually shifts. Not just in the structure — the exercises are more or less the same, the timing similar, the instructions unchanged — but in me. My voice settles, my mind skates, my body stops trying to anticipate. I listen more carefully to what is actually happening in the room rather than what I expect to happen next. And this is when the surprises usually happen. This shift suggests that repetition functions not as mechanical reproduction, but as a condition that enables embodied attention to emerge.

Repetition is often treated with suspicion. We are warned against becoming stale or mechanical, taught to value novelty and the appearance of constant progress. And yet theatre itself is built on repetition: rehearsing lines, repeating movements, returning to the same stories night after night. Storytelling, perhaps more than any other theatrical form, depends on this return — the telling again, and again, and again. This is what keeps stories alive. It is a repetition that demands not just endurance but presence.

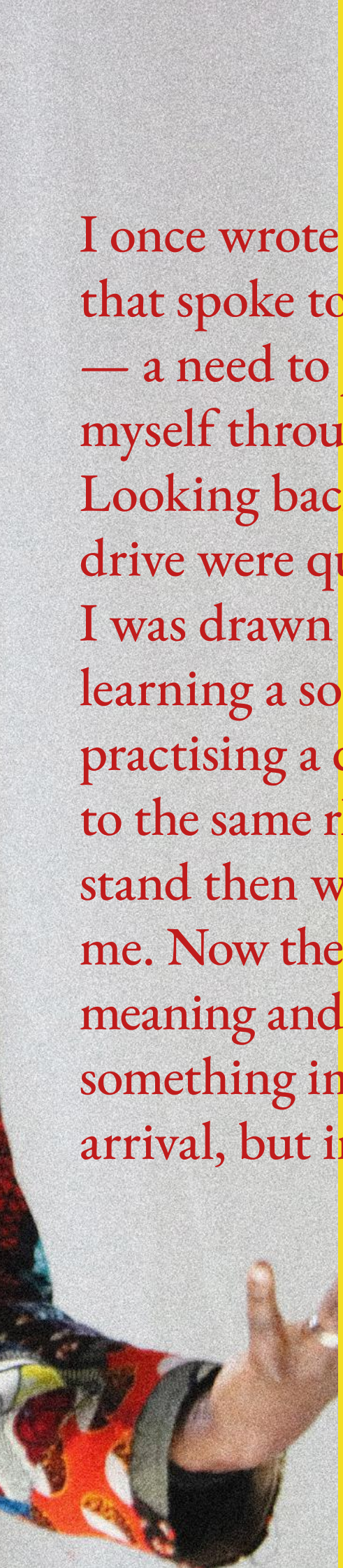
'Repetition becomes a practice not of adding, but of allowing meaning to emerge.'

I recently read an article about Hermann Hesse (2023), who wrote about wonder not as a childish indulgence but as a disciplined way of paying attention — a capacity that education and adulthood often train out of us. What strikes me is how close wonder feels to repetition. Wonder does not require novelty; it requires presence or even mindfulness. To look again at the same butterfly is not to exhaust it but to notice more of it. In theatre and storytelling, repetition can function in the same way. When a structure is familiar, attention is freed from anticipation and control. Repetition becomes a practice not of adding but of allowing meaning to emerge.

Samuel Beckett (1983) famously wrote, 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better'. This line is often quoted as a promise of improvement but I am increasingly interested in what happens when repetition does not lead to anything 'better' at all. Beckett's theatre often dwells rather than progresses; it stays with material, circles it, wears a groove through time. Repetition here is less about mastery than endurance and honesty. It asks whether we can remain with something without trying to fix it or demanding a new result. There is value in repetition that does not redeem itself — in staying, in allowing something to emerge slowly or not at all.

We have all heard the idea that doing the same thing repeatedly while expecting different results is a form of insanity. Art, however, has always been willing to inhabit that risk — to return without guarantees and to trust that change does not always announce itself as progress. In this sense, artistic repetition quietly challenges cultural assumptions that equate rationality with efficiency and linear advancement.

In the Shona storytelling tradition (an oral storytelling tradition of the Shona people of Zimbabwe), call and response is central, and a refrain — Dzepfunde — is uttered by the audience every few lines. At first it can feel like an interruption. But listening more closely, I notice something else happening. As the audience interjects spontaneously, repetition becomes rhythm, connection, and invitation. It opens the door for collaboration, shaping the story without changing its words. As with ritual, repeating the same phrase does not produce sameness, it reveals difference. A pause lengthens. A rhythm emerges. A moment that once felt incidental begins to carry weight. The story does not change so much as our relationship to it does. Repetition has not dulled the work — it has sharpened our attention.



I once wrote about my desire to make work that spoke to big moral and political themes — a need to justify both the work and myself through urgency and purpose. Looking back, I can see that alongside this drive were quieter preoccupations.
I was drawn to moments of shared doing: learning a song and repeating a melody, practising a dance and stepping together to the same rhythm. I did not fully understand then why those moments stayed with me. Now they feel less like a detour from meaning and more like an early clue — that something important was happening not in arrival, but in *repetition* itself.

repetition

repetition

repetition

repetition

I have heard this story before. I will probably hear it again.

Listening to my toddler ask for the same game, the same song, the same nursery rhyme — again, again — has shifted my understanding of repetition. Here, repetition is pleasure, reassurance, and learning happening simultaneously. Each return deepens familiarity while opening space for recognition and delight. Before we were trained to optimise and move on, perhaps we repeated things because it felt right. This unselfconscious return offers a way of making sense of the world and of feeling safe enough to explore it.

Repetition creates safety. In telling the same story, or leading the same exercise repeatedly, the edges soften. There is a place to rest inside the work — what I think of as finding a place in the fun. Predictability does not constrain freedom, it makes it possible. When we are no longer preoccupied with what comes next, we can inhabit what is happening now. Wonder slips back in quietly, sometimes followed by learning. Repetition, then, is not always something to escape. Sometimes it is a comfort zone worth trusting: a safe predictable space where the pressure to push forwards falls away and unguarded moments can occur, allowing us to wander back to the wonder of being and of learning. In this sense, repetition functions as a condition for, rather than an aversion to, creative risk.

'Predictability does not constrain freedom; it makes it possible.'

We live inside systems — not least social media — that reward constant movement: the next post, the next idea, the next version of ourselves. Stillness is easily read as failure. Repetition becomes suspect, associated with stagnation or a lack of ambition. These pressures are not merely personal but structural, shaping how creative value is measured. Against this backdrop, choosing to repeat can feel almost transgressive. It asks us to resist the pressure of forwards momentum and to trust that staying with something — a story, a form, a practice — is not the same as being stuck.

Once upon a time ...

Perhaps the question is not how many repetitions are too many, but what kind of attention repetition produces. When repetition becomes merely efficient, it can deaden; when it becomes attentive, it can open. Not every return promises improvement. Some offer presence, pleasure or familiarity — and sometimes that is enough. In a culture that insists on progress, repetition may be one of the few places where we are allowed to dwell — to listen, to wonder, to belong. As a new year begins, with its familiar pressure to move forwards, I find myself wondering whether some of the most meaningful work I will create is not new at all, but waiting patiently to be done *again.*

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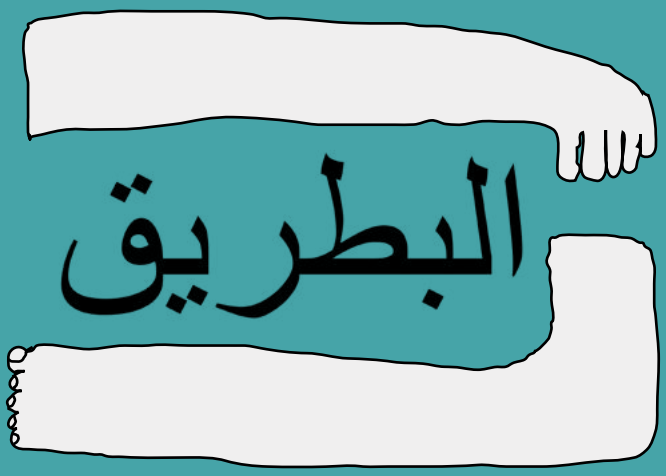

Penguin

Written by Hamzeh Al Hussien,
directed and co-created by Amy Golding

Photo: © picturesbybish

Introduction
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Penguin is a one-man theatre show born from friendship, trust, and an urgent desire to speak honestly about displacement, disability, self acceptance, and finding humour in survival. The play was developed collaboratively over years of sharing stories with Hamzeh Al Hussien and working closely with dramaturg and writer Lindsay Rodden. The result blends storytelling, humour, music, and movement to invite audiences into Hamzeh's world. It celebrates his lived experience as a Syrian refugee and disabled artist, but mostly it showcases a brilliant man — his humour, resilience, and 'coolness' — a guy with a sharp sense of style.

‘Hamzeh is charismatic and compelling, and his enduring sense of optimism is so present.’ **NARC magazine**

The story remains relevant, more so in this moment where intolerance and scapegoating of immigrants by governments is spread through media and far-right rhetoric. In this article, I reflect on our aims, approach, outcomes, and areas for development, with a particular focus on touring the work across the UK and internationally, including taking it back to Jordan, where Hamzeh lived for six years in Zaatari refugee camp.

Aims
الأهداف

Penguin set out to do three key things. First, we wanted to create space for a refugee story to be told with complexity, humour, and agency. Second, we aimed to model an ethical, collaborative process between artists with different lived experiences, foregrounding access, care, and dignity as core artistic values. Third, we wanted the work to reach audiences who might not normally attend theatre, particularly Syrian, Arabic-speaking, and young audiences, and to use performance as a catalyst for conversation.

We were also committed to experimentation: exploring how bilingual captions could be fully integrated into the design; how community advocacy could sit at the heart of touring models; and how a piece could remain responsive while travelling across cultures, languages, and age groups.

Approach
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Collaboration and process

Penguin was developed through a close, ongoing collaboration. Rather than beginning with a fixed script, the work emerged through conversation, improvisation, and experimentation with movement. Hamzeh’s voice and authorship were central at every stage.

'Access is relational — it is built on trust.'

Accessibility shaped both process and form. We built rehearsal schedules around Hamzeh's energy and pain levels, paid close attention to how stories were shared, and allowed the structure of the piece to change as new insights emerged. This openness became part of the work's experimental quality.

Language, captions and translation

One of our artistic choices was the integration of captions in both Arabic and English. Rather than positioning captions as purely functional, we treated them as part of the visual and narrative language of the piece. This allowed audiences to move fluidly between languages, and enabled Arabic-speaking and D/deaf or hard of hearing audiences to engage directly. The English captions and simple language also made it easier to follow for others learning English as an additional language. We will be substituting either the English or Arabic captions for German when we tour to Switzerland later in 2026.

When we took Penguin back to Jordan, we re-re-hearsed the show in Arabic. This was a challenge for Hamzeh as the original was in English with some Arabic. Performing the work in the region where Hamzeh's displacement began was both emotionally and artistically transformative. It required us to reconsider rhythm, emphasis, cultural reference points, language around disability, and how the humour landed in a different context. Also we had to consider safety and comfort for Hamzeh — he made some script edits as there were some lines he didn't feel safe or comfortable sharing in the Zaatari camp, especially as we had the security police in attendance. This trip was also an opportunity to reunite with his mum and sister after seven years apart, and for them to see him perform a story in which they were so present. This was a huge moment.

Photo: © Saya Naruse

Community advocacy and touring

Across the UK tour, we worked with paid community advocates in each location. These advocates, often embedded within Syrian, Arabic-speaking or refugee communities, played a crucial role in bringing new audiences into the space. This approach challenged traditional marketing models, and acknowledged that access is relational and built on trust.

We also took Penguin into schools, using performances and discussions to open conversations with teenagers about disability, migration, self-acceptance, and resilience. Teachers frequently noted the depth of engagement, especially in schools with refugee pupils. Hamzeh became a celebrity amongst the school communities.


His tears in the moonlight.
It was the first time I saw that.

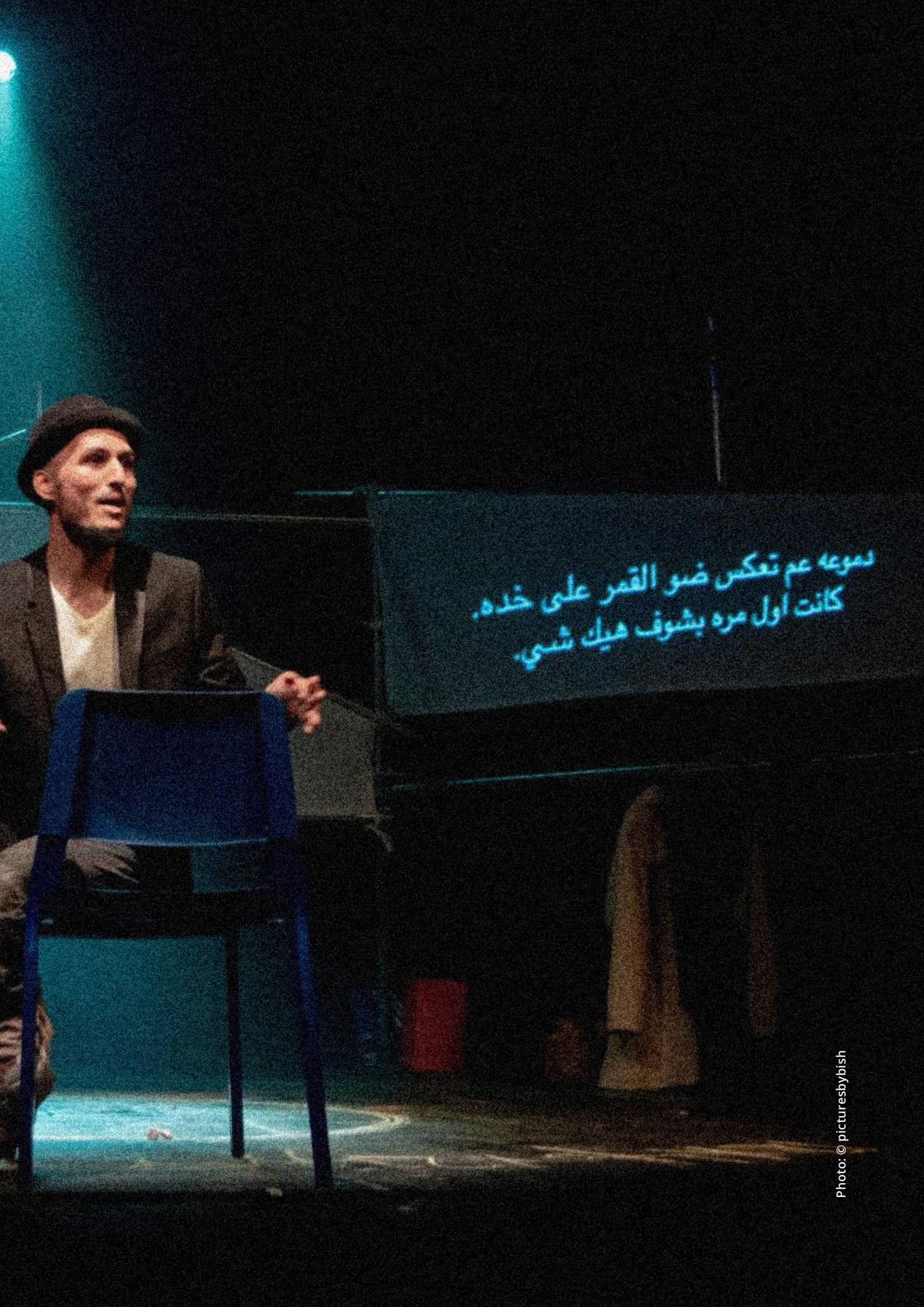

Photo: © picturesbybish

‘For some, the performance was more than a play; it was a mirror.
The profound resonance of seeing their own story on stage was palpable.’
Teacher, Excelsior Academy School

Outcomes

النتائج

Audience impact and reach

Penguin has reached audiences across theatres, festivals, schools, and community settings. The response was overwhelming. Teenagers really engaged with it, leading to the work being programmed at festivals that celebrate theatre for young audiences. Notably, Penguin was presented at ASSITEJ Bright Generations in Marseille, reinforcing its resonance within international contexts for children and young people.

Recognition and professional development

For Hamzeh, Penguin marked his professional debut in theatre, culminating in winning Best Newcomer at the 2023 North East Culture Awards and gaining a lot of press coverage and overwhelmingly positive reviews. This recognition celebrated not only his performance but also the importance of creating pathways for displaced artists to enter professional creative industries.

Learning and challenges

التعلم و التحديات

Touring as a disabled and displaced artist

Touring Penguin has generated significant learning around access, particularly the reality that access requirements are deeply individual and cannot be assumed. Standard solutions often fall short. For example, during airport transfers, Hamzeh did not want to be pushed in a wheelchair, but buggy services were deemed unavailable to us. These moments exposed how systems often prioritise efficiency over dignity. We also found that once Hamzeh had his full British passport and was not using travel documents attitudes towards him at borders changed significantly.

Navigating these situations required constant advocacy, negotiation, and emotional labour. We learned the importance of detailed advance conversations, flexibility, and trusting lived expertise over generic access policies.

International touring and freelance structures

Building international touring relationships as a group of freelance artists has been both incredibly rewarding and time-consuming. Developing relationships across borders, negotiating funding and fees, aligning timelines, and understanding cultural differences requires sustained effort, particularly when layered with access considerations. While challenging, this process has reinforced the value of long-term relationships and transparent communication, and enriched our practice as artists enormously.

Areas for development

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As Penguin continues to tour, we want to deepen our international reach, particularly in regions where refugee narratives are politicised or silenced. We are keen to further refine our access planning and to share our learning with venues and festivals, contributing to more nuanced and dignified approaches to disability access.

Looking ahead

التطلع إلى المستقبل

Penguin will continue to tour internationally and is already attracting further interest from festivals and venues. We are actively seeking new bookings and partnerships. The work remains open, responsive, and rooted in lived experience, and we are excited to see how it continues to evolve in dialogue with new audiences.

We have also just started the journey of making our next show together.

If you are interested in programming Penguin or continuing these conversations in your context, we warmly invite you to get in touch: algolding777@gmail.com.

Access As Process:

Visual theatre and deaf-led practice

By Ramesh Meyyappan

‘Visual theatre can be a shared language.’

My career in theatre has spanned almost 30 years — as performer, teacher, actor, and director. For many years I have focused on developing my own visual theatrical vocabulary. This is an important aspect of my work — making it accessible to deaf and hearing while attempting to maintain artistic and creative ways to tell *my* stories. I have been fortunate in the opportunities I’ve had to create work and as such haven’t had to give much thought to how scripts are presented to and for the deaf.

Being given opportunities to create work myself, I felt it important to script my ideas to share them with production teams and creative collaborators. I have begun to consider how, as a deaf person, I make scripts accessible to other deaf.

This provides some background about me as a theatre-maker, processes I’ve used (scripted and unscripted), and a little about what I’ve witnessed in terms of deaf engagement in theatre-making.

Beginning my acting career in Singapore working with a mostly deaf (or signing) theatre company *Hi! Theatre* I rarely concerned myself with accessibility of scripts. Like many deaf companies our work was entirely visual and usually devised. Our 1990s contemporaries worked much like us or devised work that dealt with deaf issues. Since then there has been progress, particularly in the number of deaf involved in theatre and associated arts, with increasing support and interest from mainstream theatre companies.

Being deaf and being actively involved in theatre both nationally and internationally, I’ve been fortunate to be involved in a range of processes making efforts to create work for and by deaf performers. I have witnessed how others have attempted to evolve their work to make it more generally accessible.

As a theatre-maker I develop performances using an eclectic mix of visual and physical styles. I continually seek to extend my visual vocabulary — incorporating circus techniques, bouffon, puppetry, and illusion — while creating strong narrative work.

Since moving to Scotland, I have played an important role in raising awareness of deafness in the Scottish theatre community. I work tirelessly at making my work mainstream, accessible both to deaf and hearing.

I was involved in the programme design team for the BA Performance in British Sign Language (BSL) and English at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland where I taught the visual theatre module.

I continue to create accessible theatre work that successfully tours nationally and internationally. I was nominated five times for best actor at the Life! Theatre Awards (Singapore), winning twice. In Scotland I was nominated for a Total Theatre Award for *Snails & Ketchup* and for best male performance (2017) at the Critics’ Awards for Theatre in Scotland for *Off Kilter. Off Kilter* was showcased at Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Milan, Paris, Vienna, Reims, and Shanghai.

Early life

Born in a small rural village in Southern India, my parents decided to move to Singapore in the hope that both my sister and I, being deaf, got access to education catering to our ‘condition’ and greater opportunities. A tough decision as they had to leave my older brother in India.

My household was interesting to observe and difficult to describe. Neither of my parents spoke or used English — only Tamil — nor signed. My sister was multilingual. I know very little Tamil, my first language is American Sign Language (ASL), and I use English. We are a visual family and the chat would do a round, with some translation or working out to do at times. This is perhaps why a visual language became important to me — linguistics and semantics were less relevant as they didn’t help with our communication.

'Accessibility must be creative, not an afterthought.'

Singapore and early arts career

Initially I was very content working in Singapore, excited by the idea that we had a growing arts scene and always eager to be part of the development of the arts there. I was finding my feet in terms of having a sense of what I wanted to do, had just become artistic director of *Hi! Theatre*, and felt I had done a decent job adapting and directing *Macbeth* into a piece of visual theatre. This was a milestone for me in terms of becoming aware of visual possibilities when adapting texts. However, being aware of the possibilities, I felt I wanted to explore more and applied to Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA) who afforded me the opportunity. I was the first deaf student at LIPA as well as being the first deaf recipient of a Shell–National Arts Council scholarship allowing me to study overseas.

I graduated from LIPA with a first class BA Honours in Performing Arts and also received the Philip Holt Trust award the same year. While at LIPA I was selected to perform at the National Student Drama Festival with a solo performance I developed — my adaptation of Dario Fo's *Mistero Buffo*. There was much interest in my work as I was the first deaf to perform at such a festival. Being in Liverpool was more than just a time of study, I genuinely saw the potential of developing visual theatre work combining a range of disciplines, developing my own solo work, and collaborating with individuals and companies such as Spike Theatre, Unity Theatre (who often programmed my work), and Hope Street Theatre.

This was very much a springboard. *Mistero Buffo* and subsequent solo performances *(This Side Up* and *The Tell-Tale Heart)* saw me touring extensively for a few years — Singapore, Edinburgh Festival, France (Paris, Reims), USA (Washington, Baltimore), Austria, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Australia, New Zealand, England, Poland, Cambodia, Hong Kong, and India. The work was entirely visual and therefore had universal and international appeal. At this point I was committed to demonstrating the possibilities of a shared language — that deaf shouldn't be insular in their approaches to work (much work created by deaf was primarily for deaf/signing audiences). To this extent I was seen by some as a pioneer — demonstrating the possibilities of work with and by deaf, and that it could and should be seen and presented on mainstream stages. This was important not just to me but also to the wider deaf community. As a deaf person, I had gained critical recognition — reviews talked about my craft and rarely mentioned my deafness (I was never the token deaf), my work spoke for itself and even earned a few nominations and awards.

My commitment and passion for creating accessible work garnered interest and invitations to share my work through talks at conferences, workshops, and masterclasses, directing for and collaborating with individuals and theatre companies.

In Scotland I've had opportunities to collaborate with individuals and companies — all have been keen to explore visual possibilities when creating theatre and have supported my aim to develop a visual theatre vocabulary unique to each piece of work. For *Snails & Ketchup* and *Skewered Snails* I combined aerial work and choreography with strong characterisation (playing and transitioning between multiple roles). *Butterfly* made use of puppetry and choreography to re-tell a version of Nabokov's *Madame Butterfly*. *Off Kilter* made use of illusion and magic in a dark comedy that deals with mental health and well-being. More recently, working with Raw Material as producers I have extended my collaborations to work with National Theatre of Scotland, Tron Theatre, and Vanishing Point on some visually successful productions like *Love Beyond and Lear* — my adaptation of *King Lear* as a commission from Singapore International Festival of Arts with support from Creative Scotland and National Theatre of Scotland.

I aim to continue to focus on creating work, collaborating with like-minded individuals to explore the many visual possibilities within a theatrical vocabulary and to find ways to script for future deaf and hearing to maybe consider themselves.

More that connects than divides:

A BRIDGE

to understanding

By Claron McFadden

"I am always looking for what connects us as human beings, rather than what divides us."

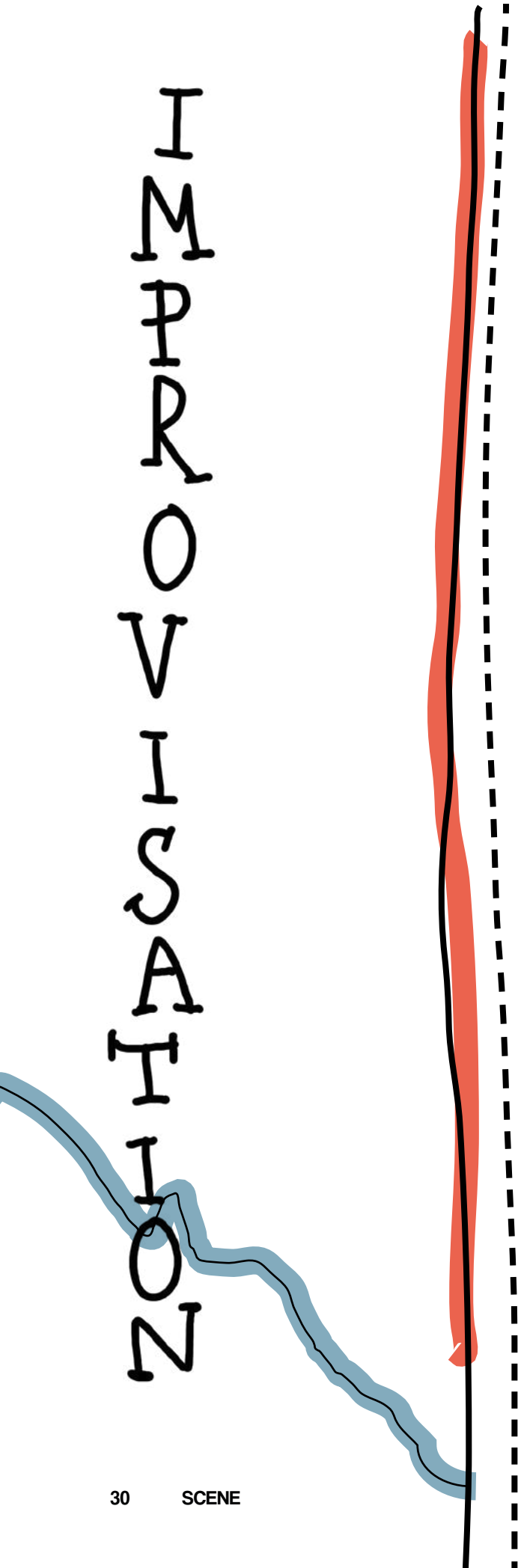
I am a vocalist, and singing helps me make sense of the world in which I live. There is something quite profound about this simple act: inhaling, feeling the lungs expand and then feeling the vibration of sound riding on the gently exhaled air. For newborns, this is deeply connected to their survival, how they communicate and make sense of their new world. I became fascinated by how sound could be both calming and stimulating, and started exploring ways to use sound to communicate emotions without words, as infants do.

I am always looking for what connects us as human beings, rather than what divides us. I am very curious to learn more about cultures and musical traditions that are different from my own — this helps keep me open to the world and the people in it.

Photo: The Crow © Erik de Jong

In my search for what connects us, I did a project where I gave a voice to secrets that had been anonymously given to me. In this project, called 'Secrets', I wanted to honour the people who have been on the planet for a very long time, and who are not always able to share their experiences and wisdom in our society. The one project that touched me the most and continues to do so — Nachtschade: Aubergine — involved a road trip around the Mediterranean with a documentary-maker. We went to five different countries, and in each country a host taught me a dish with aubergine and a song. I asked them about their identity and migratory history. I had to prepare the dish and sing the song for our dinner guests. It was an amazing opportunity to learn from my hosts, but also to share with and learn from people who randomly crossed my path. We shared stories, food, and music, and the understanding that we are all coming from somewhere else, adapting to our surroundings, integrating, and adding to the rich cultural tapestry — just like the iconic aubergine. I was very happy that my voice could be a bridge to greater understanding and connection.

Photo: Nachtschade: Aubergine. © Koen Bross



In 2010 I discovered a vocal piece by John Cage called Aria. It is a graphic score made up of curving lines with different colours and text fragments that seem random and with no coherent meaning. Each colour represents a different musical style. Cage says it is up to the individual to assign the styles to the colours, but says it's necessary to be consistent with the colour as well as following the shape of the lines. This was my first experience with a graphic score and although it was challenging, I found it very liberating. I gave a talk in which I compared the primal spontaneity of Aria to that of the human voice, and just how connected the voice is to human emotions. That score opened the door to a whole new world to me: total musical freedom within a clearly defined structure, in other words — improvisation.

At about the same time, I was invited to take part in a project with top musicians from the free-improvising scene. Although I was familiar with improvisation in specific musical styles, I had no experience whatsoever with group free improvisation. As the project got closer and closer I became more and more stressed, and by the time we started the first rehearsal I was totally blocked and incapable of contributing anything artistically meaningful to this collaboration. The breakthrough came when a colleague gently encouraged me to just listen and react intuitively to what was going on musically around me, in real time, free of inner judgement. My mind quietened down, and in this new silent space I started improvising intuitively with just the pure sound of my voice. I learned to trust my intuitive creativity and a whole new world of musical expression opened up to me. My journey through this project completely changed my approach to making music and to connecting with others, onstage and off. It also became the departure point for the artistic practice that I call 'SWARM: Intuition in Motion'. It is a workshop I've developed over the last 20 years and is inspired by swarm behaviour in the insect and animal kingdoms.

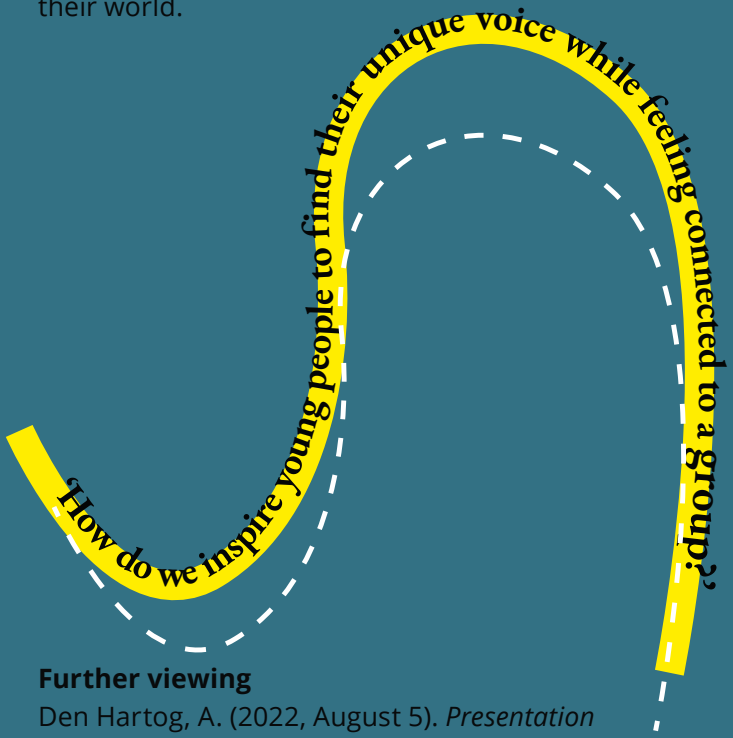
It is generally accepted that fear is a crucial part of our survival instinct, triggering a flight, fight or freeze response to avoid danger. In this heightened state of alertness, are we not extremely creative in an intuitive way, as long as we don't panic?

We've all had to 'perform' at some point in our lives, be it giving a presentation in front of classmates, giving a speech to a group of peers or just daring to express our creative ideas or solutions to co-workers or colleagues. Think of the dry mouth, sweaty palms, the racing heart. Right before we perform, the brain gets the signal of danger and starts releasing the same fight, flight or freeze chemicals as if we were being chased by a sabre-toothed tiger. The good news: the brain also releases the same feel-good chemicals after the danger has passed ...

The musician in me marvels at the incredible, twisting school of sardines or a huge swirling murmuration of starlings. These are formations to avoid danger. I see how each individual fish or bird is unique but yet is still very much part of the collective as a whole. This 'swarm behaviour' also occurs whenever people are performing together and are in the same creative flow. They move as one entity. I had much experience sharing the workshop with singers, but I wanted to know how it could work with non-musicians or with people who were not accustomed to using their voices except for speaking. I wanted to know how it would be to have people of varying ages improvising together. But I was particularly interested in seeing how this workshop would resonate with young people, many of whom had been isolated from their classmates due to the pandemic and therefore were needing to find ways of reconnecting socially, especially in a world that had become more and more isolationist. How to inspire them to develop their unique 'voice' while still feeling empowered and connected to a group?

I had the honour of being invited as a resident at the prestigious ARThailand program at Prem International School in Chiang Mai and was able to work with kids from ages 3 to 18, adjusting the workshop to fit the needs of each group. Through exercises both challenging and fun, the young people felt safe enough to start to explore that intuitive inner voice that I believe is the key to creativity. The voice and body became an instrument of expressive exploration — everyone contributed creatively to the group improvisations, adapting to the subtle changes in the group dynamics in real time.

I'm always amazed at how quickly people who have never before improvised start reacting to the sounds around them, from birdsong and dogs barking, to espresso machines and laughter. It's as if a door has been opened to their creative awareness or perhaps a meaningful bridge, connecting them to what makes sense in their world.



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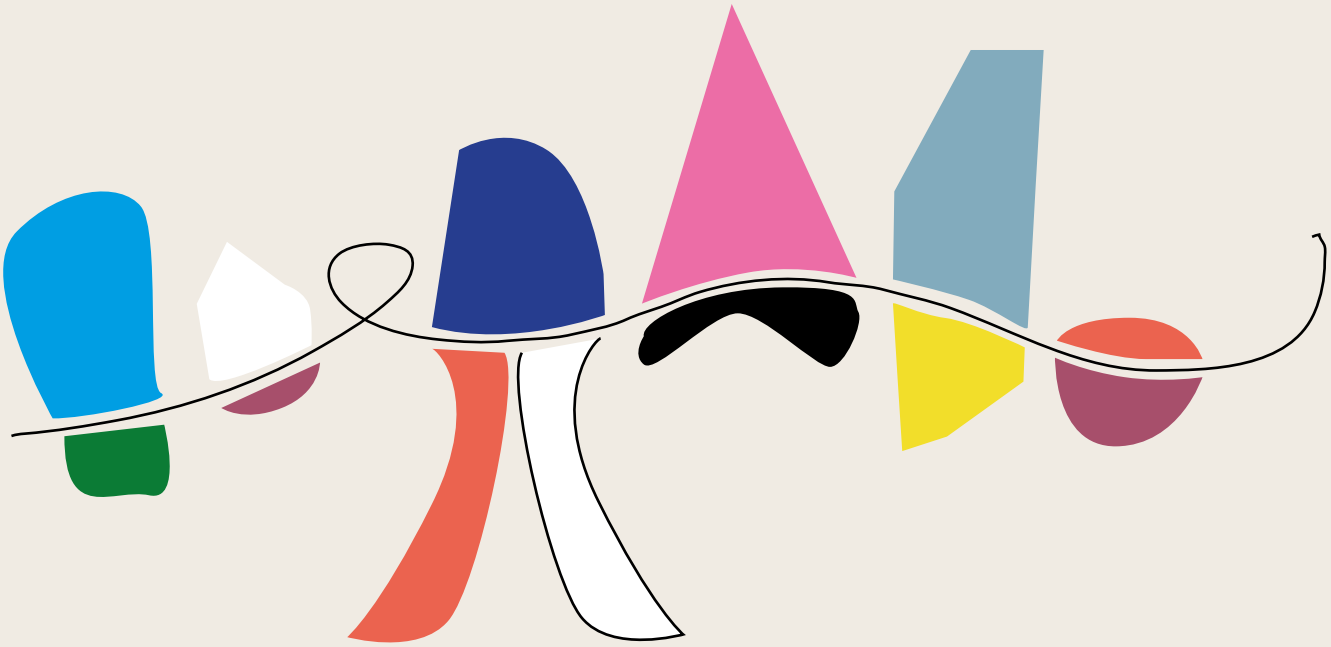
Why dance matters

By Lauren Cullimore



Creativity is vital, and dance is its purest expression. For me, teaching dance is about shaping critical thinkers, creators, and principled citizens, who will make a positive impact on the future. Teaching is an opportunity to educate and inspire the next generation of dance artists — individuals who will carry forwards the language of movement with confidence and purpose. This belief has guided my journey as a teacher, committed to empowering students through arts education.

Who I am and the work I am involved in

My name is Lauren Cullimore, and I am a passionate and energetic arts educator committed to communicating knowledge through engaging and impactful methods. Currently, I serve as the Coordinator of Middle Years Programmes at an independent grammar school located in Western Sydney, Australia, where I lead curriculum innovation and support student development across a range of disciplines. My work is driven by an idea that education should be inclusive, holistic, and inspiring — empowering students to think critically, act creatively, and grow as individuals. Beyond my school leadership role, I am deeply involved in the global education community through the International Baccalaureate (IB). The IB is a global leader in international education, committed to nurturing inquiring, knowledgeable, confident, and caring young people. I am pleased to contribute to this mission through a variety of roles, including curriculum developer, online facilitator, community moderator, school visit team member, workshop leader, examiner, and global academics contractor. These roles allow me to collaborate with educators worldwide, promoting best practices in teaching and learning.

I enjoy serving as an examiner and moderator for IB Diploma Programme (DP) dance, and am very grateful to be actively involved in the DP dance curriculum review. As a workshop leader for the IB, I design and deliver dance workshops globally, exploring effective and innovative ways to engage students in dance education.

I also proudly serve as Vice President of the Dance Educators Professional Association of New South Wales (DEPA), advocating for the dance education community and supporting teachers in delivering high-quality courses. DEPA's mission is to champion excellence in dance education by providing professional development, resources, and a strong voice for teachers across the state.

In the current education climate where arts subjects often face reduced funding and curriculum time, our work is more important than ever. Dance is not just an art form; it is a vital avenue for creativity, physical health, emotional expression, and cultural understanding. DEPA ensures that dance maintains its rightful place in the curriculum and that educators are empowered to inspire students through meaningful, inclusive courses.

In my current school position, I oversee curriculum for students aged 12–16, working closely with department heads to ensure academic programmes meet educational standards while responding to diverse student needs. Cultivating a positive school culture is central to my philosophy. I believe students learn best when they feel safe, supported, and valued. Through student leadership initiatives, staff professional development, and community engagement, I have worked to create a culture of respect, inclusion, and collaboration.

What led me to these roles

My pathway to becoming a dance educator and curriculum leader began with a love for the arts. Dance has always been more than movement, it is a language of expression, identity, and connection. Early in my career, as I began teaching dance in schools I witnessed first-hand its transformative power. Students who struggled academically often thrived in the dance studio, discovering confidence and creativity they didn't know they had. This reinforced my belief that arts education is essential not optional.

Over time, I sought opportunities to influence education beyond the classroom. Joining NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) as a technical advisor allowed me to shape curriculum at a systemic level. Similarly, my involvement with the IB opened doors to international collaboration, curriculum development, and professional learning. These experiences broadened my perspective on education and deepened my commitment to creating programmes that prepare students for a complex, interconnected world.

Serving on the DEPA committee, first as Secretary and now as Vice President, has been another pivotal chapter. Advocating for dance education and supporting teachers across the state has been both rewarding and inspiring. It reminds me daily that our work as educators is not just about teaching content, it's about building communities of practice and empowering future generations.

Echoing Nietzsche, Sir Ken Robinson famously argued that 'those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music' (2016). His words remind us that creativity and by extension dance, can be misunderstood or undervalued in traditional education systems. Yet dance nurtures skills that are critical for the future — creativity, collaboration, resilience, and self-expression. This is why we must continue to advocate for dance in schools.

Advice for aspiring dance educators

If you are considering a career in dance education, here are some insights from my journey.

Advocate for the arts
As Martha Graham observed, 'Dance is the hidden language of the soul' (1991). This sentiment echoes Robinson's call to elevate creativity in education. Robinson argued that 'creativity now is as important in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status' (2006). Together, these voices remind us why we must continue to advocate for dance in schools: it nurtures imagination, resilience, and self-expression, qualities essential for thriving in a complex world. Dance often competes for recognition in school curriculums. Be a strong advocate for its value.

Stay passionate and purposeful
Dance education is demanding but profoundly rewarding. Your passion for the art form will sustain you through challenges. Education is constantly evolving. Engage in professional development, attend workshops, and seek mentorship. The more you learn, the more you can offer your students.

Build connections
Join professional associations like DEPA or international networks such as the IB community. Collaboration enriches your practice and opens doors to new opportunities. Be open to leadership opportunities. Leadership roles allow you to influence education on a broader scale. Whether it's leading a department, writing curriculums or facilitating workshops, these opportunities amplify your impact.

My career as a dance educator has been a journey of passion, growth, and purpose. From the classroom to global curriculum development, every step has reinforced my belief in the transformative power of the arts. Dance education is not just about teaching movement, it is about shaping confident, creative, and compassionate individuals. If you are considering this path, know that your work matters. You have the power to inspire, to innovate, and to make a lasting difference.

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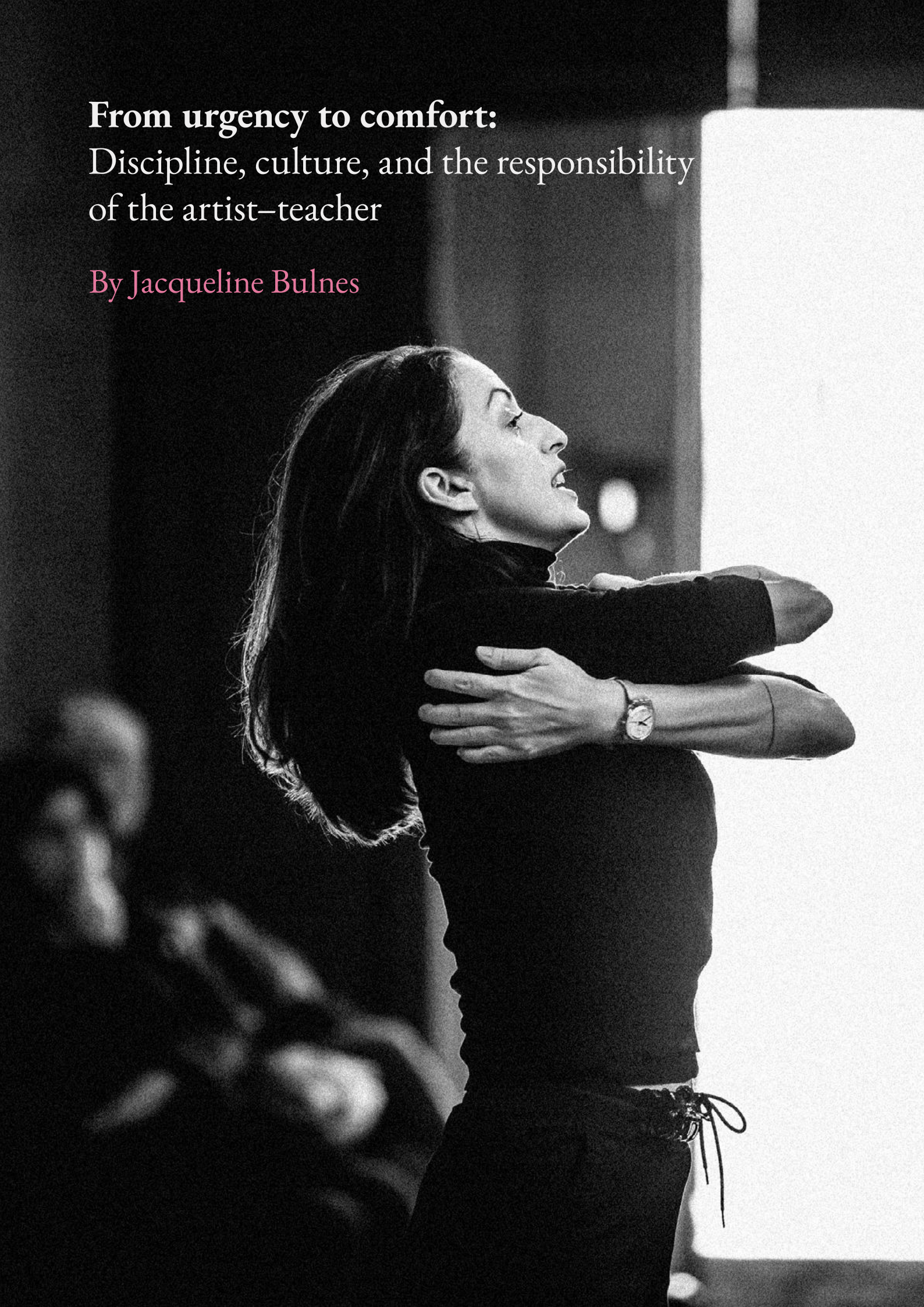
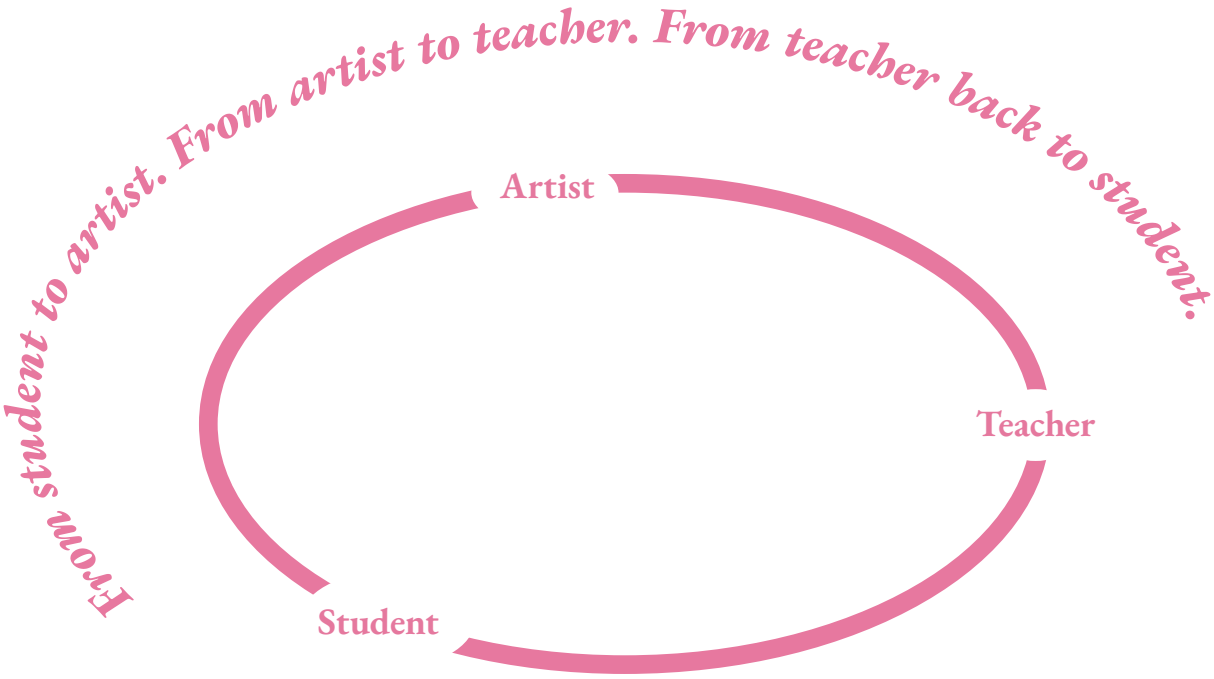
From urgency to comfort: Discipline, culture, and the responsibility of the artist–teacher

By Jacqueline Bulnes





This cyclical passage has shaped my life in dance. Each transition has brought not certainty but questions — about discipline, culture, responsibility, and what it truly means to train an artist today.

I grew up in the United States (USA), in a household where financial stability was never guaranteed and where artistic pursuit was inseparable from survival. Dance was not an extracurricular activity; it was a necessity. I was fortunate to receive scholarships from a young age, allowing me to train seriously. My first teacher, trained at the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, demanded discipline while cultivating joy and curiosity in the studio. Mistakes were part of learning, not a source of shame. That balance — rigour paired with humanity — became my earliest reference point.

My formal training continued within an intensive conservatory environment, where exposure to multiple ballet and modern techniques, dance history, anatomy, and composition was considered standard rather than exceptional. Only later, when I began teaching, did I realise how much those expectations had shifted — and how unevenly across cultures.

After dancing professionally in the USA, my career eventually brought me to Europe. Fifteen years ago I settled in Italy, where I have since worked as a teacher, choreographer, and movement director. Teaching across countries — including Denmark, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Poland, and the UK — has exposed me to a wide range of pedagogical approaches and attitudes towards work. These differences cannot be explained by technique alone. They are cultural.

In my own training, discipline was non-negotiable. Preparation began before the scheduled start time. Absences required justification. Teachers were trusted, peers respected, and working beyond official hours was understood as part of artistic responsibility. In many European contexts, I encountered a different rhythm. Rehearsals missed for minor illnesses. Preparation beginning at the hour rather than before it. Strong boundaries around time and a growing reluctance to exceed them. This contrast prompted a deeper question: why has urgency diminished and what has replaced it?

Is this generational? Cultural? The tension between US productivity and European comfort? Or does it reflect a broader shift in how artists understand responsibility, effort, and competition?

Culture, competition, and work ethics

Work ethics are never neutral. They are shaped by history, social structures, and collective values — they deeply influence how competition is perceived and practised.

In Nordic cultures, competition is often deliberately softened. Collaboration, trust, and collective responsibility take precedence over individual rivalry. This can foster healthy, sustainable working environments, but it also raises the question of whether reduced competition diminishes urgency or individual accountability. In Southern European contexts, particularly Italy and Spain, work is relational. Belonging, negotiation, and adaptability shape professional life. Competition exists, but is mediated by personal connection. Does this protect artists from burnout or does it sometimes prioritise comfort over growth?

‘Work ethics are never neutral; they are shaped by culture.’

French professional culture often frames competition as intellectual rather than physical or productive. Debate, critique, and conceptual clarity are valued, sometimes more than endurance or repetition. This can generate depth and discernment, yet may also resist the demands of long-term embodied labour. US work culture, by contrast, openly embraces competition as a driver of ambition and innovation. It produces speed, excellence, and opportunity — while also risking exhaustion, exclusion, and the erosion of communal responsibility.

These differences lead to a central question: which relationship to competition best enables growth without becoming toxic or overbearing? Is competition most productive when it pits individuals against one another or when it challenges them to develop within a shared framework of discipline and care?

Shifting standards and surface knowledge

Across countries I noticed a recurring pattern: many students lacked familiarity with foundational figures and techniques in both ballet and modern dance. Names such as George Balanchine, August Bournonville, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, José Limón, Bob Fosse, Lester Horton, William Forsythe, Maurice Béjart or Trisha Brown were often unfamiliar or understood only in passing. References to choreographers, methods or historical contexts frequently fell flat.

This was not a matter of ignorance, but of compression — histories reduced to summaries, techniques merged into general aesthetics, and specificity replaced by versatility without depth. When dancers lack reference points, their ability to make choices, articulate intention, and develop nuance is inevitably limited.

Through conversations with colleagues across Europe and the USA, these concerns echoed repeatedly. In Denmark, teachers spoke of training being ‘washed down’, making it difficult to find prepared dancers locally. In New York, students studied contemporary choreographers while remaining unfamiliar with their lineage. In France, some dancers dismissed older works as outdated, questioning the relevance of sustained technical training altogether. In Italy, students often knew only what had been transmitted directly by their teachers, with little exposure beyond the studio.

What emerges is not resistance to work, but a redefinition of it — one that increasingly favours immediacy over accumulation, comfort over endurance, and expression over structure.

What is lost when urgency disappears?

Sociologist Richard Sennett, writing on craftsmanship, reminds us that mastery is inseparable from repetition, patience, and time. Craft is not sustained by efficiency or ease, but by commitment to process. When urgency disappears from training, what is often lost is not joy, but depth: the slow accumulation of skill, judgement, and responsibility that defines an artist’s relationship to their work.

‘When urgency disappears from training, depth is often what is lost.’

Through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu, this shift can also be understood as a change in cultural capital. When access and opportunity are no longer directly tied to training, urgency often gives way to comfort. While this may reduce fear and hierarchy, it can also dilute accountability — reshaping how discipline, effort, and excellence are perceived.

The challenge, then, is not to defend severity, nor to romanticise the past. It is to ask what kind of artists we are preparing, and for what conditions.

What needs reclaiming

If we are serious about educating artists rather than producing content, several elements must be reconsidered.

First, historical depth must be restored. Dance history should expand, not shrink, in an era of increasing access to information. Understanding movement within its social, political, and cultural contexts gives dancers agency and responsibility, preventing technique from becoming empty form.

Second, technical specificity must return. Modern techniques have increasingly fused into a single aesthetic, producing adaptable but indistinct movers. Ballet, meanwhile, is often taught as allegiance to a single method rather than a spectrum of approaches. Specificity does not restrict dancers, it equips them with choice.

Third, embodied transmission must be protected. Scholars such as Susan Leigh Foster and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone remind us that movement knowledge is learned through sensation, repetition, and physical experience — not language alone. We now work in an environment where teachers increasingly risk professional consequences if physical correction is perceived — even momentarily — as inappropriate. Yet physical correction, when consented to, is not an imposition but a form of knowledge transfer. To remove it entirely is to reduce learning to explanation and to sever the body from one of its primary ways of knowing. Finally, studio culture must be rebuilt. Attention is a collective resource. Phones should be switched off or left outside the studio in order to respect both the learning process and the shared space from beginning to end.

Breaks are part of the work, not escapes from it — moments to observe, reflect, interact, and remain engaged. When focus fragments, community weakens and growth suffers.

Carrying the cycle forwards

Teaching has not given me answers, it has sharpened my questions. It has revealed how deeply culture shapes discipline — and how easily rigour is mistaken for rigidity.

The task ahead is not to return to older models unquestioningly, nor to surrender to comfort in the name of progress. It is to build training environments that are humane yet demanding, inclusive yet precise, supportive yet uncompromising in their respect for the work.

‘Without roots, nothing grows very far.’

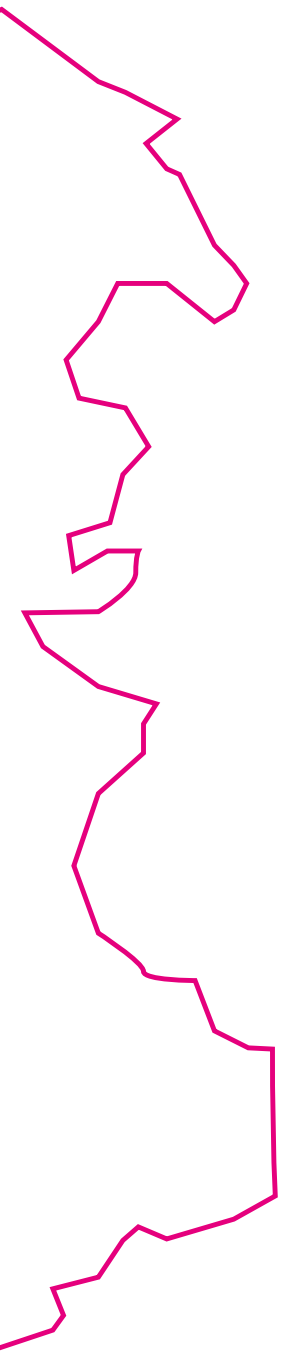
Further Reading & Viewing

- Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*
- Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*
- Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement*
- Pierre Bourdieu, on cultural capital and education

Collaborative practice: Learning on location

By Tristan Tull

As any film graduate will tell you, the leap from second year to the final-year project stretches the tendons. Students will enter their concluding year having worked on a number of productions and will be finding their feet as film-makers. What happens with the 'grad film' sometimes comes as a shock as every facet of a student's learning is put to the test.



Regent's University is an independent, international university in central London. Our film and screen-writing degrees immerse students in the practicalities of film-making and practices of the industry so that they are as connected and as prepared for the realities of the film-making world as possible. The conclusion of our degrees requires students to create short narrative dramas of 10–15 minutes with accompanying screening plans. Each student must take on a core head of department (HOD) role: director, producer or cinematographer on one film, and a specialist role: production design, first assistant director, assistant camera or sound on another, meaning they are working on a minimum of two grad films in the first term of the year.

As the final term ended in 2024, my colleague, Director of Programmes, Mike Peel and I had a plan. It needed firm organisation, a budget, and a fast turnaround. Crucially it needed the commitment of our students to return to university earlier in September, adding more pressure to their workload. If, however, they bought into the plan it would give them invaluable experience in preparing for their final year. We began to discuss how we could shoot a film with the students at the end of the summer holidays with us taking on the HOD roles, whilst they gained production experience and learned from how we navigated the process.

Mike had a script he had been developing based on the mountaineer George Mallory whose body was found (and lost) on Everest in 1999 after his attempt to scale it 75 years earlier.

Between Heaven and Earth is set in 1915 during the honeymoon of George and his new wife Ruth, as they go climbing in England's Lake District. Mike was fascinated with George's conflicted desires of family and adventure as well as Ruth's realisations of what her life was about to become. I loved the script and asked if I could be the producer to Mike's writer–director.

Producing includes managing money, locations, cast, crew, and logistics, with each component dependent on the other. A good crew works in harmony but being unprepared can result in a project collapsing.

We realised we had some money in our annual budget that we could commit but without the students' involvement it would be pointless. Luckily six (about half the cohort) immediately put themselves forward.

Advertising on casting websites produced 160 applicants and 3 days of casting to find our 2 actors. These ended up being the very first pair we had seen on the first morning, Jess Frances and Paul McLaughlin.

With our budget of £6,000 we worked out that we had three days in total. We originally hoped to film in the same location where the Mallorys' honeymoon took place but soon realised that would involve two days' travel so that was out.

Being based in London we started to look for locations that could at least look mountainous — maybe we could shoot tight and 'cheat' it, maybe we move the story indoors? I knew though, that the Brecon Beacons were only a few hours' drive away; if we found a sympathetic landowner we could maybe have our location. I chose a mountain by a lake called Llangorse, with an adventure centre at the foot of the mountain we could stay at.

Miraculously we had three days of September sunshine in South Wales and other than the sound operator's twisted ankle production went without hitch (something very rare in film-making).

'A good crew works in harmony — being unprepared can collapse a project.'


BETWEEN HEAVEN & EARTH
SCENE
2
SLATE
21
TAKE
1
ROLL
A8384
DIR MIKE PEEL
DOP AMIR AAL
50mm G61
DATE 19.09.2024
IRND 0.9

‘There is a false sense of security when production wraps, you feel you have finished but really you are at the foot of another mountain — post-production.’

As well as enabling our students to hone skills and develop confidence, we as educators have a duty to report and rationalise our approaches to teaching.

The UK Research Excellence Framework promotes 'open science', namely collaboration across institutions and the sharing of outcomes — an ethos we embraced. Five of the crew were Regent's colleagues, and we recruited friends and staff from the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham to join us in the costume and camera departments. Carlos Lellis of the world-famous Abbey Road Studios provided a beautiful soundtrack, and in a nod to the story's origin we spoke to Dr Sue Allan (an expert in Cumbrian music) who turned us on to some folk music from the region.

It was essential for us that the students understood that even when the edit, sound design, score, and colour grade are finished the work is not over — we needed to reach an audience. The traditional way to do this is via the film festival circuit. It is possible to throw lots of money at entering festivals and not getting selected. We therefore employed a company called Festival Formula — they have extensive knowledge of festivals worldwide and for a fee, if they chose you, will present you with a bespoke festival plan. The festival run lasts around 12–18 months. We have already screened at the internationally acclaimed Aesthetica Short Film Festival in York as part of the Regent's showcase and we look forward to many more throughout 2026. Mike would like to develop Between Heaven and Earth into a feature script and festival successes help with that aim.

We love the film and feel that our collective effort has honoured the script in imagining what it was like on that day's hike in 1915 for Ruth Mallory as she sees her husband climb ahead, somehow sensing that his desire to ascend would consume him and leave her a widow with two children. A completed work deserves its own screening and I thought it would be great to organise a celebration of the memory of the Mallorys with our film as the centrepiece. I invited people connected to the story and was delighted when Mallory biographers Katherine MacInnes and Tom Newton-Dunn (George and Ruth's great nephew) as well as Rebecca Stephens MBE, the first British woman to scale Everest, agreed to attend. Our cast Jessica and Paul opened by reading excerpts from the biographies, we then screened the film and followed with a Q&A with Mike, Katherine and Tom.

The success of immersive learning we took from the film has now become an annual event. In August 2025 we collaborated with the University for the Creative Arts and shot a short film called Moryow entirely in their VFX studios, a very different experience but again an invaluable one for the students.

We are already looking ahead to the summer of 2026; there is something wonderful about the experience of research by practice with your students. A film becomes an experience you all shared and something you can all be proud of. Even when they have graduated and are working on huge projects it is wonderful to know that you were there when they started.

I find their passion, excitement, even nervousness infectious and even though every year each group is a new one it is a process I never tire of.

> 'Research by practice with your students creates something you all share.'

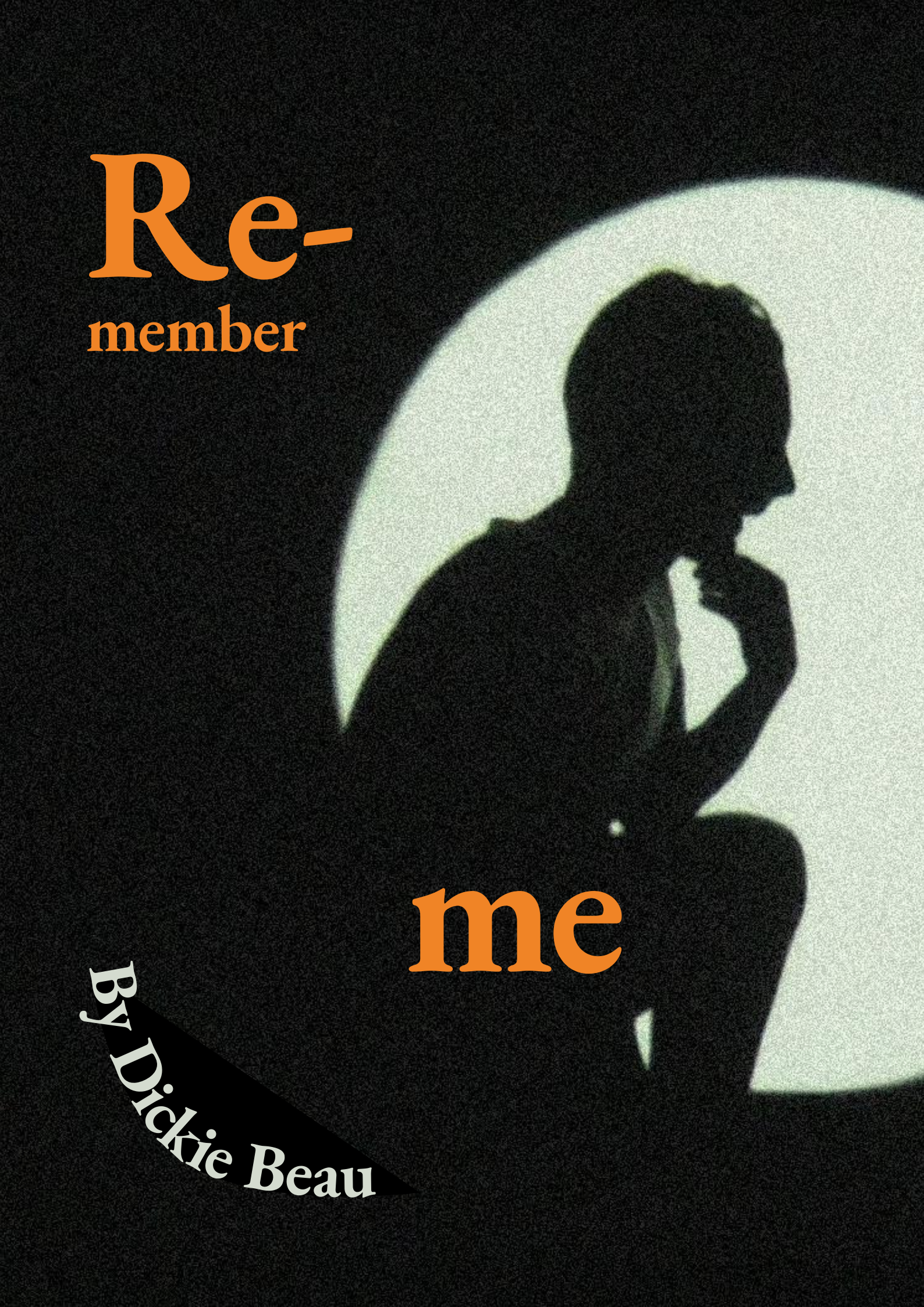
For reference:
https://bottlerocketfilm.com/between-heaven-and-earth

Regent's University London film and screenwriting courses: www.regents.ac.uk/undergraduate/film-acting-screenwriting

Festival Formula: www.festivalformula.com

Research Excellence Framework: https://2029.ref.ac.uk

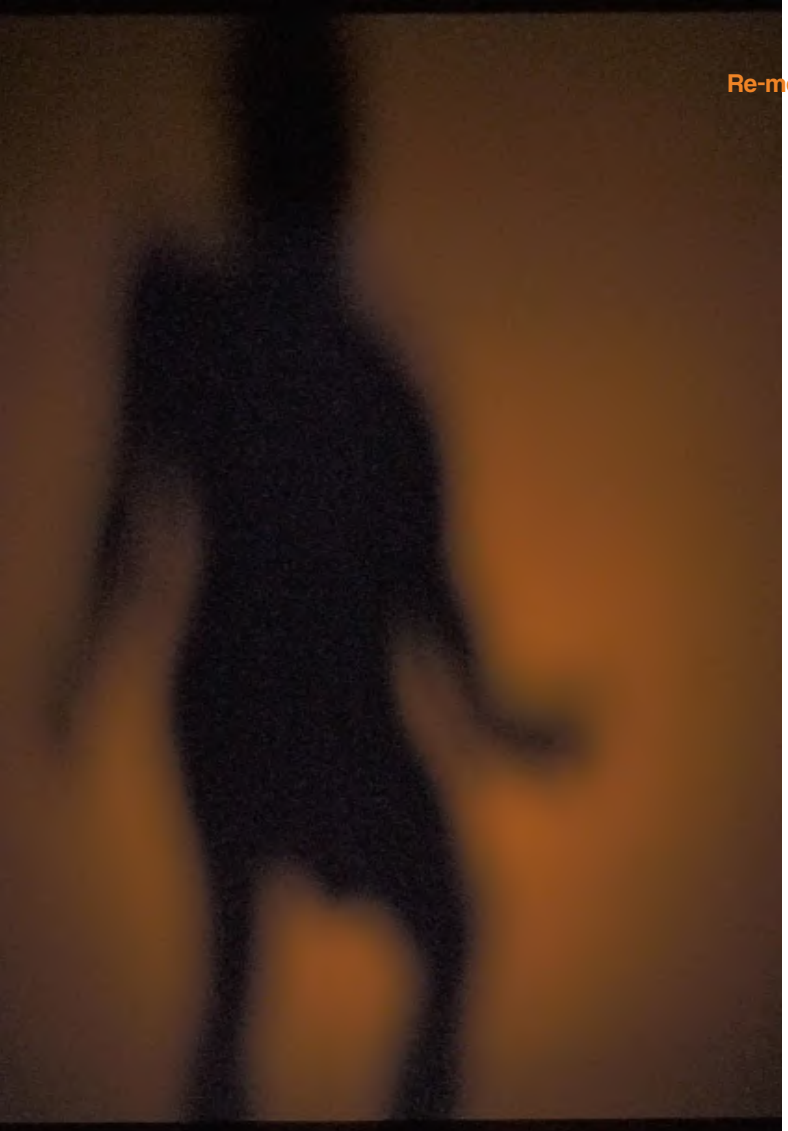
Re-member me



By Dickie Beau

As well as working as an actor, I've been making solo long-form lip-sync performances for the last 20 years. As a form, lip-syncing, which I feel might be more aptly termed 'body-syncing', implicitly creates the paradoxical presence of an absence — it makes present the idea of the person whose voice we hear, but since we know that voice doesn't truly belong to the performing body seeming to transmit it, it simultaneously makes present the fact that they are not there. This paradox establishes the foundation for a kind of hauntological dramaturgy that sits at the heart of my practice, and while nowadays lip-syncing is pretty ubiquitous online thanks to TikTok and other social media platforms, I think it is a form most apt for live performance, and for use in the theatre — an inherently haunted space and a place for listening.

As haunted characters go, Hamlet surely ranks among the most iconic. I can't honestly say I had ever really coveted the role as an actor, until I was in the dressing room at London's Royal Vauxhall Tavern one night, about 10 years ago, after I had come offstage from performing a long lip-sync to the late comic actor Kenneth Williams, when a fellow cabaret performer turned to me and said, 'You should do Hamlet'. The suggestion was I take great recordings of legendary Hamlets, from Gielgud, to Olivier, to Burton, and on, and channel them into an epic lip-sync performance of the entire play. A human Hamlet mix-tape. I thought this idea was both completely bonkers and weirdly compelling.



‘The theatre is an empty space — a headspace, an imaginarium.’

I now think it’s possibly quite a bad idea. But it got the ball rolling.

When Sir Richard Eyre first directed Hamlet for the Royal Court Theatre in 1980, he and his lead actor Jonathan Pryce, who had recently lost his own father, came up with the idea that Hamlet be ‘possessed’ by the ghost of old Hamlet. Pryce’s performance saw him ‘channelling’ the voice of the ghost. I met with Eyre, and he told me that this was a way of dealing with the problem he felt the play had for a contemporary audience who simply didn’t believe that ghosts were real.

The skull that played Yorick opposite Pryce was, on the other hand, all too real. It was later signed by the cast and entered as a raffle prize at the end of the production. It eventually found its way to the Victoria and Albert Museum, having been left in a cardboard box on the doorstep of the museum as a gift by an anonymous donor. As academic Aoife Monks has pointed out, this skull has played many parts: as a living body, as human remains, as a theatrical prop, as a raffle prize, and finally as a museum artefact.

‘Lip-syncing makes absence present.’

The image of an actor addressing a skull is perhaps as synonymous with the idea of theatre as the words ‘To be or not to be’. And the empty space cradled by the skull is the perfect metaphor for the theatre — a headspace, a playroom or as I like to call it, an imaginarium. Shakespeare prefigures this image early in the play, when Hamlet conflates the actual Globe Theatre with his own head as he promises ‘whiles memory holds a seat in this distracted globe’ that he will strive to honour the ghost’s request to ‘remember me’.

Of course, a real skull was once also a self, and used as a prop it marks a slippage between subject and object, making selfhood an uncertainty, casting knowledge into doubt.

And onstage, as a palpable symbol of the larger 'empty space' in which it appears, it makes present the inevitable future absence of the live theatrical event itself, which is forever irretrievable. And it makes me think that every theatre review is really a kind of obituary.

'Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio ... Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs?'

Shakespeare, 5.1.190–197

The skull does not answer. And its refusal to speak is as loud and clear as a bell tolling. It is a cameo that may upstage even the most convincing Hamlet. And to return to the paradox I mentioned earlier, the effect of lip-syncing parallels Yorick's skull in this scene — by making absence present.

With all this in mind, when thinking about whose voices I could include in my human Hamlet mix-tape, I was intrigued by the possibility of the wheels within wheels I might turn by 're-membering' Pryce's performance for the ghost scene. My eye then turned to Eyre's later production at the National Theatre, in 1989, which starred Daniel Day-Lewis in the leading role. Theatre gossip holds that one night onstage Day-Lewis thought he saw the ghost of his actual father and was so shaken he left the stage, never to return. Digging into the National Theatre archive, I came upon the stage management report for 5 September 1989, which confirms that Day-Lewis didn't return to the stage after the ghost scene, but sheds no light on the reason why.

Day-Lewis's mysterious departure subsequently overshadowed a lesser known story, but one that grabbed my attention. In the midst of the many press cuttings in the National Theatre archive, I came across a stunning review by then chief critic of the ***Sunday Times***, John Peter, which showered praise on the ***'masterful'*** performance of the actor who replaced Day-Lewis, Ian Charleson. What Peter didn't know was that at the time of playing Hamlet, Charleson was dying of AIDS. Within two months of his final performance in the role, he had been buried.

No recording of Charleson's Hamlet exists. And, turning on this discovery, my idea changed course. I felt compelled to try to put his performance back together again. So I stopped 'auditioning' recordings of Hamlet to include in my human Hamlet mix-tape, and instead started recording memories — of the play, the part, and particularly of Charleson's performance. Among those I interviewed were Sir Ian McKellen, Eyre, and through a coincidence of acquaintanceship, the person who had been Day-Lewis's dresser on ***Hamlet***, Stephen Ashby, who was backstage with Day-Lewis after he walked off from the ghost scene. Through these conversations, recorded intermittently over a few years, I was gradually able to piece back together the story behind one of the greatest Hamlets almost never seen.

A chance conversation in late 2016 with director Robert Icke, who was about to direct Andrew Scott as Hamlet for the Almeida Theatre, gave me an opportunity. I proposed making a satellite show that could 'haunt' his ***Hamlet***, to be presented on the set of his production on Sunday evenings during the run. Working with my director and co-devisor Jan van den Bosch, I edited my collected conversations into a 'digital script' and, with our dramaturgical approach driven by the notion of 'possessing' Icke's existing production and its set, we found ourselves composing a theatrical eulogy to a man whose memory had been sitting on the margins of the cultural archive, and a lip-synched ode to the presence of absence on the haunted stage. It was an experiment, and luckily it landed, becoming a testament to that thing Peter Brook once said: ***'Behind a bad idea a good one can be waiting to appear'***. Like a ghost in the wings. For me, making any show is a journey into darkness, and sometimes the way through is to listen, and follow what calls.

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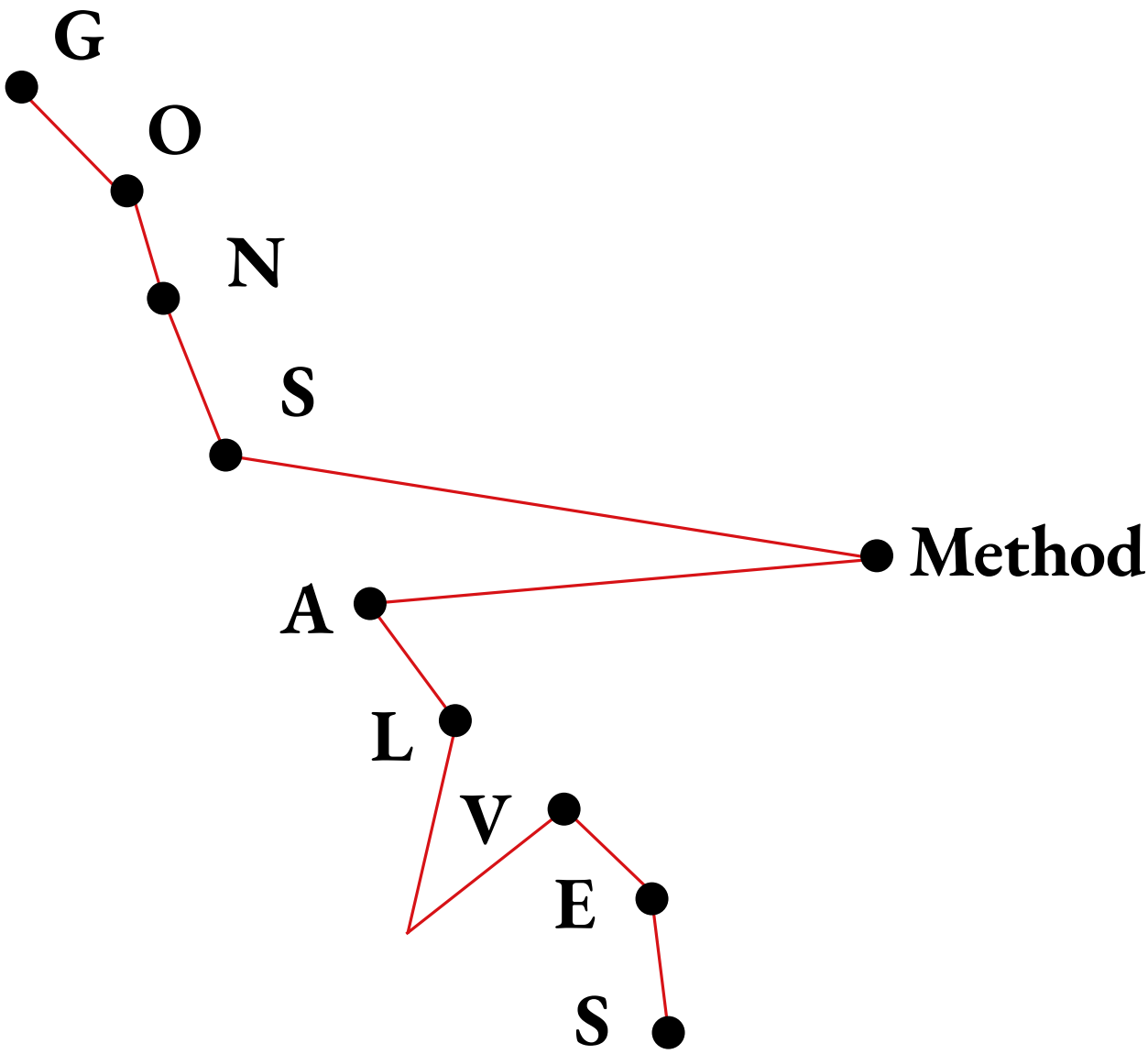
Connection first:

Adapting the Gonsalves Method for dance and Shakespeare



By Aileen Gonsalves

For the past twenty years, I have been developing an approach to actor training and directing, rooted in the Meisner technique, that prioritises connection: connection to fellow performers, to the material, to the environment, and to the audience, moment by moment. This approach, now known as the **Gonsalves Method**, consistently produces bonded ensemble companies capable of delivering truthful performances — from new writing to Shakespeare — without performers becoming emotionally overwhelmed. The aim is simple but demanding: audiences feel something real because performers are feeling something real, live, and in the moment.

Alongside my work at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) — over more than 25 years as an actor, director, and associate education practitioner — I have directed musicals, new plays, immersive theatre, and Shakespeare extensively, including with my company Butterfly Theatre. I have also co-written ***Shakespeare and Meisner*** with Dr Tracy Irish for Bloomsbury/Arden, and our second book, ***Gonsalves Method: Meisner Updated for the Modern Actor***, will be published later this year.

Until recently, however, I had never applied the Gonsalves Method to dance — particularly not as a tool for creating choreography from scratch.

Why dance?

Today, 25 accredited teachers and directors across Europe work with the method, alongside other artists, writers, film-makers, singers, dancers, and choreographers. As this community grew, we began asking an intriguing question: could this 'connection-first' approach be used not just to deepen performances, but to generate movement itself?

Choreographer, dancer, and accredited Gonsalves Method teacher, Kay Crook, founder of Chhaya Collective and Shakespeare in Motion, was keen to explore this idea. Rather than applying the method after choreography had been set, she wanted to see whether emotional connection, responsiveness, and the signature Five Conditions of character creation ***could inform the creation of the dance itself.*** Together, we decided to experiment.

My motivation was deeply personal. While I have always admired dancers' technical skill, discipline, and bravery, I have rarely been moved emotionally by dance. Across styles — from ballet to contemporary — I often felt a disconnect. The performers' attention seemed inward, focused on precision rather than on each other or the audience. The work often felt emotionally static. I wondered: what would happen if dancers worked from genuine responsiveness rather than pre-set form?

Kay also wanted the dancers to speak — specifically, Shakespeare. Dance, text, and emotional truth would coexist. It was a bold experiment, but one rooted in a shared belief: emotion only reaches an audience when performers are truly connected.

Reclaiming Ophelia

We chose to explore Ophelia from ***Hamlet***, focusing on act 3, scene 1 — the 'nunnery scene' — where Hamlet publicly rejects her with devastating cruelty. Inspired by Shakespeare's text and by the paintings of Millais and Rossetti, we reimagined Ophelia through a lens of female empowerment, mental health, unrequited love, and resilience.

What if Ophelia did not descend into madness? What if she refused to be destroyed by coercive control and emotional abuse? What if she reclaimed her voice and her life — on her own terms?

The performance was immersive, staged in the library at Bedales School, UK, with the audience surrounding the dancers. This demanded absolute emotional truth. Alongside the central duet between Hamlet and Ophelia, we created a curtain-raiser featuring a group of young female dancers. Set in a restrictive finishing school, this opening piece showed Ophelia secretly reading Hamlet's love letters while the other girls performed a rebellious, covert dance of resistance and solidarity.

Process: From connection to movement

As always when employing the method, we began with attention outwards. The duet dancers trained their awareness through sensory work, listing, walking, and Meisner-based repetition exercises — tools designed to sharpen observation and encourage honest, immediate responses rather than polite or habitual ones.

Instead of starting with text analysis or fixed choreography, we identified the emotional and visual journey we wanted each section to convey. Kay described the 'vibe' or story of a moment, and I selected combinations from the method's **Five Conditions** — As If, Objective, Stakes, Entitlement, and Prep — to serve as starting points.

For Example:

The remembered tenderness of past love

Hamlet's cruelty and rejection

Hamlet's public madness and inner regret

Ophelia's intimidation under public scrutiny

Ophelia's desperation into determination.

We experimented with different combinations, testing them through using walking and repetition. Because the dancers were less comfortable speaking, repetition and silent movement initially felt safer — and surprisingly effective. From there, movement emerged organically. Improvised motifs became a physical language that Kay and I shaped together using the language of the approach, which by now we all shared.

Unlike my usual work with actors, we filmed rehearsals extensively. I was struck by how open the dancers were to feedback. When I asked why they never took notes personally, they replied simply: ***'You're the only one who can see what it looks like — we trust you'.*** That trust allowed us to push further and work faster.

To support this process, we used **Connection Cards**, a toolkit from the approach designed to encourage play, boldness, and variation within the Five Conditions. Random prompts sparked new ideas, and kept the work alive and exploratory.

Speaking Shakespeare

Introducing Shakespeare added another layer. Drawing on decades of experience at the RSC and with non-native speakers, we paraphrased the text, used As Ifs to personalise meaning, and integrated lines into repetition exercises alongside movement. It also meant we talked and explained less. The dancers just grabbed a card and tried what it said, allowing us to make unexpected discoveries as well as saving time.

Eventually, the dancers faced the most challenging — and liberating — stage: **uninflected line learning**, a core practice in the approach. Through games and strategies, they learned the text 'beyond learning', freeing them from both memory anxiety and the dreaded 'Shakespeare voice'. Though demanding, this process gave them extraordinary freedom.

We adapted rehearsals to include full vocal warm-ups and breathing work, addressing a common dancer habit of breath-holding. Once they breathed fully, emotional expression flowed naturally through both body and language.

Outcomes

The dancers described the process as liberating. With clear objectives, they stayed out of their heads and fully engaged with their partners as they changed tactics and responded fully moment to moment. Movement and speech became different tactics serving the same intention. Performances felt alive, risky, and responsive — placing each performer's body and emotional state in the hands (and feet) of the other. They were also much more responsive to the live audience and the setting, in this case the many books and shelves around them, utilising both to achieve their objectives.

Audience responses confirmed the impact. Whether performed in the library at Bedales or the Russell-Cotes Museum, the work consistently moved audiences. One response, from Martin Berry (Creative Director of Exeter Northcott Theatre), who expressed that he can sometimes find dance difficult to connect with, stood out.

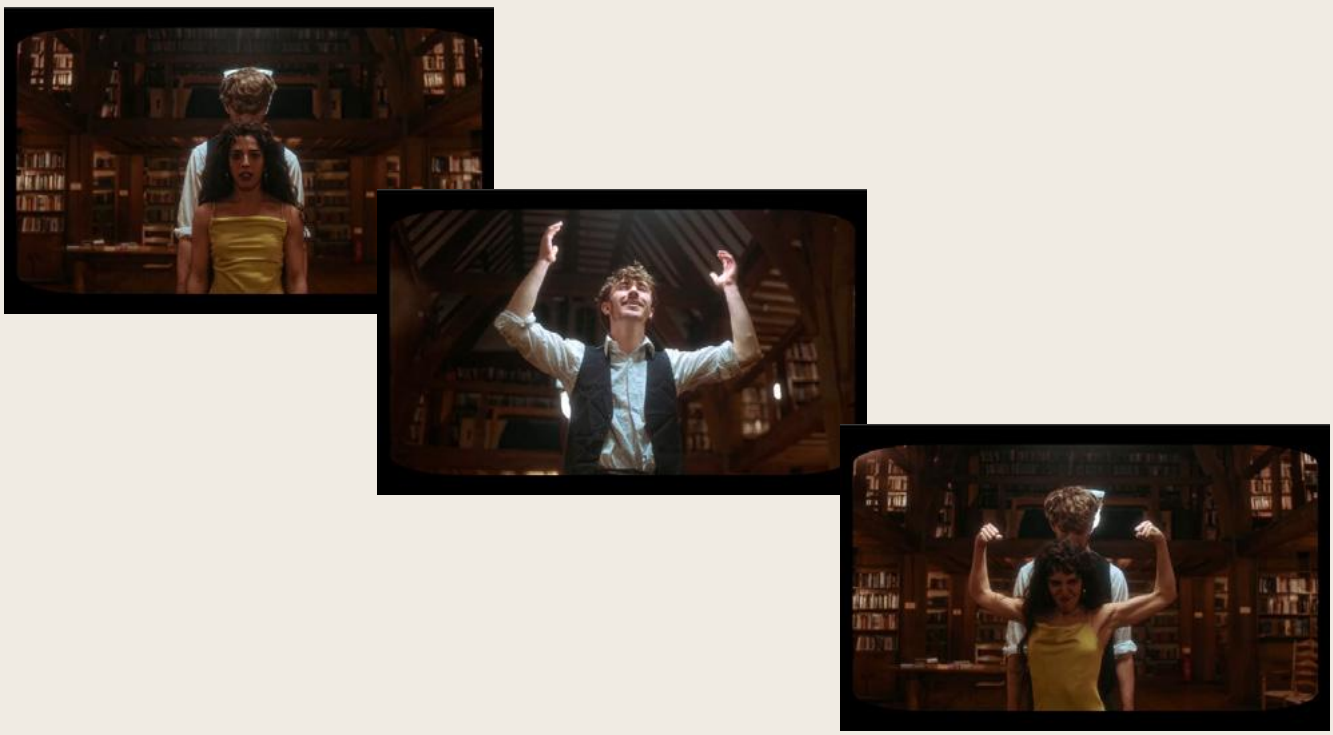
'This was emphatically not the case [with this piece]. The storytelling was highly sophisticated. I felt every moment — detailed, thoughtful, and very real. The young people were excellent. It felt ambitious and truly owned by them.'

Looking ahead

This experiment has reshaped my practice. We are touring the production and developing further Shakespeare duets, including ***Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, and The Taming of the Shrew.*** The work has deepened my trust that even within precise choreography or blocking, freedom and connection can thrive.

It has also expanded my reach. I now work regularly with dancers, singers, musical theatre performers, and even puppeteers — anyone committed to making audiences feel something real.

Ultimately, this project reaffirmed the core principle of the Gonsalves Method: **connection first**. When performers are genuinely connected — to themselves, each other, and their audience — storytelling becomes immediate, embodied, and unforgettable.



Our Contributors

Hamzeh Al Hussien

Hamzeh Al Hussien is a performer from Syria. He discovered theatre in Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan where he lived for six years, and where he began to perform, touring shows across the camp and facilitating workshops for children with disabilities. Hamzeh came to the UK in 2018 and was a member of the Curious Monkey theatre company for six years. His debut show Penguin toured the UK in 2023–2025 gaining brilliant reviews and winning Best Newcomer at the North East Culture Awards. Penguin toured to Jordan, France, and continues to tour internationally. Hamzeh has since created work for Alphabetti Theatre and Gateshead International Festival of Theatre. He regularly performs as an actor, clown, and entertainer. He also loves to perform in pantomime and dreams of starring in a horror film.

Dickie Beau

Described as 'Theatre's master of lip sync' by The Guardian, Dickie Beau has presented his solo shows at many festivals internationally and at major UK venues including the Almeida Theatre, Barbican Theatre, and Hampstead Theatre. Onstage, he has played leading roles at London's National Theatre, Austria's Salzburg Festival, and New York's The Public Theater. Screen credits include Bohemian Rhapsody, Colette, The Sandman, AIDS: The Unheard Tapes, The Gold, and What it Feels Like for a Girl. A previous winner of the Oxford Samuel Beckett Theatre Trust Award and Best Supporting Actor in the OffWestEnd Awards, Dickie was nominated for a Helpmann Award in Australia for Re-Member Me.

Jacqueline Bulnes

Jacqueline Bulnes is a Cuban American choreographer with a master's degree in arts management and entrepreneurship from The New School, New York. Internationally recognised, she was a soloist with the Martha Graham Dance Company, Limón Dance Company, Dance Theatre of Harlem, and the Merce Cunningham Trust.

She currently teaches at Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, Italy and The Joffrey Ballet, USA, and serves as a guest teacher at Teatro alla Scala in Milan. She was recently Maître de Danse for Benjamin Millepied's Paris Dance Project. She has also taught at institutions such as the Limón Dance Company, Martha Graham School, Rambert School, Trinity Laban Conservatoire, and more. Jacqueline has also collaborated with artists including Robert Wilson, Anne Bogart, Pam Tanowitz, Fabian Prioville (Pina Bausch), Matthew Bourne (New Adventures), Alberto Alonso (Ballet Nacional de Cuba), Gabriela Carrizo (Peeping Tom), and Dimitris Papaioannou.

Lauren Cullimore

Lauren is an enthusiastic arts educator dedicated to delivering meaningful and engaging learning experiences. As Coordinator of Middle Years Programmes she leads curriculum innovation, supporting student growth across multiple disciplines. She examines for International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme dance and contributes to the ongoing curriculum review. Her broader IB roles include workshop leader, curriculum developer, moderator, and school visitor. These roles allow her to collaborate with educators worldwide, promoting best practice in teaching and learning. Lauren serves as Vice President of the Dance Educators Professional Association of New South Wales, advocating for inclusive, creative, and holistic learning experiences that foster student growth, critical thinking, and meaningful engagement in the arts.

Amy Golding

Amy Golding is an award-winning director and theatre-maker from North Shields whose work has toured across the UK and internationally, including extensive work in South Africa. She was founder and Artistic Director/Joint CEO of Curious Monkey for 12 years, a Theatre of Sanctuary company known for socially relevant work. Amy collaborates with underrepresented communities to create authentic theatre that seeks social change. Her directing centres trust, contemporary issues, and challenging inequality. Credits include Penguin, Here, Mamela, Leaving, and Beats North. A Clore Fellow, Amy also works as a facilitator, consultant, and runs the pop-up experience Curious Caravan — inviting creativity, stories, and connection.

Aileen Gonsalves

Aileen Gonsalves is a theatre director, actor, writer, and creator of the Gonsalves Method — a pioneering approach to actor training taught in drama schools and universities worldwide. With over 25 years in theatre, film, television, and radio, she has worked extensively with the Royal Shakespeare Company as an actor, director, and educational practitioner, and is the founder of Butterfly Theatre, known for immersive Shakespeare in extraordinary locations across Europe. She ran the MA in acting at ArtsEd and was Head of Acting at Drama Studio London. She is co-author of Shakespeare and Meisner with Dr Tracy Irish and the forthcoming Gonsalves Method: Meisner Updated for the Modern Actor (Bloomsbury), and is Associate Director of Kali Theatre Company. She has also written the foreword to Bloomsbury's Actors' and Performers' Yearbook 2026.

Claron McFadden

Claron McFadden received her bachelor degree cum laude from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, and lives in the Netherlands. Known and respected for her work in many different genres of music, she has worked with conductors such as Pierre Boulez, Frans Brüggen, and William Christie. She has performed the lead role in Lulu at Glyndebourne and Zerbinetta in Ariadne auf Naxos at the National Opera in Amsterdam, where she is a frequent guest. She has sung in many Baroque operas at international theatres and festivals, most notably, the title role in Cavalli's La Didone at La Scala. She loves participating in interdisciplinary projects that intersect various artistic disciplines, collaborating with artists such as Alain Platel (vsprs and pitié!) and Jorge León (Mitra and Brûler). Additionally, she is artist in residence with Muziektheater Transparant in Antwerp, realising her own projects (Lilith, Secrets, and Nachtschade: Aubergine), as well as collaborations, such as Chez Bricktop with fortepianist Claire Chevallier, and NINA, a mimetic musical monologue about Nina Simone, both directed by Luigi De Angelis.

Claron is recognised as one of the leading interpreters of contemporary music, collaborating often with the Arditti Quartet, and has had the honour of performing numerous world premieres by composers such as Michel van der Aa, Wolfgang Rihm, Jörg Widmann, Gavin Bryars, and David Lang. Thanks to her vocal versatility, she often collaborates with jazz musicians, most notably Fabrizio Cassol and Kris Defoort.

In 2002 she was nominated for a Grammy, and she received the Amsterdam Prize for the Arts in 2006. Her 2010 Tedx talk about the spontaneity of human expression through John Cage's Aria was featured on the prestigious TED website, and in 2020 she received a Dutch knighthood — Knight of the Order of Orange-Nassau.

Ramesh Meyyappan

'SCOTLAND'S LEADING ARTIST IN THE WORLD OF THEATRE THAT REACHES BEYOND LANGUAGE'
The Scotsman

Ramesh Meyyappan, a Singaporean based in Scotland, is an award-winning theatre-maker who develops performances using an eclectic mix of visual and physical theatre styles as he continually seeks to develop and extend his theatrical visual vocabulary. Over the years, his solo performances and collaborations have toured nationally and internationally to much critical acclaim. His work has been nominated five times for best actor at the Life! Theatre Awards (Singapore) and awarded the accolade twice. In Scotland he was nominated for best male performance at the Critics' Awards for Theatre Scotland (CATS) for Off Kilter and Love Beyond. He was also nominated for best new play and won best Scottish production for Love Beyond. He was commissioned by Singapore International Festival of Arts to write and perform a new play, Lear — inspired by Shakespeare's King Lear — that was recently performed in Singapore and Scotland.

Awe Moyo

Dr Awelani Moyo is a storyteller, performer, and researcher with a rich background in experimental theatre-making and performance. Originally from Zimbabwe, she has lived, studied, and worked across South Africa, the UK, Southeast Asia, and now Spain. Her work explores identity, belonging, cultural performance, and oral traditions from Southern Africa. With an MA in drama from Rhodes University, South Africa, and a PhD in theatre studies from Warwick University, UK, she has taught at universities and international schools. She continues to research and experiment with traditional performance styles, while also creating original performances and bringing her African cultural heritage to life.

Tristan Tull

Tristan Tull is a film-maker and lecturer, running the BA Film and Screen Production course at Regent's University, London. He has previously worked in training for film-makers, in the UK as a Screen Academy associate, and internationally as part of the EU's media programme — helping run Four Corners, an initiative that developed first feature films with new directors, producers, and writers across Europe. He has also run film training courses in Bahrain and Australia.

Tristan has worked in factual television and film, and in 2022 released his own feature documentary, Occupation. An Island Story about the experience of Channel Islanders who lived through the Second World War.

THANK YOU

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