

The Dance Centre Podcast Episode 30: Marissa Wong

SPEAKERS

Marissa Wong, Claire French

Claire French 00:11

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.

Marissa Wong is a Chinese Canadian dance artist who has the privilege to create play and share on the unseeded territories of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Musqueam nations also named Vancouver, BC. She received her postgraduate studies through Alonzo King LINES ballet and Ballet Austin. Her engagement with the Vancouver dance community has demonstrated her capability to produce, perform and host works. Marissa is invested in continuous learning and growth. Her work reflects her observations of the human experience. She strives to change the systemic structure in dance through the facilitation of inclusive and sustainable arts spaces. Marissa is currently the artistic director of the Falling Company, formerly the response. She was previously a member of TWObigsteps Collective, which she founded in 2015. In addition to choreography, she has produced performances for self-choreographed solo *Departure*, and co-hosted performance *Split Bill* with Warehouse Dance. She acknowledges the continued support from Canada Council for the Arts BC Arts Council and the city of Vancouver.

Hi, Marissa.

Marissa Wong 01:54

Hi, how's it going?

Claire French 01:55

Good, good. Thank you so much for joining us, I'm delighted to be able to talk to you today about some of the transformations you have made. And your career developments. And in the capacity of your role as Artistic Director of The Falling Company, and your up and coming show at the Dance Centre in April. So, there's so much we can talk about. But I think what would be really lovely to hear from you at this point is a little bit of your history just to lead us up to you becoming artistic director of the falling company, and maybe just a little bit about what that has entailed for you. I know it's been a little while, but it's also quite new as well. So, I'd love to hear a little bit about how you how that all happened if you don't mind sharing that.

Marissa Wong 02:42

Yeah, totally. I was appointed artistic director in 2021. And yeah, it's been a kind of crazy wild ride since then, I knew Amber when I first moved back to Vancouver, and she was one to connect me to the community. I remember at the time; I was just starting to choreograph. And I was working with TWObigsteps Collective, and we were a collective, trying to just make things work in the city. And I remember seeing Amber at that time and just going What's the system, you know, help me, give me resources as to how to navigate this freelance life. And then, yeah, a couple years later, or actually, many years later, I was asked to interview for the role of taking over her company, which was totally a surprise and exactly at the right moment in time, where TWObigsteps Collective and COVID and we were just feeling exhausted with the collective and just ready for new changes as both humans but also as a group. And so that came in that the most appropriate peaceful time.

Claire French 03:41

Fantastic. Can we go back a little bit just for the listeners who might not know quite, so we're talking about a transition of Amber Funk Barton's company, the response? As Amber was looking for somebody to take over that company and interviewed a few people. Marissa being one of them. And then Marissa took over, what was the response at the time, and re named the company, the Falling company. So that's where that's where we're at now. So. Okay, please keep going.

Marissa Wong 04:14

Yeah, totally. Yeah, lots of context. Yeah. And since taking over the company, it has been a slow transition intentionally to build a foundation that can be sustainable in the work that we're creating, and sustainable just in terms of workload, how we're implementing new ideas, or integrating new ideas, new systems, new structures, how I want to lead a process, and how I'm working and collaborating with the board. So, it's been when I talk about the company, when I talk about what I'm wanting to create, it's an ecosystem overall, and many parts contributing to that ecosystem. And sometimes those parts take a really long time to grow. And some of them are a little bit quicker. And overall I want it to work as an ecosystem and as collectively as possible. So, all of these different ideas and integrations, how they all work with one another, and supporting those foundations that some of those may take a little bit longer to do. Yeah.

Claire French 05:17

So, you're at the same time, you're maintaining a freelance career, and we'll get on to that as well. But I wonder if we could just go back a little bit further. And maybe you could weave into a response to this question around your career path, including some of your training and how you might, reflecting back on that, take in this moment, I'm sure you do this often, of arriving at an artistic director of a company like is this part of was this always part of your vision? Was this something that only came into your visioning land and your visioning world when the opportunity arose? That kind of context, because I think there's a lot of interesting, you know, there's all this serendipity that happens in the world for us if we're ready for it, and open to the opportunity. But there's also the kind of our path is veering away from what we thought we wanted, or what we thought we were going to be doing in life. And I just feel like you're in a great, almost crossroads, but almost like a roundabout. So I wonder if you could maybe just backtrack a little bit, help people understand how you came to be in this position, and then talk about

whether that aligns with your vision, your long term vision, like since you were a child dancing, you know, or if it's if it's a new thing?

Marissa Wong 06:39

Yeah. So, I started off in classical ballet, I'm sure that's what people want to hear too. Yeah, like super structured, rigid, classical ballet, and really, really on that trajectory of being like a company dancer, I was doing so many summer intensives, in the States, I was doing Pointe work, you know, every day and you know, for four hours a day, and then eight hours a day of full, just full-on ballet. And I really wanted that dream. But I think when you talk about this, and you talk about my trajectory as a career, it's also included a trajectory of coming into more of my personal self, and really aligning with that, too. And so, while I was on this ballet track of what I thought I wanted to do, or kind of maybe what other people imposed on me to do, I was always going to the studio late at night. And you know, improvising or doing some contemporary kind of works or choreographing on my own. And then I ended up going to Lines, which was the first time Alonzo King LINES Ballet, which was the first time that I really had the opportunity and agency, where they asked me, you know, what do you want to do? Or, you know, what is the porta de bra that you're going to be doing? And so, you know, I was asked to make shapes and arm structures that were different than what the conventional kind of language that I knew at that time. And I couldn't it was, it was really impossible, I had to face the self of going, is it possible to move outside of the grid? Is it possible to move outside of that rigidity, that structure that had been embedded in me for so long. And as I was on that journey, and as I was choreographing, I could do to find my voice, and I continue to maybe regain my voice back because I had lost a lot of it while I was in this classical ballet regimen. And I started to understand that I always had this leadership role about me, this way of joining a group together, whether that was for a dinner party, or whether that was for a choreographic opportunity. And so that led me into more and more opportunities. And it was really when I was living in Montreal, which was the year before I moved back to Vancouver. And I was working like cleaning studio floors in exchange for studio rental and choreographing and trying to bring people together and hosting events where I realized, Oh, this is actually so much more in alignment with my path. And things became so much more easeful. A: because it felt like it aligned with my values as a human. I felt like I was contributing to where I wanted to in my community. And it felt way more aligned, especially as a woman of colour in dance, and a stronger position for me to use my voice and use my power. And so, then I came back to Vancouver, I gathered a group of humans together, we started TWObigsteps Collective, which ran for about five years or so as we were in our early stages of our career. And then, yeah, and then I was requested to have this artistic director position, which then just felt like another alignment and that kind of easeful, or yeah, this is feels like the right path. I kind of do this, but it feels like it also kind of goes back on itself as you're saying in that roundabout way. There's many twists and turns. Yeah. And sometimes you end back in a place, you're revisiting a place that you thought you had already been before today.

Claire French 09:52

Yeah, exactly. So there. So I really like the kind of awareness of this leadership tendency or this kind of desire to bring people together, as you say, which, you know, is a beautiful, soft form of leadership, I think and has been highly underrated, but thankfully is kind of gaining its power and soft power as a space for community, but still within professional communities like not having to make that separation between the two, as much. And so, we've talked about, or you mentioned a little bit about the things

that you are in right now with falling company and the, and you mentioned new ideas, and I'm assuming new creative ideas. But there is also a big part of your work, I think, and what you were implying there is that ideas, also probably around systems, and those systems might not be just about work, they might not just be just about the choreography, or the art work outcome itself. That's also about how companies run, right? And how, and how that's organized. Could you talk a little bit about that, because in your, in your bio, you do mention, and I asked you about this earlier, before we started the interview, adjust around your idea of changing the systemic structure in dance by facilitating inclusive and sustainable arts spaces. And I'd love to hear just a little bit more, because I feel like that's multilayered, of course, multifaceted. And I feel like, I just would like to give you this platform to talk a little bit more about that sentence.

Marissa Wong 11:23

Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, those are big words. And I want to acknowledge that. And I want to acknowledge that in a bio, I want to be able to open up the space for conversation of saying, yeah, what does that mean for you? Or what does that look like for you in the company? So, when I sit here, and I think and I close my eyes, and I go, what is the exact, what does that mean, for me, it starts off with a lot of personal exploration. And it starts off with the clarity in which I find within myself so that I can be that softer, stronger leader that you're expressing. So, some of those ways in which I do that internal work to then let it transfer out into all of the artists, all of the organization's, all of the creative spaces that I'm interacting with, are in the ways in which I communicate the boundaries that I'm working with, finding clarity and values, and that includes company values, as well. And we've had to make some decisions with myself and the board actually recently about some really big opportunities for ourselves, and having to say no to them, because it didn't align with the values. And in saying no to those big opportunities, it actually allowed us to be in maybe a smaller scale of what we thought the project would be, but in a lot more thoughtful of a way, or a lot more of a way that is sustainable, so that everyone is not overworked, or it's within the scope of what we can do financially, or it's in the scope of what we can do capacity levels. So, when you speak about that, it's acknowledging that going, Okay, what do I have this capacity so that I'm not projecting as a leader, all of the other personal things that I have going on as a human outside of being a director right into the spaces that I'm creating? And so, it really, it starts there as a seed, and then transfers out into more of a more of a structural way. And so, I feel that sometimes as listeners, they're looking for that, well, what's the nugget? You know, how are you doing that? How are you kind of activating and making change? And what is the active ways? Well, some of it really is, is just, I sit with myself in the morning that I go for a mindfulness walk, you know, along the beach, so that when I show up to rehearsal, then I can hold space for the dancers or artists that I'm interacting with. And then sometimes it looks like having a conversation, because we are a nonprofit organization with my board of directors and saying, okay, how are we able to pay our artists more, you know, how are we able to change these structures? How are we able to offer things like a wellness benefit to our artists so that they can receive mental health or physical health support after a process is finished? Some of these structures are things that we see in larger companies or companies that aren't necessarily arts organizations, how can we start to implement that into what we're doing, and so that we can create when we're talking about sustainable, like I said before, we can create an ecosystem that is renewable, and so that it's not normalizing burnout, it's not normalizing the conversation of underpaid artists, it's not normalizing overworking and also how we're engaging in process. The way that I talk about it to saying, I'm a person and with many vulnerabilities and

insecurities, and I am navigating, or I am interested in building a process, you know, that we'll talk about later probably about Family room, but this is what I'm interested in. And this is how I'm engaging in it. And I'm not talking about it from a place of knowing or I'm not talking about it from a place of maybe what was the ego right? That's the smaller ways in which we're integrating some of these structures, and hopefully, those that have been around for a really long time and not normalizing it creating a new norm, you know,

Claire French 15:09

Yeah. I think there's also I'm very interested in this too. And I'm interested in this notion of really, really making an effort not to assume how other people might be feeling in a process, or how another person might process things within a process. And to also allow for space for that, which means showing up with or self-awareness that isn't, like you say, driven by ego, because it can be, so that all needs are met, as far as it's realistically possible within an artistic process, that is contained, because it's craft, and it's art making, you know, so there's a real, there's a very tentative balance. And it that's different for each person. You know, some people are very clear at making those boundaries and have worked those out. And for others, those boundaries reveal themselves in a process, right, the process itself exposes those boundaries. And I've been in both situations, as a leader and as a follower. If I can ever follow, I don't know, if I can actually follow.

Marissa Wong 16:14

for sure. And I do want to acknowledge that where I'm coming from at this point in my life to is having an internal grounding and stability, but also having the privilege to be able to do that work, right, I have resources around me to be able to do that, but many people don't. And so, for me, as a leader, it feels important to be able to contain and hold that space. Because and acknowledging that a lot of folks don't have access to those resources or are not in a space where they have that safety so that they can do that work. And so how can we be mindful that yeah, like you said before, about not making assumptions and asking for consent, and the ways in which we're communicating to one another, especially in the precarity of a dance career, and especially in the precarity of a dance career that is built on scarcity, too, right? So, then it really and it is, it's hard, it's really, really difficult. And so that's what I'm saying is that when we're making decisions, you know, specifically financial or opportunities, or you know, how we're doing it, how do we create that, so we're moving away from that scarcity mindset so that we can create more abundance, so that folks do have more resources to be able to show up in a more thoughtful and caring way with one another. And that just creates an overall ecosystem. You know, I think for me, it's, it goes beyond just an arts and a creative aspect. And I kind of use, I've used the analogy already about, you know, having a dinner party, but ultimately, it's just about creating that community for me overall. And coming back to that, and yeah, sometimes it doesn't look like financial too, sometimes reciprocity for us looks like, you know, me standing up for myself and saying, someone wants to do an interview, or someone wants to have me lead a conversation. And I'm going, Okay, if the organization or the people that are asking or requesting, don't have access to maybe some of the financial resources, what's a way in which we can create, exchange or create a dialogue so that everyone can feel empowered, and that everyone can feel that they are valued? Right? And it doesn't have to still look like that kind of capitalist way of just exchanging money.

Claire French 18:22

Yeah, and I think with that comes this idea of mentioned scarcity, but it's also scared there's also being scared. And so how do we also manage and renegotiate relationships with each other, when we are in positions of paying somebody, you know, like, people feel like they can't speak up because somebody is paying them or because this is a job, you know, those kinds of that transactional relationship is like, I think it's important that we like you are looking at it for in the field we're in that we take care of the whole self as much as possible and ask other people to do the same for themselves, you know, like, get them the tools. So that for me links back to the amount of experience and impact that being a freelancer has on your ability to recognize and to bring about these changes, because I think an independent dance artist is aware of all of these components, because of how many projects and how many different experiences a freelance dance artist has to have in order to survive, to keep that title if you like, so I wonder if you could speak maybe a little bit transition, maybe a segue, what you think that might have taught you, I think one of the things you've already expressed is that it kind of empowers you because you've been there. You know the dancers that you work with, you've been in that position as well. But then maybe switch a little bit into the kinds of freelance projects you're still doing, you know, a little bit like your work with corporeal Imago and lots of other independent contracts you take on. Maybe we could segue into your experiences there. So how is the independent dancer life you have influences your artistic, directorship, and vice versa?

Marissa Wong 20:15

For sure, for sure. I feel like sometimes I have this alter ego, where, you know, I have the Falling company's Instagram in which we, you know, create media and things and posts for that. But then I also have my personal Instagram, which is just filled with circus videos of me training acrobatics

Claire French 20:32

I've watched them! They're amazing, I applaud sometimes.

Marissa Wong 20:36

Thank you. Yeah, doing partner acrobatics, and aerial rope, which just feels like such a crazy segue from what I was doing in ballet, but also kind of similar, but a lot of unlearning in that way. So, I guess that's maybe one of the first things that I would say about freelancing is the unlearning, right? The unlearning of a lot of the assumptions, a lot of the structures that I knew, like I said, I grew up in a very, like, very colonial structure. And I had to unlearn my own assumptions about that, and really face that a lot of grief. And that took, like, it's still happening, you know, I cry every day and I want to normalize that just that version of moving emotions. And at the same time, you know, noticing what I need as a human. Aside from the many other roles that get cast upon me, that sometimes I don't even ask for right, to show up as my fullest self. And that includes freelancing that includes yeah, engaging in this, this new form of contemporary circus arts. And I was just saying this the other day, while training is that what this form of movement has done for me, because I took a little bit of time off after doing ballet, I did a couple of freelance contracts, I was working with Alvin Tolentino, and just kind of other ones in between. And I was saying that what this new form of acrobatics and aerial work is doing for me is actually just helping me find pleasure that's unrelated. It is related to my dance career, because I do perform in it. But the training and ways in which I'm finding that for myself, is just finding pleasure back into movement. Like that's not related to maybe the communities in which I engage with normally, and an empowerment maybe in my body, but also when you're doing partner acrobatics, creating

connection and partnership with another human, basically, because they're your floor and you're, you know, you're above, you have to communicate with them. And so, yeah, it feels like it's a teaching and learning of finding that balance and finding what I need and the ways in which I need to show up in the many ways that I have to and the different versions of myself to right? You know, I have the director version, I have the version of myself that's talking to from my home, right now I have the version, that's a romantic partner to someone that I love dearly, I have one that shows up for friends and family and stuff. And I can see those, you know, we're kind of segueing into also the work that I'm doing, or the creative works in which I'm creating, because Family room is the piece that we're about to talk about. And that piece is specifically about my experience in the world. But I think in addition to all these roles, I get to find a little more balance, and then find out where those boundaries or where those capacity levels waver in the ways in which I show up for each of those rooms. So that I'm not just a director the entire time, you know,

Claire French 23:35

and I think that will also keep changing, right? That will mature. That will, as you adapt as your projects change as your as the work changes, you will grow inside of that. And also, and plateau. You know, there'll be all of those stages, which is, which is really exciting. Let's talk about Family room. Let's keep going. Yeah, it's a good time to keep this conversation going. And maybe we could talk a bit about family room, which you will be presenting at the Dance Center in April, I believe it is that the 19th and 20th. Do I have those dates, right? And then and maybe we could talk about some of your previous work, if you would like to but let's start with family room because a couple of things I'd love to make sure we talk about in this is your collaborators and your relationship with them. It's multigenerational, which I think is really lovely. And we've got such vibrant performers, I think giving some space for that, as well as talking about some of your personal, the concept behind it and in the autobiographical nature of it. Maybe we could kind of and up to you how you'd like to talk about those things. I'll just hand it over to you to discuss how you would like but I'd love, I think the listeners would really love to hear about some of that too.

Marissa Wong 24:50

Yeah, so this work first began when I was actually probably around the time that you and I were talking last time and I was working on a solo called Departure and, in that solo, it was I was reading the book the Body Keeps the Score, I was navigating my own trauma that I had experienced and putting it on stage in an improvised work. And in the book, the author was entered into a family systems therapy session. And instead of using people to, human people, I say that because it's a distinction that will come about in our work in just a moment, but as it were, as the author was navigating, using, instead of using human people, he ended up using furniture pieces, to create this family and allow them to act out their family experience. And so that gave me the idea to find a way to do this in a work and at that time, shortly after that piece, I was asked to do the fall choreographic series at Edam and I created four solos with the artists, and I went, Okay, I'm going to create relationships with furniture pieces, and we're just going to start there, you know, we're gonna start research. And so, we created these four solos, it was a great show is really lovely. We were it was still COVID during that time, too. So, we were creating kind of without physical contact with one another, with the human people.

Claire French 26:16

Objects were ok, sanitized objects were fine.

Marissa Wong 26:20

Yeah, it was we did, we sanitized that couch a lot. So yes, so we created these four solos. And then I was moving through into the next phase of the process into a next phase of research, through Left of main and also seeking support and mentorship with Raina von Waldenburg, as I was incorporating theater elements into movement, and it was something that I hadn't I started a little bit with my solo, but haven't done in a process with other dancers. And so, I was going, Okay, this feels important, we're obviously using props, but it also feels important that we're building character work, or we're building voice work into this piece, and how to A: train the dancers, but train myself and build a process around that. And so I'm still creating these solos, we're building characters, you know, the characters each have their own horoscopes, you know, we're just creating names from that. And it was Raina, who had pointed out to me, because all while going through this, my parents are going through a five year long process in a divorce. And I went, it's about other people's families, it's not about my own, I just want to create these relationships and demonstrate that on stage and Raina kind of just looks at me, and I can give you a face. And maybe I'll just describe what this face is. But just kind of a little dumbfounded, kind of duh Marissa, it is so obvious that it's about your own family, like you're just creating, like you're navigating this season, it's for sure about you, and you as being the child and your two parents. And in that moment, it was just it was so obvious. And it became so much more it we talked about ease, and I'm talking about ease, and just knowing when I'm on that path. And as soon as that happened, I went okay, here are the ideas, here's how we're going to create that it just became so creatively useful. And so I pivoted the piece, and we ended up moving for four dancers to three, the current three dancers that are in the periods, which is Justin Calvadores, Tamar Tabori, Shana Wolfe, and they play out my parents as well as myself. And yeah, the distinction that I'm bringing up the human people is that these three artists play out these characters for me in this work, but also, each of the furniture pieces correlate to a parent as well. So, we have the mother couch, a father lamp, and a child rug. And reasons for some of that being, you know, the mother being a sturdy, you know, supportive environment, but gets sat on a lot, the rug kind of getting walked over, but just more of a fixture, and not actually a, you know, actual piece of functional, you know, furniture, the dad the lamp needing power, needing resources to be plugged in from other people or you know, other things a little bit more precarious, and doesn't necessarily have the ability to balance on their own. And as I was navigating this, and we talked about the work we talked about, you know how I'm just coming into directorship at this time. And I am also what was poignant for me is that I grew up in Port Moody, in a very white suburban neighborhood. And as my parents were going through this divorce, what happened was, they actually ended up exposing me to a lot of the Chinese ancestry and the ways in which they had protected me from feeling marginalized as a child. And some of those ways in which they did protect me was going on the same vacations or, you know, as soon as I had, you know, brought Chinese food and my, you know, silver thermos to school, and kids made fun of me that we had Lunchables the next day, the ways in which I dressed or just haircuts moving from a bowl cut to you know, a very Chinese bowl. gotcha, you know, straight across bangs. And so, I'm, this was 2021. And I'm in, you know, my later 20s at this moment in time, for the first time seeing how the Chinese structures or the ancestral kind of family beliefs, were still a part of my childhood, even though I thought that I was actually quite removed from that being first generation on my mom's side, and actually third generation on my dad, and how their immigrant stories actually impacted me so much more. And so that looked like going

back to what we talked about at the beginning, which was how I came up into dance was feeling a lot of obligation, feeling that I needed to be in control. And then, you know, obviously, ballet really aligns with that kind of values that are cultural, but then also aligns with this kind of way of moving into the world. Some of those other ways are just that perfectionism. And so, you can kind of see how things are aligning as I talk about this work in terms of also what my history was, and coming in and out of it. So, a lot of my journey as a human has also meant that I have had to undo or unlearn and then come into a new version of what that power or new version of what these, this history looks like, for me. And that appears in the work as I'm coming into a new version of what a process looks like, for me, I'm moving away from maybe some of the techniques and movement that I've had previously, and integrating new ideas, which feels like it aligns with just the diversity and the ways in which we're communicating or the ways in which performance can be. So, it becomes a little bit more multidisciplinary than just, you know, one art form at a time.

Claire French 31:51

Yeah, beautiful. I'm thinking of the connection between three things are kind of swirling around in my brain, but it's almost like there's also a kind of integration of the unlearning. And the discovering the self at the same time. And that the way and that this is both objectified and subjectified in the objects and the subjects in the piece, quite literally, in both, but that there's, there's a space that's created between those. So that the kind of I don't want to say, tumultuous, but the kind of like rise and fall of mood swings or like as things as things surface in a family. And then a squash down is also I mean, these are all like beautiful, either analogies or metaphors for process, right as well.

Marissa Won 32:42

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Claire French 32:44

So and also, I'm sure building the characters with the dancers, before you realize that it was a personal story is extremely useful, because again, this idea of objectifying is in the work, so that you can cope with, you know, the process. So, I'm also mentioning this partly because I, I understand in the marketing of the, or the, yeah, I mean, it is marketing, but not sensational marketing. But you know, when they're just on the event page on the Dance Centre website, it says that there's a talkback with a counselor. I think it's really important to mention for two reasons. One is you've already talked about this, the personal aspect of this story, so not just for you, but the fact that it will touch on many people's own experiences I'm from a broken home, as they call it, which is, you know, I think it improved things to be honest for me personally. But so broken home is kind of a very loaded term, but it exists. And so and so I think there'll be many things that happen in the work that will trigger people for their own for the past. But then there's also this idea of having a counselor present for a talk back because of what you talk about in your bio about these systemic changes. And so inviting a counselor into a talkback scenario is a space where you are showing that, you know, you're leading that, right, you're showing that it's not just about talking about the artwork, we're going to be talking about knowingly talking about things that the work is expressing, and while you have protected it for an audience, because it's your personal story, and you're dealing with that, obviously, as you go through the process for yourself, the counselor being there is an offering to the audience. You know, and so I think there's, I think it continues right, what I really love about that is the process continues, and it draws attention to the fact

that it will continue for each audience member and I'm going to use a horrible word, but I'm gonna say it should continue. After seeing an art work it should continue for that audience member. I feel like there's a, we have an opportunity as artists to create work that People continue to think about and relate to beyond the confines of that theater space. So, I feel like that's a really important thing to talk about beyond the kind of personal story, it's the space where getting personal in your work, is also a possibility, and offers opportunity for the audience to also bring about their own reflections and address issues for themselves. Yeah, I certainly have to share them with you.

Marissa Wong 35:27

Yeah, yeah. And they're not left at home after the performance, you know, just on their own. In addition to having that talk back, if it doesn't feel that, you know, an audience member can stay for that portion of the conversation there, we also offer, we have a list on our website continued a list of low barrier counselors, as well. And so, to offer the audience an opportunity to say, hey, there's access out there, or there's let us help support, you know, let us normalize that there are resources that can that can be become available, and the conversation starts here. And yeah, as you said, it is knowingly, you know, that, that everyone has a relationship to family. And I think it's important when we're doing that for this process, but it feels important for me, to integrate and include in future processes as well, you know, having that conversation where everyone can kind of get out of their seats and sit around, you know, this couch. And we did have a preview episode of that last April, where we had that opportunity. And I was, I was incredibly floored by the amount of vulnerability and capacity and space that the audience was able to share with a random group of humans. Yeah, it just brought a conversation that felt like a continue, it brought a way of feeling like you can support not just, we're not just supporting those in which we're engaging with or those that we're employing, but also those that come and see the work or those that come and take classes as well, you know, how it really is fostering that community, fostering that ecosystem. And I think one of the other ways too, is having conversations like these, including the audience in the process, including audiences, you know, in the vulnerability of what this work is, so that they don't just come and have an assumption of, okay, there's this whole beautiful thing, and also allowing an audience or allowing, you know, the people that are coming to see the work to say, Yeah, I also don't know, you know, I have, we build that into the process, that we're within our creative spaces of just having the ability to say, I don't know, or the ability to have vulnerability as a leader, or the ability as a choreographer to listen, you know, to also learn and people in positions of power to find that. And so, I appreciate you bringing that up. Because it feels important to me, not just in the ways in which we're supporting artists, but in the ways in which we're, yeah, like I said, that ecosystem.

Claire French 37:54

Yeah, and I think also it offers it, there's a little bit of space there for things to be treated lightly. You know, like, and I'm sure there's humor in it. And I think it's important to mention, because that is also a healing tool, right to be able to, like, I know, some of the darkest moments, you know, in my life have been helped by a light focus or involving humor, in ways in which, you know, I'm kind of thinking about it, or looking to humor to heal, you know, is kind of a really important way, and I'm sure for you, and the process has been necessary. And taking on artistic direction. And this theme is a little bit like, what are you doing to yourself? But of course, you know.

Marissa Wong 38:37

I know, I do, I do have that humor side of me, you know, sometimes I say that, you know, I have this humor of like, you know, a teenager and just being able to like, be a little bit of a gremlin and sarcasm and just running around like giggling at myself, oftentimes, like I'm often just like laughing at my family thinking I'm the most hilarious person.

Claire French 38:57

And I think I remember that talking to you about that during your solo Departures. Yeah. Because we talked a bit about, I think we talked about play, I seem to remember how important that is, and how, and it's just important in general, and, and even for dealing with difficult subjects play is like, is the way to be able to kind of evaluate whether you are actually crafting something or whether you are actually using it as a therapeutic session. So, I wonder if we could maybe just talk a little bit about Plunge.

Marissa Wong 39:31

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Claire French 39:32

But because it's a mentorship program that you're running under the company. Oh, and maybe we could also, I like plunge and falling together. And I'm wondering about changing the name from response to falling, and maybe a little bit of that process if you want to talk about that. Because I think that could be interesting, too. But yeah, I'd love to hear a bit about the mentorship program. And what I'd asked you before this was what inspired the idea of mentorship and I understand from what you've talked about so far that it fits beautifully, it's extremely aligned with all of your kind of leadership goals and objectives, but also your I wouldn't say tendencies or affinity. So, but I'm wondering if you were approached to mentor and or if and what you feel you offer as a mentor? And do you have mentors, so, so many questions, but yeah, basically plunging into, diving into mentorship and what that means to you.

Marissa Wong 40:26

Yeah, so maybe let me take a moment to talk about Plunge to start. So, Plunge is a mentored project, in which it bridges the gap between training and professional work. And so, it's a mentored project that basically creates a work and, and gives the dancers as well as the production mentees an opportunity to learn and basically learn from mentors that are myself and a cohort of other brilliant humans, what leadership can look like. And so that's some of the ways in which, you know, we've already discussed, you know, the vulnerability or having conversations or what it looks like to navigate balance. And so we've had conversations in our first iteration of plunge of, you know, what does it look like, and we just spent one day, you know, creating a value sheet and allowing the artists to understand and recognize their own value so that they can make stronger decisions for themselves or having conversations about grants or having conversations about, yeah, what balance, what foods, you know, these kinds of things of just how, and one of the things that felt important to was not just honoring dancers as a mentee, but honoring the production team as well. So, we had a stage manager, a lighting designer, a costume designer, and a sound designer come in, and those were also a part of it as well. And a couple things; Amber funk Barton, who used to run this company, had a version of this called workspace, and which it was a mentored project. And also, it was important for me, because that was our first engagement, I was actually hired to be a dancer mentee for her and ended up being on the production side, learning

stage management as an apprentice. And we call the mentees because we want to start to disassemble that language and that hierarchy. But yeah, I was I was an apprentice working under Honey Quick for and continued on to work under Amber Solo and such and learning these other skill sets as well. Yeah. And so when we talk about plunge, you know, we talk about what mentorship looks like, you asked if I was asked or sought out to mentor, it's kind of a new thing that's been entering into my scope, or this realm, as we talked before, this year, and last year, as we just held that project, but I come at a mentor experience of sharing the things that I have experienced and learned in hopes of not continuing that harmful and normalization of a career. And so I come at it from the experiences I've learned as a freelancer, I come at it from the experiences I've learned in ballet and saying, how can we change that? How can we allow help we normalize more care for ourselves, but also for one another, and building that self-awareness, as we have already talked about too. And so yeah, recently, I've been asked to, you know, hold conversations, or, or be in dialogue in a mentee cohort, or be a mentor for other projects, and really finding ways to support that I mean, I've taught before. And so that kind of way of creating that, that transferring of information, or that learning of information is not necessarily new, but the new role. And as we talked about roles, this new role that I'm entering, is a new one that I'm navigating, and I navigate it with extreme thoughtfulness and extreme care in the way in which I talk about the things that I know, but not as a way of saying that I know them for certain as a way of saying, I am in process, or I am constantly learning that allows for more, I guess, for more normalization or conversation around the fact that humans are just constantly evolving. And it doesn't look like that linear trajectory that we talked about. It looks like turning in on itself. It looks like me saying, I yeah, I feel like you know, my 16-year-old self today. And it's bringing up this pattern, and I'm having to sit and like meditate a little bit more because I don't want to be in that pattern anymore. I don't want to associate with that harmful space that I'd been in. So, I think approaching mentorship that way is the way in which I'm going about it.

Claire French 40:26

Yeah and one of the reasons why I asked I think why was curious about how it came about is there's choices we make because they feel like something we it's part of what we value and it's how we want to contribute to the world or to you know, our field or whatever the milieu and then there's feeling like, we have to meet what the milieu is asking of us. And sometimes we've already you've already addressed this partly, and it's partly to do with, you know, becoming a ballet dancer, and deciding, you know, when you realize there was another way, you know, that's what you embraced, and was more curious about in the end, and neither of them are more right than the other. I think they have to fit the person, right. That's what we're talking about. And I think partly in the, the mentoring, it feels like that path has always been beneficial for you and was already part of the response. And you got to experience it that way. But the beautiful thing about the interdisciplinary nature of it is like is again, that community, is understanding who you are, and be able to be adaptable inside an interdisciplinary community, which goes beyond dance right? It goes beyond the beyond the dance community and beyond dancers giving each other space. So, I think that's, I think that's a wonderful thing. I used to run something called Project CPR. I ran it for about eight years, and it was choreographic practice and research. And I feel like that what you're talking about is you've plunged into you say, you're entering into this new role, and you've entered it, right, you've plunged right in, you're in it. And I felt like after running CPR, I needed to go through that process myself. And essentially, that was my PhD, I ended up I realized that I was putting myself through CPR by doing a PhD, and it felt really like. So, I learned so much from being in a

mentor position with guest mentors, as well, who were with me from the mentees and learned so much that I realized I needed to be a mentee again. But there were certain things that I wanted to let go of, and I wanted to rediscover about the patterns that you're talking about from my previous training. So it was unlearning relearning, thinking, again, all of these things were like what catapulted me into the PhD research. And so out the other side, I feel like it's still a little bit of time before I can create work, I'm starting to now but I gave myself that space and patience, to let the patterns disappear, actually, and I couldn't just revisit them, because they would just come back, like it was just then all the patterns, I had to let them actually leave my body I had to give time.

Marissa Wong 44:41

I also would, you know, maybe challenge that as, as I'm navigating that for myself, because I don't think that the patterns necessarily leave just my relationship to the patterns change. Because those patterns, you know, are part of a history or part of what you know, made, us both be here at this moment in time. And I say that because I was, you know, training at Edam, I'm doing the scholarship, and I, I would always keep pointing my toes or go into an arabesque. And I was so frustrated, because I was trying to move away from this pattern, right. But then it kept becoming a part of me. And so at that moment, I had to learn to have a different relationship to it and have a different relationship, I guess, to the way that I approached that. So rather than having kind of this negative, you know, idea around this history for myself or around this pattern, how can I use it to catapult you know me into a new space or going yeah, like, I am a person who needs to have you know, these certain things or who needs to, you know, something like control who needs to be in control or something like that? And how do you change the relationship so it's not, you're not necessarily a person who identifies as someone that needs to be in control. But that that control can also, you know, propel you in certain moments in your life, that you're not necessarily doing it in all relationships or always in which you're experiencing the world, but it does help kind of support you in these moments in time. And, yeah,

Claire French 47:28

and what I've done is I've gone back to tap dancing, and I've gone back to singing, and I've gone back to loads of things that I had kind of let go of, I thought I wouldn't, wouldn't be in my, you know, in my life and they are it's led me back to those, which is a really wonderful journey. It's just it's very exciting. And I found pleasure in that. So, you know, so yeah, that's where my pleasure is right now. So, yeah, that's really wonderful. So you do seem to be balancing your being, you know, your freelance career. I wonder if we could just maybe bring this to a close by just talking maybe about some of the, again, you could maybe share some of your wisdom around time management around, you already mentioned, like scaling of projects and talking with your board about, maybe it isn't quite as big as you thought maybe that it's not the right time for something of that size and scale. And I wonder if you could maybe just talk a little bit about that. And then we'll end with that. What have you discovered about yourself and about time management, Marissa, in this whole journey?

Marissa Wong 49:51

Oh, I think it goes beyond time management, Claire, and I think we're sitting here kind of giggling because we know that just had I think it's been a process. And it's been a process of Yeah, understanding myself, and it started off with boundaries. And I come back to that version of boundaries, because then then you are still able to be kind of in this window of tolerance, where you aren't

exceeding or depleting yourself energetically, but also just in capacity levels. And so when I say boundaries, it goes, What does this you know, do I have capacity? Is this something that's going to exceed me? Can I move a little bit out of that, you know, that window or that frame for just a little moment, but the know that I can drop myself back in? And that's a personal journey, but it also relates to you know, how I'm navigating my time, does it feel right to do you know, am I going to allow myself to sleep in this morning, one other thing is that we're offering the dancers in the process in all processes, you know, one paid day of mental health day for the duration of a process to so that they can really take care of themselves. And so it's checking in feeling that, you know, what is my capacity, what is my boundary in that time, and then it's also within those boundaries, it's, you're able to find balance, I think, if I started with saying, finding balance, it becomes this kind of juggling game of, well, I have so many things, you know, I have these ideas. But when you are able to acknowledge your boundaries and capacity levels, sure, I want to do everything right, of course, I'm a human who wants to, you know, gather all of knowledge and soak it up as much as possible. But there's a couple things, knowing that I'll have time to be able to do that. So just feeling a little bit more abundant in myself in that time and not being in that scarcity, that everything needs to be done right away. And I offer that to especially early career artists, because it feels like you have to do everything all at once, you know, it feels like you have to know how to do the grants, so you have to get the opportunities, you have to say yes to everything and then you end up exhausting yourself. And then it's also understanding to your own value system, so that I can make a clear decision, you know, my values surround these ideas of reciprocity, around community around communication. Also, you know, for me, this is where I that circus kind of comes in is also risk, but also in the ways in which I create. So understanding those values, and adventures is other one those values is, okay, I become so much clearer as a choreographer, I become so much clearer in what I'm saying yes to does it align, you know, is this opportunity, only touching on, they may not touch on all five of your values, maybe it's only three out of the five, but then you can say, yeah, it's three out of the five, maybe, you know, they're not paying me as much, but I get, you know, this wide scope of other things that come along with this opportunity. And so that's how I navigate the decision making processes with myself, but also the company and the board. And it helps us stay within that window so that we're not over exerting or undervaluing ourselves.

Claire French 52:52

yeah, well, for me, it's as well it's like, understanding that the minutiae of something is connected to the bigger vision. Yeah. And then that's a way of, of managing, and knowing which one you're in at a particular time. And also, just accepting that we can only do one thing at a time, even though we, even though we might very, very quickly shift like within milliseconds to another thing, we are only ever really doing one thing at a time, if we're completely honest with ourselves. And then that way is that way is, is really healthy I think It doesn't mean that when we don't have many things happening in a day or an hour, but we can only give our attention to one thing at a time. Genuinely. And I think that's just a lovely way. But I think that's really beautiful, the values system and the, it not having to all be now. But if you can have your value system cover as many opportunities of possibilities that you can imagine at this point, you will be able to prepare yourself for those right opportunities. Yes.

Marissa Wong 53:56

And then it's forever changing. Yeah, I think that's important. I wanted to I wanted to kind of run back to your question about the company's name. And I think that, you know, to kind of close off this

conversation, as you mentioned, the company's name is the foreign company, as an act of surrendering, and as an act of really kind of giving up and a surrendering and letting go. And if you see in the logo, it kind of is this triangle shape? Pointing down? Yeah, with the legs coming out. Yeah, they're out and they're kind of falling into this hole. And it's not a circular hole, because it's actually what it represents is this journey inward. It's a triangle pointing downwards as a journey to go kind of further into yourself as a way to actually quite end up climbing up that mountain. So, we talked about the linear trajectory of moving upwards. And for me, this moving upwards means actually digging downwards into the self into the structures into falling into that space. And that was really the initial Sure, yeah, the initial intention behind the name behind the logo behind what we're creating. And as I first started, when I created the company was, I wanted, hopefully for the systemic structures to also fall. And which we talked about some of the ways at the beginning of this conversation and create a new version of what that ecosystem can look like that is fostering communication and care and everyone supporting one another. But people keep making jokes, as I entered this circus journey, that also the falling company may just move into a circus company one day, and it's just us falling with aerial ropes and acrobatics.

Claire French 55:37

but I'm also thinking the other way, and I can totally see that, but there's also an underground element, right, which is like, and I'm thinking of the plie before you can leap, you know, like the importance of a play in order to get off the ground. So like, there's a there is this and while they all might be vertical, and their logo is not, you know, it's a bit more horizontal, which is also really lovely, because it has this kind of a heterarchical quality about it, which I think is really important. There is this under and there is something about also maybe upturning seeds that we didn't even know were there by going under. So it's loaded, I mean the symbols are all right there in the action and the and the image and, and your work. Right. And your work is all about that. Thank you so much. Marissa, this has been really insightful. There's so much in there. And it's just it's very exciting. And we're very excited for you. And congratulations, the company and the work and all of that. And I know we'll hear more from you in the future.

Marissa Wong 56:42

Yeah. Well, it's so nice chatting with you again. I feel like it's a whole new.

Claire French 56:47

It feels like that, to me to completely new chapter, we will see you at the family room. Or family room, April 19 and 20th at the Dance Center 8pm shows but you can find it on the Dance Center website. And there's also the falling company.com I believe is the website. Is that correct? Yes. Yeah, lots of information there. Yeah. Thank you so much Marissa.

Marissa Wong 57:14

Thank you.

Claire French 57:20

Thank you so much for listening. We would love for you to subscribe, rate and review wherever you get your podcasts as this will help other listeners find us and help us to grow our dance audience. We'll be

back next month. In the meantime, you can follow us on Facebook at The Dance Centre, Twitter at dancentre and Instagram at thedancentrebc. And if you'd like to support our work, please consider making a donation. Just go to our website at thedancecentre.ca where you'll find extensive information about our upcoming programs and events. The music for the Dance Centre podcast was composed by James B. Maxwell. Always a pleasure to connect with you to dance. Until next time.