

The Dance Centre Podcast Episode 15: Arash & Emmalena

SPEAKERS

Emmalena Fredriksson, Claire French, Arash Khakpour

Claire French

Hello, welcome to The Dance Centre podcast. I am your host Claire French, and I'm joining you from the traditional unseeded territories of the Musqueam. Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples also known as Vancouver, Canada. I'll be talking to dancers, choreographers and other members of the dance world here on the west coast to find out more about their creative work and practices, and to discuss what it means to us to be dance professionals today. Thanks for joining us.

Claire French

I'm thrilled to be joined by Emmalena Fredriksson and Arash Khakpour, who are presenting You Touch Me at The Dance Centre on the 8th, 9th and 10th of December. The process has extended over several years, and a several integrations with presentations and stalled presentations, which is in itself its own narrative. We'll be diving into their experiences of the process in relation to this work and finding out more about how they came to this process and its concept and beyond, including their dance trajectories leading to this point in time. But before we start the conversation, here's an introduction to Emmalena and Arash.

Emmalena Fredriksson is a contemporary dance artist living and working in Vancouver, Canada, as a guest on the ancestral unceded lands of the Coast Salish peoples. Her practice is defined by choreography as a relational practice in the expanded fields of dance, often collaborating with artists of other disciplines, creating choreographic experiences and dance for social events, film, galleries and performance. Born in Sweden, she received her training at Balettakademien in Umeå and at SEAD in Austria. Emmalena has presented choreographic work, performed and taught internationally with Daghdha Dance Company (IE), Canaldanse (FR), Malta University (MT), Pact Zollverein (DE), and Falmouth University (UK) among others and have been based in Vancouver since 2013. Emmalena holds an MFA degree from Simon Fraser University and is currently a term lecturer on the SCA dance and theatre programs.

Originally from Tehran and based in Vancouver, **Arash Khakpour** is privileged to be a dance artist who has immigrated to the ancestral and unceded Coast Salish territory. Arash's practice is concerned with the reveal of the complexity of the human experience, and of having a body. He investigates how thoughts influence the body and how bodily states and sensations influence thoughts. This leads to his ever-evolving interest in experiencing what it feels like to be a body without any direct focus on intellectual thinking and concerns. How can I just be a body? Arash's desire is to see whether performance can be a process to interrogate the body and to investigate alternate ways of being, seeing and feeling. He is interested in dancing as a language that researches the human condition through historical, social, political, spiritual and existential interpretations. Arash is the co-founder of the dance-theatre company **The Biting School** (alongside his brother Aryo Khakpour), co-founder of Vancouver's guerrilla performance group **Pressed Paradise**. Arash is grateful to be the 2016 recipient

of Dance Victoria's Chrystal Dance Prize with Emmalena Fredriksson for the creation of You Touch Me.

Let's start this conversation.

Claire French

So, I am delighted to be joined by Emmalena and Arash at this time, they have jumped into this podcast interview with me having just come out of rehearsals. I'm very excited to talk with them not only about the project that they're currently working on, but about their own histories, their own careers and trajectories. And I'm going to start by asking them, what they would like to share with us about why they started to dance or where the performance and the choreographic experiences came in for them in their careers. And whether they would like to share with us kind of key stages of their careers leading up to this just to give us a little bit of insight into kind of a little bit of aesthetics and training and how they've kind of arrived at this, maybe even talking about how you arrived at this together. So, it's a wide open question. Maybe Emmalena can start.

Emmalena Fredriksson

Yeah, great question and actually made me think, in this very moment, just what we were rehearsing in the studio right before this. We were rehearsing a section of the piece that we call 'the game'. And we were talking about a sense of athleticism that Arash and I are both interested in so when you ask me how did I come to dance in the first place, I grew up with, I'm the youngest of four and I grew up in a very sporty family with a lot of physical activity, and I actually started playing soccer was my first sort of physical practice. And then I was really interested in theatre. And then about the around the age maybe of eight, nine, I discovered dance. But so in my body before that was competitive sports, team sports, specifically and theatre, and then I got just so enchanted with dance. And I didn't start doing ballet till maybe 15 or so. So, I tried a lot of other things. And at some point, I guess I decided that I was like, Oh, this, I think this is it, this is what I want to do. I see a lot of umming and ahing, it's hard to tell your whole life story in a short amount of time. But I went to train in Sweden, because I didn't know what kind of form of dance I really wanted to do. So, the first professional training I did was more modern dance, more ballet, jazz. And I realized I was like, I think I want to go more into abstraction or theatre, in that realm, and then I got into the school in Austria, which was very, at the time, it was quite, it was Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance, we always used to joke that it should be called Salzburg Academy of Experimental Dance and not an Experimental Academy. It's an inside SEAD joke. I think the point was, though, that it was contemporary in its essence, when it was founded. And I felt so at home when I got there, it was, it was very athletic. The dance forms we were training into, it was a lot of floor work, a lot of contact improvisation. And so, I'm kind of drawing that link for myself, I think at the moment, between... yeah, growing up with two older brothers and a lot of sports and sort of let's, you know, put on the ice skates and skate across the lake. And that's how I came to dance from that place.

Claire French

That is so great, because I feel like there's a lot of the dynamism. Like, that's kind of you. It's also like, I love that context, that it's kind of like putting that dynamic into an experimental dance studio space that's allowed you to kind of like use, continue to express that and refine that through dance form, and bring all of that sports background with you into, you know, the grace and strength you have when you move. I think that's a thing that's really lovely. And I like the game. I like the idea of the moving the kind

of idea of team sports into a game. You know, it's kind of a really interesting trajectory. So yeah, I think that's really cool. What about you, Arash?

Arash Khakpour

Yeah, it's nice to think about these, I haven't thought about the trajectory in a while.

Claire French

No.

Arash Khakpour

I used to growing up, I used to do a lot of sports. I started with gymnastics very seriously. And I, at that point, I was 10, 11. Until 11 years old, I was doing a lot of gymnastics. And then I had an a specific incident and an injury that just kind of stopped, I completely stopped. And I remember also thinking I'd like to do something group oriented, I'd like to do something. It's lonely, like gymnastics is so lonely, you're alone. And you're have a team, but still, you're alone. You've got to have your, you know, your performance mindset. And your it's, everything's to you. So, there was something about the group thing, and my brother used to play basketball. And he's older than me. And I remember sitting there being like, oh, yeah, that's, that makes more sense. I'd like to do that. I want to do a group thing, a group sport. And yeah, then I got into basketball around, I believe it was 11,12. Yeah, then I till 14 in in Iran, I start to get very serious about basketball, then we were just about to go into like, the more like, you know, kind of more competitive and athletic years of basketball, which is 14, 15,16, into the adult teams. And then we moved to Canada. Then I played basketball throughout high school all the time, pretty much. That's all I was doing. And then dance wise, I had a friend who used to do ballroom. So, waltz and Tango, and see she just said, you know, I could just teach you for free. And you could you could do this with me. And we knew each other and I was like, yeah, that's pretty good idea. So, we just stay after, after school or whatever. Whenever we could to do this for a recital. And yeah, so I learned waltz and tango and I got a and as I was doing as I was playing basketball and playing games and then I took a a course in in Pinetree Secondary, which is where I went to school. They had a dance course, which was I think dance like grade 11, dance in grade 12, which was amazing our teacher was a fantastic, is a fantastic salsa dancer, part of a group and but she knew all kinds of, she's an actor, director and dancer and knew contemporary dance and jazz and everything. So, she had this wild program that you get into so I just signed up for that for grade twelve final year, as I was finishing basketball, and yeah, so I got into that and I did a recital show, and had a So You Think You can Dance section and as actually as well. Believe it or not (laughs)

Claire French

I'm wiggling my shoulders. I believe. I totally believe it. Do you remember your teachers? Do you remember your teacher's name? It's okay. I just

Arash Khakpour

Roberge. She's I've seen her since that as well. She's come to some of my shows. She's fantastic.

Claire French

Can you say her name again?

Arash Khakpour

Coco Roberge or Nicole Roberge. But uh, yeah, had a big effect on me, I think and her approach to it. And I think I told her something that I think I'm more serious about this thing. And then basketball was ending, and I didn't think it was gonna go into basketball, college basketball, I was like, Oh, that feels wrong. And then I was then I also found out that it was like, oh, dance can be solo and group. Like, there's something really amazing about that you can pretty quickly switch between any of those as a sport, too. And then I got into doing some drop ins in contact improvisation. And at Edam, and then doing dropping classes with Barbara Bourget at Kokoro I remember I just walked in, I was pretty scared of what her class would be like. So I asked her to sit in without doing it. And she said, Yes, that's fine. And I said, watch the whole class. And then I said, I'll come back tomorrow. And then I went back anyway, it's a very hard class, but a great.

Claire French

Yeah, I remember doing 64 grand battement in one of those classes. And I think I and I was going for like, just two weeks and my thighs completely changed in two weeks of doing those classes. Like I just completely, absolutely.

Arash Khakpour

You just jump for 20 minutes sometimes.

Claire French

20 minutes and grand battement for seven. Yeah.

Arash Khakpour

That was my, that was my refresh beginning. Up until 19, basically 18ish yeah.

Claire French

So, I love this personally, because I was also, I am a ballroom, I was a ballroom dancer. And I've always felt that my style of movement comes from my training in ballroom when I've had a partner like mine was, I got my teaching certificate when I was 16. So, it was very, you know, kind of regimented, like in the waltz, Tango, all of those things. But like syllabus style, you know, so that's a little different to maybe what you're talking about. But I've always felt that, that that sense of an invisible partner. So even if I'm not contact improving, I've always had this extra person that I feel like I could potentially be dancing with when I'm dancing. And it feels really lovely. And I think it comes from that sense of like, team, maybe a little bit of competition sometimes, you know, like just having that mindset because I did dance festivals my whole life. So that was that was a bit different. But I was also in the netball team. So, I love this. I love the parallels here. I think it's really great.

Emmalena Fredriksson

I think too. It's like, it's a great question, Claire, because it made me think too, about how we met dancing at Edam and through the community. And I think maybe we're thinking about these histories that we have. And I can only speak for myself in this moment. But I think there was a permission in the energy when we met to be very physical. Like I didn't feel like I had to be careful with you in the way

that maybe I sometimes as you know, I'm not super skinny and I was often the like, the more rowdy one in a room. And when I met you, I felt like your energy met mine. And I didn't have to be so careful. And so I could be my full athletic self and also my tender sort of more like gentle self. And then I think there was also the permission to which is also takes us into the piece a little bit, which I feel like you probably also are aware of Claire, when you're not from a place and you're not fully understanding that like what are the social codes? How am I supposed to behave? And for a lot of us sometimes like you like you hold back you don't I'm not sure what to say. And meeting you I felt also this permission in that I could say things that maybe I wasn't sure if I could say or there was a lot of freedom and play in that meeting. So maybe that is a little bit where we both came from yeah, certain environments and that like that energetic meeting that happens.

Claire French

I think there's a for me, there's also this, there's something about trusting when you meet somebody who's from somewhere else and when you arrive at a new place and you meet somebody who's from somewhere else, there's an element of trusting that they are bringing with them different cultural norms if you like or different things that and so there's, there's also an openness to finding out more about that other person. I think we all have that like all being, you know, kind of immigrants, if you like, you know, to Canada for, you know, all of our own reasons but there is something about there's already an openness, we've already made this decision to move to somewhere else. And so there's already this, I feel it gives us an innate sense of trust in the, in the not known. And we find a support network with each other, that gives us time to, to, to know each other, but without us having to give in to the cultural norms that we haven't yet learned. So, I don't know, I feel like the door is open a little bit there.

Arash Khakpour

Yeah, I think so I think it's a different audience. When you, when you connect, and have conversations with someone you know, everything they know about you comes in, whether it's subconscious, but when you go to talk to someone, they don't know, there's no, there's no other reference, all they're getting is what you are getting there. And I love that about audiences too where even with this piece, I love going somewhere else, because all of me, everything I've done comes there. And they don't know when they can feel it, they can feel your experience, it can feel your tendencies, they can feel your style, and like your desire for things. And it's just that one show. Whereas like when you do performance in Vancouver, they'll be like, Oh, I remember you do this thing you did in the last show. But it's a different version, or like, you know, everybody has a reference. And I think that's also valuable. But there's something about meeting the new person, which was this piece, it's like, okay, what can we do with these tasks, with our own languages, with curiosity, with play, and then not worry about an endpoint, and then see what kind of containers and, and scores come up.

Claire French

So, what's really cool, from what I've seen, so far of things and kind of do my own research, you know, back through your archives for this piece, I won't bring in other pieces, and I won't do that. You warned me Arash, that's, that's a really good warning, it's like, oh, strike that strike that. No, that there's, what's great about this piece is that you are doing that, bringing yourselves in a team, you're bringing yourselves in, in tasks that bring you together. And so what you're also getting, which both of you have very much in your say, in your bios, and that your work is about this kind of the social, you know, the

social dynamics, and you get that in this piece, that how you arrive into a social situation, how you are relationally, you know, expressing yourselves with the tasks and the things that you've set up for an audience to then engage with you in. So, I think there are so many layers of, of what you're talking about in this work, I think that's really exciting. Because I think what, what also happens is you give permission for the audience to laugh, to become familiar with how you make certain gestures, and how you contact each other without saying too much. And then there's also still that mystery around the different languages that that may or may not be in this iteration of the work. So I'm wondering if maybe we could shift all of this a little bit into language, or a little bit about the different elements you would like listeners to know about coming into watch this work, or things that have been in the process, and also maybe then give you, hand this over to you to make sure you only tell the listeners what you want them to know in advance.

Emmalena Fredriksson

Yeah, I think, I think a word that's come up, or words that have come up during rehearsal this past week, and especially returning to the ensemble and the work, we were supposed to premiere the work in 2020. And so we had a research period at the end of 2019. And we did a studio showing here, you know, the future was bright.

Claire French

The future was 2020.

Emmalena Fredriksson

Magic was gonna happen. And so coming back with the ensemble, and we've also, two of our dancers that was part of the original ensemble are not joining us this time, we just had to acknowledge too that it's like two years have passed. And so where do we start from? Like, we have a history together, but we're also different people, where do we start from? And one, a couple of the words that have come up to this also related to the languages, the verbal languages and the physical languages, and even the notions of how to relate to the other and because we think maybe of the cultural landscape that we are in or that we've moved through is words around nuance, ambiguity, sitting in the thing of could it be multiple things at the same time? Because there is yeah, I maybe stop me from talking too much but it makes me think about when Natalie Gan, who's one of the performers in the work, in the very first phase, she kind of pointed something and she said, What is this? Is this like United Nations or something, we're all just happy and getting along all the time. But it was a very good comment, because it's like the work is not necessarily about agreeing and being in harmony. And it's all just, you know, a rose shimmered reality, like, it's not about that. But it is about being with each other in the things that we can understand and the things that we can't understand or the things that we want to give space for each other to be in. And, and with that, it comes that we have to sit in our discomfort as much as our comfort, we have to trust to sit in Ooh, yeah. How would I feel about this? Or? Oh, I totally would like make that assumption about someone. And what does that what does that give me to reflect upon? And how does that feel? And I think especially even when we think about verbal language, because we do spend a lot of time speaking our own languages, I don't speak Farsi and Arash doesn't speak Swedish so we very early beginning of this, we would spend an hour or so and say, okay, no English allowed, you only speak Farsi, I speak Swedish.

Arash Khakpour

The opposite of when you move here, basically,

Emmalena Fredriksson

Yeah. And there's so much nuance in like, what we could understand and what we had no idea. So even in like speaking to opposite languages, or opposite, or just different languages. And I think being in the ensemble is interesting, because there's some languages that are more similar to others. So, there's some of the people that understand each other more verbally. And even I think Farsi and French sometimes sounds very similar in terms of the sound, too. So, there is something about this idea of like, what is lost in translation? And what is found in being different and other? Yeah.

Arash Khakpour

And I mean, just to follow up a little bit, is that also the containers were meant to be, you know, a space where we can also like, let go of like this concert dance idea. And be like, well, how about we, we actually truly play an experiment in front of you, instead of execute? In front of you? And see, just see what happens, what comes up? What feelings, what textures? What ideas come up for the audience to and I think if we think about what, yeah, what we were doing is also checking in and giving space to the performer to be where they are at that day. And when there is no necessity for execution, then the performer actually has a chance to do that. Yeah, yeah. But yeah, so basically, yeah, it's that for us, it was more that what if we're truly there, you know, there was a, there was a day that, you know, we went on stage, and I just had morning and afternoon, I had heard a I got a phone call about a my friend dying, five years ago. And, you know, I didn't know how to, you know, the performance was a place to process it. And I feel that I learned a lot from doing that. And I think it wasn't stressful, because the piece, I was allowed to be where I was at. And of course, it changed how I performed. And in some places more vulnerable, in some others not so much. But like, I was allowed to be myself when someone asked me, how did you and then I told him, I said, Well, I just feel that I'm glad there was this piece, because I don't know how what I would do in a different piece. That I could just be there.

Emmalena Fredriksson

Which makes me think about this so maybe the listeners do not know. But this originated as a duet between Arash and I and now we are trying to make the ensemble work of it.

Claire French

So can I just say this wasn't 2019. Right. This was back in 2017, when you actually presented it as a duet. Yeah, I believe

Emmalena Fredriksson

And we started it in 2016. The first we had was in 2016. So, it's also a long time ago in 2017. It premiered as a duet. But I think what you're saying Arash is interesting to think of how do we put a work like this, or how do we expand a work like this onto other performers, but what we've learned, which is so beautiful, that it's not about them performing it like us, it's about them performing it like them. And so, it's been such a beautiful explosion of possibilities in terms of the things, how they respond to some of these tasks. And Kate Franklin, who's our rehearsal director, one of the first days she said, this is just going to be great, it's going to be incredible because you're all such different, beautiful, complex human

beings. And I think there's exactly what you're saying is that the amount of times that we have performed it and even inviting these other people in it is in a way a new show every time because it's not thought about doing the prescribed same thing. It is a container for which...

Arash Khakpour

For something to happen or something to happen. Yeah. And hence the question is that the core of it the heart of it really is a series of questions that we could think of that same day or, and so, and that was really the basis I think of the 2016 start.

Emmalena Fredriksson

Yeah, so it makes it like, like, I was just thinking about, like, wholesale, what's a container, anything can happen? The containers are quite specific. And like, you're talking about the interview, for example. So now I'm giving it away. One is called the game. It's called the interview.

Arash Khakpour

But it doesn't, it doesn't give away anything, no one knows.

Claire French

But it doesn't give it doesn't give away the content, it just kind of sparks and triggers something for like, oh, what could be yeah, it's making me think as well, that the title also helps in this context of what we're talking about, allow for you two to be touched by the other performers and their responses to things that you started. And so what you're doing in the, in your part of your performance is also allowing yourselves to be surprised by an embodied, an embodied surprise, you know, like to actually start to kind of allow that to come out in the decisions you make in the moment as performers based on what these other people, the expansion of your team has allowed, which I think is really, really great. Because you can't know, you can't really know how somebody else is going to perform in this kind of container. Right? You've allowed that as well. Yeah

Arash Khakpour

The idea is not, you know, like, I think it's also we are just one group that speaks different languages. And we do dance in a specific way. And we have specific dance skill sets. But the idea wasn't to cover the whole society, the idea was to dance, and invite them to really get really tight on the boundary, so that we could only really, yeah, we could just only invite certain people. And definitely, there was a point we had an audition as well. And that also narrows down even in audition. And that was interesting to just also experience, like, who is in this city that is a dancer, that's, you know, their first language is not English, or they've had an experience of culture, they've been a different space. And, and that was all, I think there's a lot of learning and all of that, that whole process.

Claire French

Yeah, absolutely. And then there's, there's also, I'm not going to dwell on this for any length of time, but just when there's also an aesthetic thing around training. So then when you're all in town, and you're all in the same place, and you're all training, there's a kind of an aesthetic, that you are also accessing in those auditions with these dancers, that is kind of common, you know, in a way, it kind of creates a kind

of the fabric of, you know, how you can, how the team then kind of puts that out in the world. So, it is contained as well also by that, which I think is really beautiful.

Emmalena Fredriksson

And I recognize too just, I don't know if this will be interesting to keep or not, but what you said of it takes certain, I think maturity and trust, in your own performativity to go out on stage and be as open as we were trying to be. So, we recognize quite soon also that like all like a little bit older dancers was better than to like fresh out of school or too young, except Juolin, who is one of our dancers who just blew us away in the audition, and we were like, she's ready, she's so ready. But there is something about not being with this work, we couldn't be too concerned with looking good.

Claire French

I'm glad you mentioned that, because I was going to say that the also the contact, and maybe this is what I'm why I went to the aesthetic and a generalized thing about aesthetic, because there is something really beautiful and kind of in the rawest possible way of contact dance. Because there is awkwardness in in its you know, in those moments of meeting, when you encounter each other, which is the word I like to use in my research, there is it's all of it, you know, you can't have you can't have it can't just be precise, or even the even the precision is in the awkwardness sometimes. So, I just wanted to add that into the aesthetic, which I think is really great and humorous, and graceful. And you know, at the same time, it's all of these things because you have to be so competent to be able to do what you're talking about, not only just in front of an audience just anyway, right? So, the way is intensified.

Arash Khakpour

Again, going against the dancers, you should not hear dancers breathing or talking or voice it's like we're completely doing the opposite. I mean, we start with vocalizing and vocalization and talking and then and then dancing and talking while dancing. So, it's like, what if we actually are allowed to do all of these things and what enriches the experience of the audience as well? So, I think there's something about obviously this whole time this past five years until now is also about breaking the borders and boundaries and pushing past what we think is true and is possible.

Claire French

And reminding people that that the people who are dancing are expressing themselves as humans, you know, like that, that we're in that, we're there now, you know, like we have enough dance styles and dance does enough stuff you know, it's connects to enough things for it to just be like for movement to be dance. You know, it doesn't I think that's I think that's what's so, so exciting about it.

Arash Khakpour

Claire, when did you see it? The piece?

Claire French

I've watched a few...

Arash Khakpour

I'm just wondering, was it live or video.

Claire French

No. It's video. I've seen I watched some video stuff on your YouTube or website. But I do think I think I saw you two do it a long time ago.

Arash Khakpour

Yeah. Cuz usually took sound like you totally know. And I was wondering, I was like, when did you watch it?

Claire French

You know, I just, I just, I just get into my research. And I really liked doing that. So, I actually forget whether I saw it live or on video, because I get so in. I'm just like, a sponge that way. I just tried to get in there.

Emmalena Fredriksson

Amazing. And that I think even the fact that you bring that up, it's like of dancers being humans, and that we can be ourselves an effect of this work in the past, which will be really interesting to see with the with an ensemble, with a group. But often when we would do it as a duet. After the show people would come up to us, and they want to tell us their answer to some of the questions or they want to share something from their lives. So, it was clear to me that there was a lot of space for them to reflect on their own experiences throughout life, whether that also be in relation to otherness, or assumptions or prejudices, like hard things that is hard to come up against. But also some things that they were like, wow, yeah, you know, this, like, this happened to me. So, there is a sense of us breaking some of that fourth wall, also gave the audience some permission to want to share with us their own lives. And so that in and of itself also became the meeting and this idea of who touches who and you know, yeah,

Claire French

Yeah, definitely. Yeah, I think that's absolutely beautiful. So aside from, like, COVID, itself, coming in and disrupting everything in the way that it did, and all of the things that we have endured and survived around that. And in, in the climate that we're in at the moment, and the kind of what would you say is the biggest challenge? Or even has been the biggest challenge? Maybe in coming back to this work? Like you said, returning to the work? Or, or even what, what do you find is your current challenge now? Are the is the one, have you overcome them? Or is the one that you think you've overcome?

Arash Khakpour

The challenges of the you know, this piece in, this piece? Or any?

Claire French

Well, maybe, but I think I think I'm thinking more of the timeframe, through COVID, that we that everything was kind of on hold. And I am maybe thinking of how, what was the challenge to return to the piece? So yeah, we could start there. But I'm also if you are willing, also open to you answering that question on a more personal level that's not necessarily about this process. Or maybe they're intertwined so much.

Emmalena Fredriksson

Yeah, there's I think there's a lot of intertwined that came up today in rehearsal and the both in the check ins, in the checkout, like how this work percolates, like outside of the rehearsal time, and whether it's challenging things or just inspirational, thoughtful things. So, I feel for me personally, it's also it's, like, I also I came into rehearsal time we started and then I just had to cry. And the space allows for that, because that's where I we need to be there where we can be that open. So, I think that sometimes what's the most beautiful things, and sometimes it's challenging, because we're not always safe enough to do that in terms of other jobs or things. There's something about the container of the room and the people in it, that is so amazing, but sometimes that the fact that it's so safe and good. It sometimes makes me go to places that's hard in myself. I guess that's also what the work is.

Claire French

Well, yeah, and then you're putting that into the rehearsal room, but then you don't have a rehearsal room like you have a place to be present. Yeah, like rehearsal room doesn't work either for your process, calling it that. So, it's not, it's just like it's a time capsule together.

Emmalena Fredriksson

That's the thing to where it's like, I recognize that it's like sometimes it's hard to leave it in the studio, you know, and that's both a good and a bad thing. But sometimes you're like, I just wanted to go home and make dinner and now I spent the whole night thinking about this thing. But I think just working with other people to talk about consent around that has felt important that we want them to know that they can also choose how far they go. Because it's one thing when we're prodding each other and pushing each other to go into deeper spaces, because it is our work, but then paying people to do it, if you're like, make sure you take care of yourself.

Arash Khakpour

Yeah, and hence the like, you know that there's like certain rituals and practices that we got to keep in place when we want to go into places of discovery. And when it's physical and emotional, and like, you know, like Emmalena says, things come up sometimes. And actually, they come up all the time, but we just have learned to push them down. So, when they come up all the time, there has to be space for processing it with ourselves, but also in the room. Sometimes we process over the weekend, and we come back. And remember, we want to talk about something. So, we try to have really, like we say, check in, check out. We check into rehearsal as every person speaks, with a certain timeframe, and then check out but to me, that's also part of our lives. And yeah, part of the work we're doing in our practice is not sort of like, Oh, now we did this. Now let's get to the dancing part. There is no separation.

Claire French

Yeah. Well, I think that's really important around the idea of consent to because what you're doing is you're checking in and what the terms of consent are for that particular day. Yeah, yeah.

Arash Khakpour

Yeah. I mean, if I want to do mid day check into, you know, like, every time you get to take a break, or something, you gotta go pick check in again, until no one wants to check in ever.

Claire French

Yeah, until they just got you just got a code, you just got a gesture of some kind. That's like, yes sign.

Emmalena Fredriksson

No, a big one has been, it's like no elephants in the hallway, like all the elephants in the room. So, when things come up too that we bring them up with each other, which is where the trust is built too. And then I think that's what you see in the piece. That's also where it can go to the extremes of joy and celebration and also darkness. And yeah, fear is because we, in part of the process is building that trust. But that is not always easy. So that's challenging.

Arash Khakpour

Yeah. And I think part of the trust is to learn how people work and how every person works. And so often time again, we're going back to execution, rather than like, actually, where we're at is like, in the execution world of arts, I guess you have to fit into what the other, the leader wants to work like, or their, their desires, their tendencies. And, and I think, I guess the question is, how do we open that up within the timeframe we have? So, in the inner process of that we know, there is a show at the end, right, there is no secret. So, I think part of it is that also we're learning as we go, we've ever done this with a group as a show inside of this dancers is that we're learning. Okay, oh, how does everybody work? Like, well, we did that yesterday, as someone goes, like, I totally love that. And the other person is like, I really hate doing that. So it's like, at least we can now integrate it into or not even we might not be able to entirely but we can do our best to try like okay, so if that class, or that order of things in the work, can we go think about how to change it slightly to fit in, in between the gray area of what everyone might be wanting to and the person like me, like actually, I my feelings changed. I like it now. So, you know, like, all these things is like, if it's like, if we don't talk about it, and that realize that that is actually part of the work, then it's never going to happen. It goes to the hallways, and it goes home and it goes to, to down into the darkness.

Claire French

The lonely, lonely darkness. Yeah. Yourself dark space.

Emmalena Fredriksson

It's true. And yeah.

Claire French

This image of the elephants in the hallway, but the but the leash to the elephant being the thing that's kind of not allowing the performance or the people in the room to fully be in the room because they're also thinking about the elephant outside and having to hold. I've got this, I've got this amazing image of just that and how difficult that would be and how difficult it is when that happens to kind of try to bring the elephant in as well as it's okay. You know, knock the wall down. Bring it with you. Yeah, exactly.

Emmalena Fredriksson

I think another challenge in the work itself, which, being in the studio today, a lot of the work is also as a tool or as a tactics that we developed to open ourselves up was kind of to do that confusion of doing two tasks that are hard to do at the same time. Work is do this while also doing this and Natalie said today, because you were working when I entered the studio today you were working on a very specific contact improvisation skill of rolling, rolling up with the pelvis like rolling up someone's back. And the dance is amazing. And then Natalie just like burst out laughing and she said, but I've got to speak Cantonese at the same time. So, it's a thing of not only when we speak the languages other than English, it's not just speaking the language, but it's entering a whole different identity that we have. And so, to be in like a listening contact with someone who we mostly engage with in the English language, and all of a sudden, how do I do it while also being my Swedish identity, or in for Natalie, to her Cantonese identity. So that is a big challenge just in the work itself. But one that is, it's exciting, it's fun, it's hard. And that's something that we're trying to practice to be in those identities at the same time.

Claire French

Yeah, that's so wonderful. I love that it's making me think of this kind of finding yourself in a kind of void or like, a between space as individuals where you're like, like, how, where did that come from, and then just allowing it to kind of settle a little bit before it becomes something that you might even raise with others, you know, there are those layers of learning happening, right and embodiment happening, like surfacing even and deepening both ways. Going both ways through the body. I wonder if we could, we've talked quite a bit about your collaborative endeavors. And, and that's been lovely, like how it's just kind of segued between kind of insight and like your actual pragmatics of working together. And you've mentioned some key influences in your, in your lives so far, but around dance training, but I just wanted to give you the opportunity of the if there's anybody that you feel like you want to like have been key influences in your life or your work, whether they, you may never have met them, you may never have been in a room with them. It might be somebody I want to say somebody you've worked with, or someone you haven't yet met, or just from history of present day, it just kind of a wide open just a kind of little bit of a scope of influence.

Arash Khakpour

It's, it's really, it's kind of like everybody, right? And I think there's no way to say that oh, you know, I learned these things, because I knew them. It's like, everything, information is coming from everyone, every teacher you meet. And yeah, I've been very lucky to just be able to do workshops and classes and programs with different people. But I think, I think one of the first times what I felt like, Oh, I love this performance thing, was when I watched a Battery Opera piece while I was in night school, actually, and I skipped class, to go to the Battery Opera show, which started just at Downtown Eastside just close to the Firehall. No, no, yeah, at a bar close to Firehall. It's a piece by David McIntosh called Lives Were Around Me. And it's really about it's just giving us a space to look at the lives around us. And it's, I think it just basically, I remember in the interviews he had said too it's about the understanding of the core of the city, in a lot of ways comes from us ignoring the reality of death on East Side and, and how strongly they affected me, I couldn't believe what was happening experientially because he basically takes us for a walk. And then these performance hands, hand us off to each other in the street, and they go sometimes inside the space too. But like five, six audience members, very small, but that affected me a lot. And I said, I was like, Ah, this is this is what I mean, this is what it is. And I wasn't really training in dance that much yet. But I remember just let randomly I found it. And I went and yeah,

it was definitely one of those life changing things where for me brought everything back to reality of where you live, and its connection to the, to the to the bones of the city, that you're in and people and their realities, and that so much of it is also in the choreography of people getting uncomfortable in a place they haven't been before about society's classes and our notion of who we are and what our class is, and what our rights are. So yeah, I would say just top of my head, like that's what for me that was for sure.

Claire French

Yeah, it's so timely, too, isn't it? I mean, it's always timely in Vancouver because we've got the kind of like areas...

Arash Khakpour

That was sorry. It was 2009 This is a long time. Yeah,

Claire French

I was thinking it's a long time ago because I remember that. I remember that piece. I think it was in Push. And David McIntosh, co-artistic director of Battery Opera. So, I remember I remember that whole time. And yeah, yeah. And just for being in the Downtown Eastside for a performance like that where you are walking through one of the kind of, you know, worst postcodes for drugs and homelessness in North America. Yes. Yeah. Putting you right in the harsh realities of the city.

Arash Khakpour

Yeah, like bringing your own ignorance right into your face in a sense, and I'm sure everyone had their own experiences that I don't know what they were but in terms of like stakes being high and then integrating reality into it for me felt like if, for me changed my mind about what it can be and what actually interests me as a as a human being to experience in arts.

Claire French

Great, thank you for sharing all of that. I think that's, yeah, that's really great. Just even, even if that's not, you know, you, we might finish this interview, and you'll be like, oh, and I didn't mention this one. And it didn't mention this one. But it's just the way the way you talked about it as well, is partly that, right? It's the context that you provide. And the little sparks that happen that connect to without pigeonholing you, as an artist as well.

Arash Khakpour

There's so many, but I'm just glad that I skipped school. I had a geography course at night time and I skipped to go. I'm very glad that I did.

Claire French

Yeah. Excellent. skip school sometimes. Yeah. That's the lesson (laughs). Yeah, the moral of the story says to go with a PhD, but I did skip school. And I'm definitely skipping it now. So, there you go. So, Emmalena. What about you? Do you have a snippet?

Emmalena Fredriksson

Around a similar time in my life, I, when I did the year long residency mentoring program with Daghdha, The Dance Company under the direction of Michael Klien, I think it changed my view on dance a lot. And similarly to Arash's story like that, that time it was based in an old church that had been renovated to be a dance space. And it was also in one of the non affluent parts of Limerick. And there was a lot of gang violence around that area. And I remember so clearly, this notion of social choreography that I hadn't come across before, really. And so, the way the whole company was, run was questioning what is our relationship to each other? What is our relationship to people who come and see the work. And one of the ways that they did that was that we had something called a, it was an open studio, an open studio practice. So, the church doors were always open, and people could literally walk in from the street, there was no, no, the dance space was in the center. So, there was also you could be seen from any side at all times, and what a shock it was, for how old I was, I'm not even gonna say my age, but I was not as old as I am now. And but I remember the shock from coming from a space where maybe rehearsals happen in a closed room. And then when I was ready, I would share it with the world. And all of a sudden, it's like you're working. Now, this is your work to be in process. And people might see you in the process. And that is different from when we choose to meet together and say it's a performance and you don't have to hide until it's time to reveal. So, it taught me a lot about performance presence. And just to practice being in my body and inviting, you know, people to see me in any stage of the process. And also this notion that it wasn't, yeah, that it was like people could walk in. And often there would be people working on the computer or reading books, and if someone came in from the street, and then they would check in and said, hey, you know, do you like want to come in and sit for a while? Or do you have any questions? So, you weren't necessarily disturbed as the dancing person. But yeah, there was a lot of things that happened in that year for me, just in terms of thinking about how do I make dances? Who do I make them for? What is the relationship that I have to the audience or the work itself? And how do I? What is the difference in like, making the work to then sharing it in the state of performance? And yeah, Michael and Jeffrey Gormly, and Steve Falk wrote a little book called choreography as an aesthetics of change, a book for recommendations. And it's a very poetically written book, but it did kind of just like, open my mind a little bit and my body to what is what is the yeah, what is the essence of the aesthetic that I'm working in? What is the essence of the relationship? We've been talked a lot about how this work is also about showing up as we are, and not as maybe who we want to be or who we thought we had to be. So, what is that choreography of also on a personal level, but also in relationships with other people? So that was a really big moment for me. Like when I think about that year.

Claire French

Yeah, because it's so expansive, right? It just means that when you're still asking those questions, it doesn't mean that you won't in your lifetime, create work that is about execution. It doesn't rule that out. It just means that you are asking the questions because that's providing you with the purpose and the why and all of these things for you in this moment to be like what you want the work itself to be and I love it because it draws on, you know, outcomes and process and what is the product and all of these things in a really interesting open way as well. So, thank you for that. They're, they're really great. I think there's, you know, some really nice crossover and a really nice kind of openness. You've been very generous in sharing how you're feeling about this and what your process has been, and all of those things. And also just, you're very generous, gorgeous people anyway. So that comes across.. Yeah, so that's really great. And I just will end kind of or bring it to a little bit of a closer, soft close. No

time, no timeline necessarily like um. But just what's next, what's now what's next? Because I know now for both of you is not just this process. And we can't possibly we do not have time to talk about all of the things that these two people are doing independently and together. We won't. That's an entirely different podcast, and it's three hours long, at least. So

Arash Khakpour

The future of this, what we were planning to do next year, is that yeah, we've been invited to be part of a festival in Toronto. It's called Made in Canada. And that will be in August 2023. And we're going to do a shorter version or a 20 minute version in Toronto, which is going to be...

Claire French

That's like, for mixed bill performance.

Arash Khakpour

This is a duet. Just the two of us.

Claire French

Oh, you do it. Oh, that would be amazing to go back to that experience, after all. Woohoo Yeah, wow, amazing. And then I know, you both just performed in other works. Would you like to mention those just a little bit? So, people have a sense of other stuff you do? I mean, really, I'm giving you like 30 seconds to explain your other work. And I'm not just

Emmalena Fredriksson

Mine is like another exploration of a, you know, otherness or sameness. So, I've been working since 2020, on a piece that where I have a cyborg alter ego, so I explore the expansion of my body that includes technology, it's I wear, a specially designed, wearable spine with 148 LED lights. And in a way, like I like this feeling right now, where I'm like sitting and seeing everything through a similar lens. And that's another space where I also have those questions of where am I the same as the cyborg? And where am I different? And what are the gray zones? What are the nuances? What are the moments of joy? And what are the moments of darkness, and they look aesthetically so different? In the core, maybe there is still that question of yeah, who am I and what am I doing here? And where do I end and someone else begin? And where do we? Where do we meet where? Who touches who and?

Claire French

Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, exactly. And literally touch because those LED, this contraption is on you is on your body. So, it's like, you know, there's a there's a felt pressure from this other being if you like, but also there's this plural, pluralistic thing that's coming up again, you know, in that idea of, of representing yourself in more than one way. You know, like, it's got this kind of like, yeah, vocabulary that comes from the other, you know, which is really nice. Yeah,

Emmalena Fredriksson

I'm performing an excerpt of that at Accelerate, which is, Kim Stevenson's the Happening, she usually puts on a show where she mixes her studio with professional dancers in the community. So that's going to be performed. I think it's January 14, and 15th. Here at The Dance Centre.

Claire French

Great. Excellent. Thank you. Arash?

Arash Khakpour

Yeah, I'll just do a quick thing about what happened because I know who I was. Yeah, very fresh piece, a very new piece just created in collaboration with Alexis Fletcher. It's a duet. And it is based on the beloved Iranian female poet Forugh Farrokhzad, who passed away 50 years ago. And it's the piece is based on some of the poems of hers, and we created a series of scenes and improvisational tasks to perform it for the live audience and we did it twice at the Chutzpah festival and hopefully it will come to a theater near you, all of you.

Claire French

Look out for it. What's the title?

Arash Khakpour

It's called all my being is a dark verse.

Claire French

See? You're not gonna forget that one in a hurry. That's great. Yeah, thank you so much, both of you. That's so wonderful. And So Arash who's in the show?

Arash Khakpour

Yes, thank you. So we have Emmalena Fredrickson, who you've heard speaking myself Arash. And we have Juolin Lee Natalie Tin Yin Gan, Luciana, D'Anunciação. And Isabelle Kirouac. And we, our lighting designer is Jonathan Kim. And our rehearsal director is Kate Franklin. our stage manager and project manager is Nico Dicecco. I hope I got that his last name right. And yeah, that's, that's everybody. And we also have Alex Mah our good friend is helping us with some of the sound editing and sound consultation.

Claire French

Wonderful. Thanks so much. That's so great. Can you remind us of the dates of your performance at the Dance Centre, please?

Emmalena Fredriksson

Absolutely. Yes. December

Arash Khakpour

Eight,

Emmalena Fredriksson

nine

Arash Khakpour

And 10

Arash Khakpour

Please be there.

Claire French

Be there! In all your beingness be

Emmalena Fredriksson

Come as you are and bring a friend. Come as you are and bring a friend who can also be themselves.

Claire French

And with that, I say adieu thank you so much. Both very soon. Love lots of love.

Claire French

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