

The Dance Centre Podcast Episode 17: Margaret Grenier

SPEAKERS

Claire French, Margaret Grenier

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

Thank you so much for joining us here. I am joined by Margaret Grenier. It's my absolute pleasure and privilege to be joined by her today. Margaret Grenier is of Gitksan and Cree ancestry. She is the Executive and Artistic Director for the dancers of Damelahamid. She has produced the Coastal Dance festival since 2008. Margaret's multimedia choreographic works, bridge Gitksan and Cree dance forms with current expressions. Her works have toured internationally and include Setting the Path in 2004 through to Mînowin of 2019. Mînowin premiered at the Mòshkamo festival at the National Art Centre in Ottawa in 2019. And in Mexico that same year. Margaret holds an MA from Simon Fraser University, and a Bachelor of Science degree from McGill University. She was a sessional instructor for Simon Fraser, and faculty at the Banff Centre. She's received the Reveal Award, the Walter Carsen Prize for Excellence in the Performing Arts, and the 2022 Dance Studies Association Distinction in Dance Award. Margaret Grenier is currently an Artist in Residence with Ballet BC, and dancers of Damelahamid will be presenting Spirit and Tradition at the end of March at the Dance Centre. Welcome, Margaret.

Margaret Grenier

Oh, it's my pleasure.

Claire French

Great, I would very much like to start with setting up a context for your work and for your artistic values, actually. And I'd like to talk a little bit about Indigenous cultures and how you fuse that information and also are driven by and very much value, as you describe it, like ancestral memory, and being entering into relation with those things. I love the words that you choose to use in your artist statement. I think for me, that gives a very clear context about the explorations that you are working in. But could you give our listeners a little bit more context, maybe first on your work, and then maybe into a wider context of the importance and significance of doing this work for you?

Margaret Grenier

Well, for myself, it's very personal, I had the opportunity to grow up with song and dance, and I was the first generation to do so after the lifting of the Potlatch ban. So, I have the experience of dance going back to my earliest memories, and that really formed who I am as an Indigenous person, it connected me to oral histories that go all the way back to the origin of Damelahamid, which is the original city for the Gitksan. And it connected me to the family community, all of the different aspects that are embodied in the practice, which includes a way of learning, a political system, a legal system. And so, it's so much more than a creative process for me, it's something that shapes and relates all the different aspects of who I am. And a big incentive for me in this work, what compels me really is ensuring that all that foundation that I was able to access, all the foundational knowledge that I was able to access as a young person is transferred to the next generations. So just doing my part to really hold that in a way that includes contemporary perspectives, contemporary interpretations, but really just to sustain and cultivate that for the next generations.

Claire French

Wonderful. Thank you. Could we go back just to when you mentioned that the Potlatch ban, and just give us a little bit more context on this. I think it's an extremely important period of history. And with obviously within your nation to, to just explain a little bit further about the actual ban on potlatches. And then the lifting of the ban, and that time period. And I'm also wondering if you wouldn't mind talking a little bit about your late mother, Margaret Harris. I was able to listen to a tiny bit of an interview with her as well around this for a little bit of context for me. And I think it's, it's such an important time significance that I feel like you are really, you've really risen to continuing to maintain after the ban what was there with before, but also with the sense of a protective environment, which is another expression you use, which I think is really beautiful. And so, I wonder if you could just maybe give us a little bit more context about the actual Potlatch. What that is, and what the lifting of the ban allowed you to do, and to celebrate, thank you.

Margaret Grenier

The Potlatch ban was specific to the West Coast. And it lasted from the 1880s up until 1952. I didn't realize it before but I have since learned that it was a federal law that had been forgotten. And that's why it was lifted so that the law essentially expired over time. But for the Indigenous communities on the West Coast, what it impacted. For some we call our potlatches. For some we call our feasts. And they were where we practiced our songs, and our dances. And the so the Potlatch essentially encompassed our songs, our dances, our practices. And these are practices that had been passed down for generations. And we know that the stories go back 1000s of years, the duration of the Potlatch ban was close to 70 years. And so, for my grandmother, it was almost her entire lifetime, that it was illegal for song and dance, that regalia was confiscated. And in our family, I know that some of the items are now in collections as far away as Leningrad. So, after the ban was lifted, that was a time that my grandmother Irene Harris, described as when our culture was asleep. And she used that term because it wasn't gone, it was just something that we didn't have life put into it with, with physical practice and with gathering. And so, in the 1960s, it began under the leadership of my parents, Ken and Margaret Harris, to once again, dance. And they also hosted a festival in which they invited communities from the surrounding area to bring songs and dances together, to bring communities together. And so, with this, it was, at that time very much about revitalization of something that was so close to being lost. And from that time, I think that we've also come to realize that it really does come

down to individuals in order for these practices to be sustained. My mother, Margaret Harris was greatly influential in not just sustaining the dances, but teaching and, and sharing within multiple communities throughout the Northwest coast. And because of the work of her and her generation, we really do have dance today. For some of us we have the privilege that the knowledge was sustained throughout this time, and for some of our communities, songs and dances were completely lost because of the Potlatch ban. But there's been so much work done to not only regain knowledge, but also to cultivate a new practice that's based on the histories and the research that was done to bring them back again.

Claire French

So wonderful, thank you for explaining that so clearly, and the weight of it, you know, the 70 years span, it's just it's unfathomable. So, I am so delighted that you are able to find a way to bring keep this alive or revitalize as you said and also find a way to make it part of contemporary expression and cultural expression. And I do know that your work is quite interdisciplinary and it's not just the song and dance component is it's also in the, in the costume. Or maybe you don't like that word, but in the in the clothing, in the instruments which are like objects, also onstage projection, many layers to that. But I think there's also an element of continuing tradition or continuing ancestral in the, like, do you also make drums? And do you also sew blankets and moccasins and things like that? Are you personally able to do all of those things? Is that something you also bring into your practice?

Margaret Grenier

Yes, it's the practice itself is very multidisciplinary, it brings together the visual arts, it does bring together the creation of Regalia, the creation of drums, and of everything, the song composition, the and for our, our company, we also integrate a lot of visual design aspects in terms of multimedia use in order to support the, the narratives that we are conveying. And in part that is the essence of it is it is how to support the telling of a story. But I also think that a big part of it is not necessarily always working within, like I consider myself a dancer, but I don't always just work within dance. And I do work and create blankets, I do sew moccasins, and I do create drums. And that was very much part of the way that my mother trained us because it's important that not only the practice cultivates the creation of these items, but it also cultivates the transfer of the knowledge. And so, for example, my daughter Raven, who is now a young adult, her focus very much is in music and in song. And in learning and looking to the archival knowledge is also learning from our practice, she's then developing that and really strengthening her own practice in the area of music and, and sound design. So, I think that it's, it's multi layered, and we all find our unique places and strengths within it. But then at the same time, we're all learning and sharing in an understanding that has a whole breadth that includes everything from visual to sound to, to movement, and, and every aspect of it is inter woven.

Claire French

And are all the members of Dancers of Damelahamid from the Gitxsan nation?

Margaret Grenier

We are a family-based company. And so, we do have family members that are not from the Gitxsan nation through marriage, and so forth. So, we have influences in our family as well, from the Squamish and the Kwakwaka'wakw and then through my mother's marriage, as well, from the Cree. She was

born and raised in northern Manitoba. So, we have all of that as part of our family and our family practices.

Claire French

That's wonderful. So, the founding of Dancers of Damelahamid. And how much it's broadened or how much it has, how much you have seen it, perhaps grow? Or has it shifted? I don't think it's obviously not shifted, in its values, and it's kind of *raison d'être*? But it could you talk a little bit about that. I mean, it's quite a wonderful thing that you've taken on and continued. So, I think you're the perfect person to talk about its development.

Margaret Grenier

The Dancers of Damelahamid, it is intergenerational practice. And I think that with each generation, new perspectives and there are always a difference in terms of the time and place that we find ourselves. With my parents generation it was such a huge artistic risk really even just to bring song and dance to performance prior to the Potlatch ban. These practices were shared within our feast halls under the cultural and political structures that held them who they were shared with and how they were shared were very much defined by those practices. So, in order to be able to share them on stage was a very big decision. And it was something that at the time, I think people would not necessarily have the foresight of what that would mean but for my generation I'm so grateful that that that decision was made because it became a practice that I had access to in a multitude of ways that I wouldn't have had if it had been maintained only within the cultural settings of the feast Hall. So that's not the same place that for me that I experienced, because there was already, you know, several decades of work that had been done before I took over a leadership role. I think that for the practice today, the main shift has been in terms of really sharing the work in terms of stories told through dance productions that include multimedia elements. And with this way of sharing work, I think that our company hasn't changed in terms of, we're very much rooted within our, our training and our practice, I wouldn't say that that is what has shifted or changed, I think that it's using the same practices to speak to our contemporary perspectives. For example, the last work that we created, *Mînowin*, it means to clarify directions. So, as we come back to the same teachings, as we come back to our ancestor knowledge, we are not only reinterpreting them with each generation, but we are being redefined by them. And through that, you know, we are articulating our own healing and process as we move forward from our recent colonial past. And we are strengthening ourselves and our identities and in a very different context than my parents or my grandparents would have found themselves. So that's the work that we do today. And that's what we offer, when we create a dance production, whether it be a production, like *Mînowin*, which is very, you know, it's a very large-scale work, or with the work, *Spirit and Tradition*, which is deeply rooted in our intergenerational practice, and we have our young people as well, very much engaged in that piece. All of it is really to sort of reflect where we are today.

Claire French

So, one of the things I think in speaking about your contemporaries is your international, not necessarily focus, but the opportunities that you have created for Dancers of Damelahamid to have an international presence, and also with Coastal Dance Festival to invite those people to your land. So, could you talk a

little bit about that relation and how that works, and how you are sharing perhaps your own legacies and ancestry internationally now?

Margaret Grenier

The Dances of Damelahamid have had a number of opportunities over the past 20 years, I would say now, where we are making connections with the broader community of Indigenous artists, we've done so in part, through our own ability to travel, we've connected to communities in New Zealand and Australia, South America, and most recently in the Nordic area as well with the Sámi people. And I think that what has really brought us to, to work in a way where we are sort of going and traveling in this way is because there's so much to gain from making connections with other indigenous communities in particular, but also in terms of just the ability to share our work in a, with a broader audience, I think the story of the revitalization of our dance practices, the strength and diversity of our Indigenous communities and our arts is something that needs to be shared nationally, it needs to be shared internationally just to really you know, show people the singularity, the strength of all of our you know, there are so many nations within Turtle Island and, and all with unique languages and, and, and cultural practices. So, I think that's important that we share in that way. But we've also had the opportunity because we host the coastal Dance Festival, which began in 2008 in partnership with the Museum of Anthropology and now in partnership with the Anvil Centre. We've had the opportunity to host artists not just throughout the Northwest coast but also different parts of Turtle Island and internationally as well. And it really is a festival community. It's not a festival that's about showcasing new works. It's a festival that's about strengthening who we are in our Indigenous voices as artists, strengthening our community and being inspired through each other's works. There are so many stories of resiliency of, you know, of sovereignty of, of just the beauty of the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. And I think that when we gather, in a, in a space, like the Coastal Dance Festival, it really does help us to, as artists to find ourselves to clarify who we are, and our vision and our work, but also just, you know, just to be held by one another, and what, what everyone is sharing. And I think that that translates as well, when we have the opportunity to travel to other festivals with similar focuses or, or, you know, to broaden that beyond the Indigenous community and to really access venues that were not necessarily open to the type of work that we do even only several years ago.

Claire French

Yeah, I think that is, is so inspiring, as you say that there's a, there's almost like an expanded way of being able to be in these spaces that have for a long time within my you know, communities and worlds been conventionally treated. And so expectations are come with even maybe how one creates work or how one expects to engage with work. And I think what is so inspiring about this is that there are other ways to engage and other ways to actually share that become much more about inspiring much more about being able to share why the work has been created, not necessarily what the work is that has been created, although that is obviously such a large part. So, thank you. Do you see a growing interest in Indigenous arts and culture in Canada and beyond? Do you? Do you see it? Is it hard for you to see, because you are like, such a leader, such a leading figure in in that happening in Canada?

Margaret Grenier

I certainly have experienced shift within Canada, in spaces being open to Indigenous dance and practice. And I think it's, you know, it coincides with a desire to understand it's not just about presenting

work in front of different audiences, it's not just about being more inclusive in programming, it's really about being open to a shift in understanding to engage in conversations that are sometimes difficult that you know, that they have their challenges. And, and it's not a path of, you know, where it's a, it's something that I think where we, you know, as we learn, then the more things are revealed that that require work and require patience in terms of moving forward. But it certainly for myself, is something that I have felt, I would say, more so within the past several years than then I have seen for some time throughout my practice. And I think the, the young people that I see today who are coming forward as emerging artists are really in a place that, you know, it just wasn't there several years ago, where there are not only opportunities to engage, and to share Indigenous practice, but to really transform what that even means. And to find ways to innovate within, to innovate within traditions, to innovate within contemporary practices, and to and to bring different practices together. So, I'm really, I'm really hopeful. And I see what is what is taking place today.

Claire French

And would you say that there's a style of which...does your dance have a name, like within your own culture and traditions and communities? Do you call it something?

Margaret Grenier

I think that the Dancers of Damelahamid are unique in that we aren't working within a strictly traditional form. Yeah, so I think traditional mask dances is our, what we are like, that is the foundation of the work that we do. But I think that it is still in a place where we're defining what contemporary practices mean. I mean, within that, I don't think that's something that has sort of been settled in a way that that there is a genre or, you know that there is something that is more expansive, that can sort of be defined, I think, I think that's what is the challenge of our generation is that we are finding ourselves within these practices. And, and it takes time, it takes time to do that. It takes time for, you know, ourselves to define ourselves within that, but then also to, you know, the way in which we bridge understanding to what that means within audiences and with other communities. I think that is also what takes time.

Claire French

Yeah. And part of my reason for asking that was just that I understand also from your mother, that pow it's not pow wow dance that you are, that is part of the tradition. That's not necessarily what the traditions were, originally of, the Gitksan community and I just wanted I, I was drawn to that as an understanding, and a way of learning and how the masks also suggests something different to that. So, thank you. Thank you for that it. Could you maybe talk a little bit about? Well, I'd love to know about your own artistic path? I think you have described it, but I'm sure for you sometimes. Being kind of the leader in the leadership role of both the Coastal Dance Festival and Dancers of Damelahmaid, do you find that you have an individual personal practice? Or is that, is that not fair to say? Because it's always going to include other people? Or is your personal practice, also a social practice? Would you say that? Or can you make a distinction?

Margaret Grenier

I think it's very interwoven, I do think that my personal practice is very much a family practice, like not just within my, my, my family, but also my dance family, as well, and how that family extends to the larger community, such as the Coastal Dance Festival community, as well has become a dance family.

And so, I think that not only am I very influenced by those around me, but that, you know, that is a place of reciprocity. Always for myself. At the same time, I do think that throughout the years of dancing, I have had to find and define myself within the practice, in terms of you know, there, there was a place in for me where we're, I did come to the realization that although what it was, was deeply compelling, to me was the ability to pass this forward to the next generation. For myself, it wasn't about repeating what my parents had done, I couldn't use what they did as a model, and simply follow it, I had to find myself within the practice in order to be able to fulfill my role that would make it possible for the next generation to then follow because I think that if we don't hold that space, then I think that work is just passed forward to the next generation. And they have more to do to in order to make those connections for themselves. So even though I wouldn't say my work has ever really been, you know, limited to self, it's certainly something where I've had to clarify for myself what it means to be in the larger fabric of things.

Claire French

Your own Minowin process. Thank you for that, that's beautiful. And I feel, I feel like that's a space of wisdom, right, that is actually connected very much to ancestry and very much to kind of security, to understanding and wanting to be in relation to that history, and wanting to do the work to, to like and I think with that comes a, what I like to call kind of an embodied wisdom at the same time as a wisdom that can be passed on as part of that tradition. So, we'll come back to a little bit of your path just with some of the things that you're doing. But before we do that, could you talk a bit about the challenges that you've faced and maybe challenges that you might still be facing? I think this is going to be multifaceted and multi layered. There's the actual position of being able to bring in artists from other places, and the costs associated with that, and just the timing and the planning and all of those things. There's also the I wonder if there's a challenge around choosing what the company will present and what the company will share with a public and which works might tour and which and what the work is this the practice that remains family within the family. And I wonder if those kinds of things or anything you'd like if there's anything that you'd like to share, or any other challenges I may be way off track. But

Margaret Grenier

I think that one of the ways to articulate what the challenges are of today is something that my mother once told me, and that is, you always represent more than yourself. And I think that is especially true as an Indigenous artist, I think that what we share with our work is understood by others is a way or a means of understanding indigeneity itself and understanding values, understanding, understanding, or maybe not understanding, but even having access to practices to language to a way of seeing the world that is, you know, unique to the, to the perspective and the practice of the artists themselves. So, it's important to me to always navigate carefully, not only in terms of what is being cultivated within the practice itself, in terms of ensuring that our training and the values and the what I would call the, you know, the medicine of the work is carefully cultivated within ourselves and within the younger generations that are growing up in it. But also, in terms of, you know, how that guides what is shared, where it's being shared. Obviously, if we're taking work to new audiences, there's a caution there as well, because we make ourselves vulnerable in those places, which would be different than sharing within community settings where that understanding is already there. So, there's always a lot to consider in terms of what work to bring and where to bring it, and how will work is even designed to convey a message and who will be receiving that message. But at the same time, I think there's no one

answer to any of those things or the questions that may come up. And I think that sometimes when we find ourselves in places where we don't understand or when the challenges are, are bigger than that, you know, that's where we have an opportunity for growth, we have opportunity for transformation. And I think that's what will ultimately care for the younger people who are who are coming into this, because, you know, that's what we need to do in order to really support them and their vision for what the future will bring for them.

Claire French

Absolutely. I think the I think, you know, thinking of it as cautionary as opposed to challenging, you know, those kinds of environments is just such a kind of considered way. Like, it's almost like allowing, expecting it, and being ready to, to learn from it and be ready to have that be part of the experience of what you're doing. I think it also suggests, you know, the significance and the values that are in the work. So, I think this is a lovely place to kind of segue into a close a little bit, perhaps, but just to ask you, what you are doing now. And what's next. And there are three things that I'm particularly wanting our listeners to know about. And that is, of course, the performance on March 30, for at the Dance Centre, possibly your Artist in Residence at Ballet BC if you're willing to talk a little tiny bit about that, and also what the future is for the Coastal Dance Festival at this point, and anything else you'd like to share. But I'd like to just kind of, you know, target with what's now and what's next for you?

Margaret Grenier

Well, I think that the performance March 30, the Dance Centre is really for me, it just it's part of this coming back to audiences that has been taking place since the pandemic. So, it's been really wonderful. It was a very busy, busy fall. But it's been really wonderful just to have the ability again, to connect to audiences to share our work, we will be sharing Spirit and Tradition which means we will have younger dancers, it will be a family practice that we're bringing to The Dance Centre. It's wonderful to have the young dancers just to be able to be part of those opportunities again to and to see how they've grown as well in even throughout the last few years that have been more difficult. We also are as a company we have been working towards developing a new work it's not going to premiere to 2024 but it will tie in to some of the residency work that that we have been doing over this past season and will continue to do over the next season. We're creating a new work called Raven Mother, which is named that in reference to my mother, Elder Margaret Harris, and the impact that she had throughout her lifetime, and the legacy that she has left our family. So, I will be doing some work more individually in terms of the Ballet BC residency, and also in connection to that residency doing work with the dancers there, and deepening the conversations and dialogue around, you know, an understanding between the two dance forms. And then for the Coastal Dance Festival, we are going to be celebrating that again in person this year, and at the beginning of March. So, we'll have a lot happening in March this year. And that is our second gathering since the pandemic. So, it's exciting, I think that for not just for the Dancers of Damelahamid, but for all of the artists in the various communities, we, we really missed the opportunity to gather, I really felt that last year when we had our festival, which was in April last year, because there was that last wave that came through in the spring. And so, I think that, you know, we're just, it's just a time to really replenish ourselves to, to dance, to sing and to share. And so, I think that's what I'm hopeful for this spring. But it becomes a time of just really, you know, being able to share work, to be able to sing and dance and to have people come and witness that. And as a nice way to move forward from all that's happened over the last number of months.

Claire French

Absolutely. Well, thank you so much. This has been an inspiration. And I look forward to all that you have to offer to us here. And the Coastal Dance Festival will be again at the Anvil Centre then in New Westminster, is that correct?

Margaret Grenier

That's correct.

Claire French

Yeah. And so that there's the Dance Centre, and the Anvil Centre. And we'll put links in the description of this podcast so people can find all of those dates and follow you that way and sign up to come to some, which I encourage everybody to do. Thank you again, for taking this time. It's been really a pleasure. And I very much look forward to seeing your work on stage and wish you all and your family a wonderful, creative time. Yeah. Thank you, Margaret.

Margaret Grenier

Thank you so much.

Claire French

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