

The Dance Centre Podcast Episode 29: Alina Sotskova

SPEAKERS

Alina Sotskova, 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. Alina Sotskova is a professional dancer and choreographer with an integrative contemporary approach to her dance practice. Alina began studying at a young age in Crimea, Ukraine. After immigrating to Canada as an adolescent, her connection with dance was interrupted. She returned to dance years later to focus on specifically on studying contemporary dance and ballet. She has choreographed and performed in many contemporary dance works across Canada. She has presented original choreography in collaboration with Victoria Dance Theatre, Dance Victoria, Flux, London Dance Festival, Broken Rhythms, Scotiabank Dance Centre and Addo Platform among others. In her dance practice, she uses movement and an emphasis on pushing her own boundaries of imagination, and physicality to explore the psychological and philosophical questions she's interested in. To her artistic endeavors, she also brings an academic philosophical perspective, which she integrates with an embodied perspective of dance movement and the body. Alina holds a PhD in Clinical Psychology, as the founder and artistic co-director of Voirelia, Dance Psychology and Philosophy Hub. Alina creates contemporary dance works, develops dance pedagogy and curates interdisciplinary arts events. I am joined today by Alina Sotnikova, who is the artistic director and founder or Co-Artistic director, I should say now and founder of Voirelia Dance Hub and we will be talking about that through the interview. Welcome, Alina, thank you so much for joining me today for this podcast. And I'm very much looking forward to talking with you.

Alina Sotskova 02:18

Thanks Claire. Thanks so much for having me.

Claire French 02:20

So, there is a lot for us to talk about. Because you have, you're one of those people who has a dual career setup. And but they also are very much intertwined, I think. And I think this will be a lovely opportunity for our listeners to understand a little bit more about how that happens with you. So, first of all, let's talk on the Dance Centre podcast about your dance path, your dance career, your dance history, your dance training, very interested in hearing about your beginnings, and how you first became interested in choreographing and directing? And then we'll wait, we'll get to Voirelia a little later down the line.

Alina Sotnikova 02:59

Sounds good. Sure. Yeah, it's been quite a windy path as far as how my interest in dance started. And it's taken me really all over the place and a lot of unexpected and beautiful places. But it started really, really early when I was growing up in Crimea, Ukraine at the time, which was basically just attending dance classes, mostly ballet and some lyrical type classes. There's not really a lot of variety of dance forms and methods available at the time when I was growing up there. So that was kind of basically it. And culturally, that was also the expectation that as a girl that I would be taking part in those kinds of classes and learning that kind of way of moving and dancing. So yeah, that was like the very beginning and there was nothing professional, but it was a fairly rigorous program and practice back where I'm from and then I with my family emigrated to Canada when I was 13. And that point, I didn't dance for like a good 10 years, maybe a little bit more, I think, maybe a little bit more. Yeah, the dance was kind of farthest from my mind for almost a decade just trying to adjust to the immigration process and figure out a lot of things and learn a lot of things, just how things work in Canada and the language and figure out, you know, being a teenager, moving to a new country, and then soon after trying to figure out some kind of a work or career path. So, I missed dancing a lot to the point where it was very hard to even think about dance or to watch any performance or anything like that. As there is no space at all for it with just life things that I was dealing with. And I only came back to it. I think that I was 24 when I started my masters of Science degree at University of Victoria, just through a recreational class at YMCA, then it was just like, it was wild to experience how good it felt, and how I actually still remembered a lot of things that I learned when I was very young after not practicing at all for like, a decade, probably a little bit more. And then it was just like something being like a tap being turned on. And suddenly all like the interests and the passion and the excitement. After missing it for so long, just realizing I guess, in that moment how important it was, I just wanted to do it so much, as much of it as possible I wanted. And then from there, it's been kind of a gradual build up going to as many dance classes as I could start doing pointe when I was 25 I think. Ballet, I discovered contemporary dance for the first time ever, because that was just not something I was exposed to when I was younger, I didn't know what it was. It's very different from the more kind of jazz, lyrical influenced ideas that were present in classes when I was younger. And I was just really enjoying it and soaking it all in and I was doing my graduate work at the same time in clinical psychology and just doing more and more and more and more classes eventually join like a more like university based kind of dance company and participated in performances. And even then already, I was already interested in choreographing, first, you know, very small things, choreographing a small, short solo like on myself, right with the help of mentors and teachers. Yeah, and it just, you know, continued to really grow as a passion, as an interest, especially being part of that small company in Victoria, where it felt so supportive and so collaborative. It gave me such a, like a dream and a vision for how dance could be that I had never that way of being in dance I have never been exposed to before in my life prior to that. And it created this dream of yeah, dance being, you know, a real big and stable part of my life and doing it together with others in a very supportive, artistically experimental way.

Claire French 07:16

Did you have a name as a company?

Alina Sotnikova 07:19

Victoria Dance Theatre. Yeah. And it was kind of like for enthusiasts, amateurs, university students who are taking the dance classes. So, it was it just started very, very small. And it was a very welcoming place.

Claire French 07:36

It speaks a lot to your rigorous training; I think in your childhood, that you could put on pointe shoes at the age of 25. Had you done pointe work before that?

Alina Sotnikova 07:48

No.

Claire French 07:48

Because it implies to me that the training when you were younger, must have been must have really set you up for, you know, like, really good technique and strength and that strong ankles at least?

Alina Sotnikova 08:01

Yeah, I think strong ankles, like strength. But ya I hadn't done pointe before, I had certainly had a very rigorous ballet training, but not pointe. But also, it was, you know, the teachers that I met right away when I started, they were so encouraging and helped so much as to, like, remember how to do things I already knew, how to do but hadn't practiced for a long time, as well as just forge ahead with totally new stuff, right? And yeah, pointe was a fascination and an interest for me for a long time. So, to try that and to be encouraged and to be taught how to do it safely and properly and artistically explore what that means was, yeah, it meant a great deal. Yeah, all these new avenues and all these new interests from dance kind of exploded that I just, yeah, had no idea about.

Claire French 08:53

Yeah, that's wonderful. I mean, for me, it was a similar thing around a similar age, I moved from the north of England to the south to London, around 13 and shifted, and then again, at 18, I discovered contemporary dance, maybe, as we know it today, but you know, kind of the beginnings of that and that, like you, it kind of expanded my world and my horizons. And the same thing as the choreographing small pieces on yourself. I mean, I was even I was kind of improvising and not realizing I was choreographing or composing that didn't even, I was choreographing, before I knew the word existed. So, it sounds quite a, you know, in some ways, kind of a little bit similar in that kind of, like compulsion to have movement and kind of creation in your life, in that form. That's great. So where are we got to oh, and could I ask you, was there any kind of cultural dancing in your or was it was it more what much more of a studio based, you know, kind of classical training that you received? Did you have any kind of cultural folk dancing, social dancing background with your family or a community as well?

Alina Sotnikova 10:07

Yeah, so there's both certainly the classical ballet was very, that was kind of the main part and the main focus of what I did, this is when I was growing up in Crimea, but there's also, you know, a very regular commitment to like folk dance Russian and Ukrainian folk dance. And yeah, that was a big part of just, I think growing up, you know, those are kind of a staple for a lot of people around me and myself to do.

Claire French 10:34

Yeah, yeah. And the sense of community, you know, there's the kind of immediate, like, sense of community but also within a, quite a rigorous and, and kind of technical practice, I've always noticed that I think that's extraordinary. Like, it's, it's quite amazing, the energy and the rigor and the discipline that is there with the joy, they're together, you know, in that kind of practice, I think is amazing. Okay, so we were, so after Victoria Dance Theatre, and that kind of work and you've already given the listeners a hint to your clinical psychology background, could we maybe talk a little bit about that overlap of that for you? I think that's a nice segue.

Alina Sotnikova 11:18

Sure, yeah. You know, basically, you know, graduate work for me in clinical psych, that's a process that takes a while, I was pursuing my Masters of Science and a PhD and then a postdoc fellowship immediately after that. So, it took quite a few years, and throughout all those years, because I started dancing again, at the very beginning of that process. You know, my graduate work continued, and the dancing just kept ramping up, up, up. And then that was like, a six, seven year long process right. So I was, and you know, ultimately, my passion about dance shaped my career choices in psychology, because for even before I returned to dance, so for about 10-11 years, including my, when I was studying my undergraduate degree in psychology and philosophy, I had been really gearing towards working in academia and being a researcher, and a clinician. And, yeah, it was, you know, I was in the process of doing all those interviews, and yeah, considering the professorship opportunities, and there was some really exciting ones. And, yeah, that was the year I changed my mind. And, you know, I realized, I, you know, would not be able to do both, right, as far as a commitment to a tenure track in clinical psychology, I would not be able to really carve out much time for dance in the way I wanted to. And with dance coming back to it's so late, having, knowing how much I missed it, it felt like, you know, time is now.

Claire French 12:56

Yeah.

Alina Sotnikova 12:57

And I really didn't want to put her off any longer. Whereas the more intellectual pursuit of research and academic work felt like, it could wait, and I could return later, because I also loved it quite a lot and was very passionate about it. But I felt already dance had been put on the backburner for so long. I couldn't wait anymore. So, I changed my plan drastically.

Claire French 13:22

Yeah.

Alina Sotnikova 13:24

I went into private practice, instead, still with a lot of passion, interest in teaching and in research and, you know, did a little bit of teaching at different universities part time basis, but mostly focusing on private practice. And, you know, I'm still keeping in the back of my mind, usually, what can be some ways later to reengage in a more part time way, not in a way that a full professorship requires, was some kind of psychological research process. And that even being sort of like a dream, as you know,

having Voirelia as a platform for dance, psychology and philosophy that perhaps in the future, it could have some kind of a department or arm that's all about scholarly, scientific, artistic collaboration?

Claire French 14:08

Gosh, if only yeah,

Alina Sotnikova 14:10

I know. Right. But you know, right away, I knew like what it has to be sort of one, one or the other.

Claire French 14:15

Right? Yeah. But what's so wonderful is that you do you do have both. And what as we'll get to, with the Voirelia, and the hub, and all of your intentions and visions for it, but also what you are able, what you are doing with it. I think in essence, or however long that is able to keep going and as long as it's evolving, and all of these things are the way you want it to do. You're building content anyway, that you could refer to, like you say, but you could refer to in as your other career and use, you know, reflect back on Voirelia as a big part of anyway, I see all of that as I know you do. So, let's introduce the listeners a little bit to Voirelia and then maybe come back to the balancing of the two careers. Because I think you've already talked about Voirelia being what you wanted to shift your focus. And I think that led to Voirelia in a really interesting way. And now Voirelia is, I feel like evolving all of the time. And so maybe you could share a little bit about what Voirelia is and what the hub does. And the kind of work you've made so far, and you're making now.

Alina Sotnikova 15:33

Sure, yeah, we're, you know, year, just entering I guess year six of, we were founded in 2017. And yeah, you're right, that is constantly changing and evolving, as we're still a small and young company. So basically, the way that things work now is that we're a small, nonprofit hub for creation of contemporary dance, that's our focus. And the way that we create, a high priority for us is interdisciplinary collaboration, right. Of course, having these pillars of dance, psychology and philosophy, are really key, really important to our little hub. It says something about, you know, what we're interested in, what we're interested in making dance about, why we're interested in dancing, why it's a hub, and not just a solo practice for me, right, because for some people, that is what they seek, and that is what their dream is. And that's great. For me, the big part of the dream is the together part, right? Kind of like I experienced in that small company that I started with, from like a very, as an adult, right. It was about, you know, creating things together, it was about supporting each other, it's about doing things as a group bringing, bringing unexpected perspectives. So that's really what it's about at this point is that bringing things, bringing in people, artists, disciplines, ideas that I'm not used to working with, that my collaborators aren't used to working with. So, we usually have some new collaborators, at least every year. And some collaborators also stay for a while too, because that part of innovation and unexpected creativity that I can't get from myself is really important to me to work with as part of a group. So most recently we've been working on, you know, really prioritizing, the process of creating dance with a lot of attention to the process itself, a lot of attention to how we do it and why we do it. You know, in the beginning, there's I think, especially as a small beginning company, we felt, I often felt more rushed to make something very quick, and didn't have enough of an opportunity or resources to really take the amount of time, I would wish to. And as we're growing, and that's changed,

I'm enjoying that opportunity more, to really take the time to research things together, things that I'm working on, and projects I'm working on with collaborators. And yeah, we have a few exciting plans in the works for when you think there always are, there's always something in the pipeline, some new idea that I'm very excited about.

Claire French 18:23

Yeah. And I think that there's something about the kind of *raison d'être*, or the kind of the visioning behind the hub is also to do with healthy practice, which speaks a little bit maybe to the idea of not rushing process, where sometimes the deadline or the presentation date takes over any other kind of responsibility or accountability we might have for each other or for our kind of conduct or behavior. So, I think that the spending time taking time, to not only enjoy being together, but find out, discover what it is to be together is part of what your work is, isn't it? I think that I mean, I've only been in a couple of studios, kind of sessions, where I've seen the process. And I've seen some of your showings, and I've had the pleasure of being in one of your workshops that you've led. And I've got that sense across those that there's a care of each other. And there is a patience with material and with the creative process of each person, as if there's a sense of it, that being not the same for each person in the room at the same time. I think that's an important aspect. I feel it's an important aspect of how you work and of the hub itself and I wonder if that somewhat comes from your psychology background and your knowledge and the context that you are aware that you are working in because of the clinical psychology background. Do you see them as crossing over? I mean, it's, you're the same person. So, it's hard to, you know, say that you can compartmentalize them that far, but also there is, you know, do you make a choice to let them flow? Or do you really do have to experience, it's very different. If you wouldn't mind kind of entertaining me on answering that.

Alina Sotnikova 20:19

I'm happy to chat about it. Yeah, both the professional psychological training and idea is important, and also the personal experiences that I've had in dance. And in psychology, too, right? It is very important to me that anytime where I am facilitating a dance experience for others, or creation experience for others, or being part of sharing a performance, as you, as you were mentioning, just now, taking care of how, you know, we do it and how I do it, and why it's extremely important. So, everything around that is usually very intentional. You know, I just going back to that experience that inspired me to make dance more of a part of my life in the first place, where as an adult, as a young adult, you know, that's the kind of experience I hope to give to others and experience that encourages and invites and inspires, and not something that leaves people feeling worse than when they came in. They feel like there's enough stressful things in life. And I don't want to facilitate things that add to people's stress and problems, I want to spend time together connecting, creating, enjoying. And so as far as the psychologies involvement in that in my mind, I certainly as part of my training, and as part of my work, you know, I work with groups, I work with individuals, I work in a lot of different levels. There's a lot of skills that come about how to help set up a place that is really collaborative and creative and really is supportive, and encourages, and opens up for people to choose what they want to open up so that it's not forceful, either. And so those skills I use very intentionally and all the time. And they help me a lot. And in a way they create the kind of space for myself that I want, right?

Claire French 22:16

Yeah, I was just, I was going to ask that next. In terms of for you, there's, you know, please just keep going with what you were going to say, but there's something around that idea that while it's setting up for others in this facilitation of others, there is also taking care of you in that environment and meeting your needs in that environment. So as a creative person, do you also dance a lot inside the group? Do you find you have to give yourself room to move as well?

Alina Sotnikova 22:50

Yeah, it certainly started out that way, with Voirelia. And then just even coming to a point where I really decided to not just be you know, a dedicated hobbyist in dance, but I wanted to be a professional like crossing that line is because I was dancing right, very actively, a lot, a LOT, my goodness. And also yeah, just like absorbing all these different new dance ideas and methods and approaches, and definitely in the beginning, I was really involved in being in work myself, not just me in it, but participating in it, some solo work, some group work and dancing in it. Last two years, it hasn't been as possible, unfortunately, due to some injuries, and circumstances. So, I've continued all with my Voirelia journey, but focusing more on choreographing and directing and trying to see what I can do, physically speaking to return to dance more. But the physical experience is always very important. So usually, even if I'm not in sort of a performance mode for a few months, or even a year, as can happen sometimes to dance artists, I still need to find ways to move in our rehearsals and during teaching and during work because there needs to be at least some way that the movement goes through for me to understand what are the points of interest and focus. And there's usually lots of ways to do that. I don't need to be performing myself usually to find ways and that's the beautiful part about a lot of the contemporary dance ideas I enjoy so much, they leave a lot of room for how to dance, whether you're actively performing, choreographing, artistic directing all of the above or just some of those things.

Claire French 24:41

Yeah, the sense of embodied practice and understanding. Being able to feel like you can bring your whole body into something with the wisdom of the different parts of the body into events or into the dialogue, into the conversation. I think is, yeah, one thing that I've realized when I, it's almost like I don't know which one comes first, whether I miss it first, or something happens to me where I realize that I am not in the room in the same way that I enjoy being. And then I realize it's because I've lost touch with a certain aspect of my physicality. And then when I start to get it back, I realize how much I've missed it, or whether I had that realization that says, I miss this feeling. And I go out to get it, you know what I mean? Like, there's something it's almost like an instantaneous kind of like, state that happens in my body. It's like that pause space between an inhale and exhale, where it just kind of allows for the shift to happen. And I just go like, Aha, I can just see the other side or feel the other experience the with and the without kind of almost, that happens to me sometimes. Can we talk a little bit about you bring literature, you've mentioned interdisciplinary stimulus, maybe your sources are having an interdisciplinary interest, but you do genuinely bring in literature, your works tend to have concepts that are around quite themes, but they're also they're kind of they might be, like literary themes, but not always. You're kind of inhabiting worlds, I think, in how you set things up, would you like to talk a little bit about that interest in bringing literature or literary themes or huge universal themes into the studio?

Alina Sotnikova 26:31

Yeah, for sure. You know, I'm like a, very much a collaging person, you know, even before I did all this stuff. And while I was not dancing for a long time, I always loved collaging. In one way or another, whether we're speaking literally or, you know, metaphorically, just bringing different things together and creating something new, out of parts that maybe wouldn't normally go together and creating new colours and new pairings, new qualities and shapes. So, literature's like that, reading is like that. Certainly reading and literature for me has been a really strong focus and interest from when I was very, very young from when I was four, and has remained accessible even when dance wasn't. And so it's, I'm always thinking in that way, I'm always thinking about words, a lot of the time poetry actually, so not just prose. Prose is really important, too and certain books, I find a lot of inspiration from poetry, from books, from reading it, from writing, that's been a really consistent way through words of engaging with the world and understanding the world. And, you know, you could say that psychology basically, you know, without words, it really wouldn't be the same discipline at all, right? That's so important for making sense of experience. And making sense of the world. And literature is such a beautiful way of doing that, you know, holding up a mirror to a whole different worlds or even the opposite, you know, a story about a whole different country, time, history, and then suddenly, you see yourself reflected in it, you're like, wow, you know sometimes a poem can do that, you know, 10 words can do that, which I think is, is amazing. So, it's usually a big part of my creative processes, dance processes, often has started by finding a book, or a poem, or usually writing as part of the process as well, for me creatively. And even part of performance, usually, there's something text based or word based, that is involved. And sometimes it's more of a discussion after or sometimes that's poetry that's incorporated. Sometimes it's concepts or ideas that me or the dancers I'm working with are holding in mind that we're working with in the background, and it's helping us. Again, creating images with words. So yeah, I with literature, as with other disciplines with like visual art and photography and dance, like it's all one to me, kind of thing. And they all inform one another. And they, for me make the experience very full, and very rich. And if I'm sort of out of inspiration on the movement and choreography front, then I can always turn to literature, or poetry, visuals, photography, painting, there's other things and vice versa.

Claire French 29:26

Yeah. So, do you find that you might come up with something through the body in the studio that then lead to back to literature? Does it go, does it move that way for you too?

Alina Sotnikova 29:42

For sure. Sometimes, the movement is kind of is the first idea. It's a movement idea that comes out and then that generates a story or generates a concept, a verbal concept or a poem. And then from that poem that generates a visual image, and that then informs the further kind of creation process of the dance. So yeah, it's very inter-generative.

Claire French 30:08

Yeah. Do you ever does that inform the language, the literal verbal language that you speak in the studio, because I'm always fascinated by codes that come out in a process that the like, the kind of I call it kind of the languaging. And just for convenience, really, that emerges in a process, that becomes the kind of not necessarily secret code. It's not meant to be secret. But it becomes a kind of, in a vocabulary that the group is like a short hand for the group to be able to kind of reference something that happened in a previous rehearsal, or in a, you know, some or an idea that surfaced, and maybe it's

connected to its origins in the room, and it might have moved quite far away. But the words help people understand which part of the process you're referring to, that kind of thing. Does that happen a lot with you or?

Alina Sotnikova 30:59

For sure, because usually, we're also often working also on very, like abstract concepts. And we need ways to also make them like real and concrete and the movement, the dance, the moving images, the dance artists are creating. Yeah, and it's, you know, the movement itself can be very abstract. And the concepts itself, like the Renaissance concept that I've been working with for the last few years, that can be very kind of abstract and vague. So, we need a lot of things also to ground it. And then, you know, it's to the point sometimes it's really funny, we create our own little postmodern Renaissance poses and named them funny things like kneeling goose, which I think was something that somebody called one of the Leda paintings with the swan, but someone called it a goose. So now it's the kneeling goose, and it's hilarious. You know, I'm never gonna forget that.

Claire French 31:52

And every time they perform it, every time somebody performs it, that's what the, you know that there's that the two things really help right, the intention of that, like, how you hold the body in that pose every single time you do it with that name. Yeah.

Alina Sotnikova 32:05

Words can also add a lot of fun and enjoyment and silliness, right? Because, you know, some of the dance work physically and psychologically is really hard, really demanding, but it's always nice to bring some humor and be like, well, you know what, the kneeling goose it's really the knees, we need to, I think, think about it like this. And let's see. Yeah, how we squished the knees together, but let's just be aware of not injuring ourselves. And but it's a bit of a weird twist and pose. So, you know, let's channel the feeling of the kneeling goose.

Claire French 32:38

Yeah, excellent. And then this yeah, that craft of like, always being able to find kneeling goose when you go to do it, as opposed to like you say, like landing in kneeling goose, you know, you kind of, there's a part of that journey in the performances like to actually become kneeling goose. And so yeah, that's the yeah, that makes that that whole process, really fun. So, I'm interested in how you balance, well, two things. Let's go to the time management part a little bit, because we're talking about process and things and how you balance the two careers a little bit independently, like you personally. And then we'll maybe we'll come back Voirelia and talk a little more about who the dancers are, how you choose them, how that whole process of Voirelia works. But first, let's come back to you Alina, and your time management, amazing skills, they must be amazing skills right now. Is it like a night and day situation? Do you find yourself, is that how you have to manage the two careers? How does it work for you? There has to be a mind shift in terms of the kind of work, the position you find yourself in, in a community and then as a psychologist with the you know, the expertise and the, there's a little bit of a different relationship, I think to the people that you are engaging with, across those two different careers a little bit. And, so that that's a shift, which you probably find very easy and might be almost impossible for you to articulate right now. There's that part and then there's being able to fit in both

careers, in the way that you with your, dedicate yourself to both careers, that requires quite a bit of balance, I would think and preparation on your part, and mindset to be in one and then be in the other. I'm thinking maybe in this instance, like, you know, obviously, I have good time management skills is one answer, but you're in a position, I think to also talk about how you found a way to do it. And I think that can be really insightful. Obviously, it's because you want to do both. That's a huge part. The will to want to do both, the passion you have for both, is I would say very important, but there has to be motivation and discipline, and how do you fit it all in?

Alina Sotnikova 35:05

Yeah, yeah, complex good, complex questions I'll see, let me know if there's part of it, I'm not quite covering, please remind me, but I'll do my best. You know, I was not very driven, or particularly skilled in time management, or motivated or passionate about anything for most of my early life. It took a long time, to experience environments and people and circumstances that actually inspired me and motivated me to do anything at all. You know, when I was in grade 10, I thought I was going to drop out of high school, I didn't even think about going to university, it wasn't, it wasn't a seamless transition. And then yeah, even just what it took, you know, to, of course, the commitment to graduate school and that took a lot. And while I found a way to dance, you know, while I was going to graduate school, for me would not have been possible to do what I'm doing now with Voirelia and go to school, because that was a big commitment. Or, you know, I wish I had taken the opportunities to dance more when I initially moved to Canada after but it's, again, wasn't possible. So, I spent so long, I have so many very vivid memories of not having things I really want not, or not wanting them, but just not being able to do it. Not feeling particularly inspired and motivated. But just working hard to just kind of get along and get through. The drive comes from that I just can't do that anymore. I just can't do that anymore. And both careers are very, very important. And this is where that drive helps to use the time management skills I learned. You know, but if it wasn't so important, if it didn't feel so urgent, if I didn't feel like I had missed out on so much, I wouldn't be doing it. Perhaps, or perhaps I'd be doing it in a different way. The time management is easier answer for sure. Because that was you know, in graduate school was very helpful to learn how to time manage a lot of very different commitments with clinical work, research, classes, work life balance. So, you know, that was a big time management, learning experience. And then working in the arts as a way as well, just by just starting and working in it and learning how things work and how, of course, things are different as far as you know, my role and how timelines work and all of that, and also learning how to, yeah, just how to work with different industry, different discipline altogether, just through experience and practice. But the thing that helps me the most is, you know, the drive, that I have, the importance of these things, and reminding myself why they're important. And then yeah, being quite strict with the efficiency of my time, and finding, usually continuing to find ways to optimize how I use my time, and what is most important, and constantly making decisions about priorities, right? So I'm lucky enough to work with in both sides of the dance and the psychology community, you know, with people and with organizations who are very, who understand these two very important commitments that I have, and who are able to support and help, because I usually have to, you know, sometimes Voirelia gets really busy and other times my psychology work gets really busy. And I have to kind of stagger them sometimes and yeah, I'm very grateful to work with people who understand that so that we have a good working relationship together.

Claire French 38:41

Yeah, that's great. And I'm thinking as well, because from for me a lot, the time juggling a lot of things. There's definitely a sense of context. And the environment itself supporting that shift, it makes the shift a lot quicker, and also, and supports the work. So, if I feel like I'm walking into an environment, or I'm shifting from one environment that felt supportive to another that feels supportive, it's a lot easier. It's a lot easier to make the shift, it just literally feels like a slide to the next, you know, the next place. But I am very interested in the way you talk about your younger self, it surprises me, because I haven't known you for very long, but in the time that I've known you, I see you as one of the most ambitious and driven people I've met. And so, it surprises me to hear that you didn't have that when you were younger. And I just wonder, was that who you were? Or was it circumstance? Like when you were younger was it a personality, or was it was it your environment?

Alina Sotnikova 39:52

Yeah, I don't think it was so much a personality thing. It was about availability of experiences for me personally of course right? Other people I can't speak for, you know, because things changed very quickly, when certain right environments came along. I remember things changing very quickly from between grade 10 and grade 11. Whereas grade 10 I was kind of lost in a in a big school and not particularly had any teachers who seem to care or be interested in students' individual kind of progress and big classes, big school and lots to deal with and a lot of people were also very like, well to do in that school, and they had a, you know, fairly steady lives and didn't really need a lot of attention, I was kind of still trying to learn English properly, and trying to figure out my culture shock and how to like, what this country is sort of like about and how to live in it. And yeah, I actually switched to a different school, that was a more, a school in Toronto, that was more considered an inner city school and was considered to have actually more like socio economic challenges that the students would be dealing with. But I went to that school because my friend went to that school. And the teachers there to be honest, seem to care a lot more. Yeah. And I had two particular wonderful teachers, like, who changed my life, completely. And, yeah, they pointed out strengths I didn't know I had. They were encouraging and kind in a way that I have not experienced before. And yeah, they just kind of opened up a whole possibility of life that just was closed. And friends as well, in that school, new friends I made who were from all kinds of different, very different cultures and backgrounds than I and I just learned so much from them. And they were, we were so different. We came from such different places, but they were just so kind and you know, it's yeah, that environment was quite something.

Claire French 42:14

I'm so happy you found that. I'm sorry, because it feels it feels very much like you say that that's inspired you, you know, for how to be and how to and what to have in your life, you know, and what to share with others.

Alina Sotnikova 42:31

Yeah, there's been lots of people since as well. But you know, I just remember that as kind of a turning point, the big, big change and a turning point. And after that, everything changed. And I don't think I would be here having my career in psychology or in dance, if that pivotal experience hadn't happened, I don't think I would have had any confidence to try these things that were, just seemed way too ambitious for me at the time.

Claire French 42:58

Right? And careers, right, pursue careers as opposed to have a job or as opposed to, you know, yeah, do something others were doing around you. When did you come to Vancouver?

Alina Sotnikova 43:11

2016, moved to Vancouver.

Claire French 43:15

And did you move for the clinical psychology side of things? Did you move here for that reason? Did you just move were you just drawn here?

Alina Sotnikova 43:23

No, not really. Yeah, I lived in Victoria for seven years. That's where I did my graduate studies. And then for my residency and postdoctoral fellowship, that was back in Ontario in London for just under two years, I really missed the West Coast. I just want to come back to the west coast. So yeah, it was all part of considerations where I want to work and live and there's options, you know, Island and Vancouver and in the States on the Pacific Northwest. So, I will know I wanted to be somewhere here. Psychology wise, there's a lot of different opportunities. There's a lot of different places I could work, a lot of options that were really fun and exciting. It was more about deciding where also I could, where I could have some kind of thriving connection to dance. And certainly Vancouver offered a lot. And I probably chose it more for dance because there's lots of other wonderful, you know, towns and cities on the west coast where I could live and do my psychology work, but then they don't have as much going on in the dance department. And I'm really happy with that choice. You know, living in Vancouver isn't easy.

Claire French 44:36

That's, yeah, that's amazing. That's wonderful. You're really making that work. So, let's come back a little bit to Voirelia and the people you work with maybe how you choose them, do they choose you or do you choose them? Like how does, how does this, it feels like there's an ebb and flow and like you've already implied it changes. But what would you say so far has been, you know, where's the choosing of artists coming from and who you're working with now?

Alina Sotnikova 45:04

Yeah, I think usually it comes from especially for people who are enduring part of Voirelia, Jennifer Aoki, Voirelia's artistic core director, right, our board members, Margarida Macieira, Racheal Prince, people who are also very active artists and working in the dance and artistic community. Those kinds of enduring relationships usually come from shared values and shared vision, and passion. And we usually have gotten to know each other some way through the dance world or community. And then, as we, you know, learned about our shared goals and values. And a lot of it is about, you know, these things we're talking about today. Like really caring about being creative, feeling very passionate about it, and also really caring about how we do it and finding ways to do it, that we lift each other up and lift others up and encourage each other. Yeah. And then artistically, with more, you know, dance artists who might be part of a certain project or certain short term or long-term project, you know, usually the value alignment is really important. And then artistic interest alignment, right, we have to share some

interest in the same things right, I went into this deep Renaissance fascination for a while, so you know, whoever I was working with, it has to be interesting to them somehow. And for some people, it's not, which is great right? So usually, yeah, it's about sharing the vision of what we want to explore creatively, and how we want to do it. Yeah. So, we have a lot of different dance artists that we're working now for a few ongoing projects. And it's, it's really lovely to see some dance artists who returned from previous projects that we had going on last year, and some new ones coming in as well. And I'm excited to see what their perspective and experiences will contribute.

Claire French 47:02

Yeah, yeah, that's wonderful. So as a choreographer, do you find that you, I know, it depends on how the project is going, what and how many ideas you're working with and things but what would you say the differences between directing and choreographing, for you, in the context Voirelia work? Like, are you have the mindset that choreographing is coming up with the material, like being part of that process, and directing is choreographer- director like, you know, kind of hyphenated almost in in this context? So, you find yourself flowing between the two? Do you have a clear distinction in your mind and as a hub about what choreographing is and what directing is?

Alina Sotnikova 47:47

Yeah, you know, within Voirelia work, I'm always both, right, in other people's works and projects I've helped with just as a choreographer, or perhaps just as a director, or co director, but in Voirelia, usually, my role has both. So, director I see as a broader role with more responsibility, more responsibility towards the, you know, artistic vision of Voirelia as a hub, and the artists who are part of it and that shared vision we're trying to create. And, yeah, it's, you know, they're related. They overlap, of course, but I feel also as a director, it's a lot of the way that I think about it is the responsibilities from the very first step till the very last step of the whole process where a choreographer coming in and out of different projects might not have that responsibility. Yeah, I see the director role for me as something I'm responsible from the very beginning till the end, you have making sure everything and everyone is taken care of. And that includes division. Yeah. And so sometimes director might mean, actually get someone else to help with choreographic things because there are other vision related things or process related things that need my attention, and our priority.

Claire French 49:03

I think that's a really good articulation of the, and clarification. Just in general anyway, of the two roles because of regardless of whether you're bringing in a choreographer or bringing in a director, there's a sense of, there's a clear delineation, in terms of kind of priorities, but also there is a sense of a temporal relationship to the material and to the project, you know, that they're a little different and division, and to how many layers of vision there are in any one project, which I think is really beautiful. I think that's really great. So Discover Dance!, I'm talking to you now, because you are programmed through the Dance Centre for Discover Dance! at the end of February. I believe it's February, we have a 29th that's yeah, it's your day! And so that will be coming up. This podcast will have come out just before that so, listeners, please do come and see Voirelia, on the Discover Dance! Thursday, February 29. I believe it's a noon show. And this is where you will see some of the Renaissance work, I believe, is that is that correct? Will this be a work in progress showing? Will this be? Do you know, at this point what you will be presenting that? Would you like to talk about that?

Alina Sotnikova 50:27

Yeah, it's called *De/Formed Revival*. And no, it's a finished work. We premiered it in 2023, the Shadbolt Center for the Arts. And it's a work for, a full-length work for three dancers, exploring this idea of Renaissance as a more of a psychological concept and experience. So we're really exploring this idea of rebirth, and revival and reinvention and what that means, you know, and really what I found myself my interest kept coming back to as when we developed this work, and created it together is just this interest in what is it like to try to really change and how difficult that can be and the process of that, which in the piece, we use the visual metaphor, as far as people, what they would see on stage of sculptures coming to life, sculptures being molded, I had a lot of interest in this idea of being molded and being shaped. And then how then, you know, when we take that from the concrete, from the movement, and the sculpture like and painting influences that is very fun for us to play with, how we take that into the psychological realm of how do we try to change and evolve and grow after other people and other events have shaped us. Even in ways we perhaps didn't wish to be shaped or molded. So, it's, yeah, it's a ready work. It's a recent work that I'm excited to make some fun changes to dermatologically since the premiere, and we'll be working on that this winter, and then presenting, it will be a bit of a new version of it, but something that we've already spent quite a lot of time researching and developing.

Claire French 52:22

Seems quite apt that you would do that rebirth thing rebirthing the work itself right in front of our eyes. Yeah, that's so great. So great. And then, you've already mentioned that you have a few projects that you're working on with Voirelia, you and I are working on something researchish, we're kind of in a group for something else, which is exciting. So, I know you have a lot on the go. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about that may be coming up or what you're hoping for Voirelia in the future?

Alina Sotnikova 52:58

Yeah, yeah. So, there's two projects we have planned for development for this year that I think I'm hoping will also become some long term projects, not just a one off development opportunity, but that we can really explore and research and create something that's new for us and our group. One of them is called *Future Renaissance*. And it basically picks up where *De/Formed Revival* leaves off. And as it might sound, it takes us into the future 500 years from now, with lighting designer and five dancers who will be working with and it's comes from, yeah, taking this Renaissance concept to reflect a little bit on science fiction and futurism, as a way to also reflect on the now, reflect on how the choices we're making now what kind of future it's building, and what really it might mean to be human and to have even the idea of human psychology and emotions and relationships that are all changing very quickly. I feel in front of my eyes, and I'm like, whoa, oh my gosh, so many things are happening so fast. And some are scary. Whoa, quite an opportunity to dive into that with more cinematic and like literature influences from like *Dune* and *Blade Runner* and different sci fi genres and have a lot of fun with that. And another very different project that Jen Aoki and I plan to be co directing with a different group of six dancers is called *Zen Punk Catastrophe*. And it's just as messy as it sounds, but wonderfully so. We're more looking at climate crisis and eco psychology and how we respond and enact in relation to this, with inspirations from Zen philosophy and Punk Ikebana that's, that's what's in the works for the next little while.

Claire French 54:56

Excellent it feels like you have, you know, kind of the kind of retro and future and present and activation like really happening. So, yeah, there's so much there. I mean, that's so exciting. So innovative and, and hub work. It really feels like hub work, you know, it kind of feels like it matches the vision. This is stuff you need to be like working out with people in the studio. This is like a, these are large vision ideas. Well, thank you so much for sharing all of that. Obviously, people can go to your website for voirelia.com. Is that correct? Yeah, yeah, you can go there for postings, obviously, The Dance Centre will be posting things about the event coming up. So please do come and check out Voirelia and visit the website. And I'm sure there'll be invitations to participate in Alina's workshops and things as well. And yeah, we're very much looking forward to seeing the show. And I really look forward to seeing what you do next as well, because I think working on those two projects, I don't know if you'll be able to work on them at the same time, or how that will go. But I also imagine that they will kind of inform each other as well for Voirelia as a hub. And I think that's, it's so rich. So, yeah. Wonderful. Thank you so much for your time, Alina.

Alina Sotnikova 56:23

Thank you so much Claire has been wonderful to talk to you. And yes, all your stuff is all those updates, and you know, teaching and classes and auditions. They're all always on our website, and our Instagram as well. Our Instagram is great for kind of the live pulse and a lot of fun behind the scenes stuff that sometimes doesn't make it to the website. But yeah, they're both great. And just the I really appreciate our conversation today. Thank you so much for that. It was really nice for me to touch on all those topics with you. And thank you for the opportunity to talk about my experience here.

Claire French 56:57

No, my pleasure. I loved hearing all about it. So, thank you, and I'll see you very soon. Bye.

Alina Sotnikova 57:04

Bye Claire.

Claire French 57:10

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 [dancecentre](https://twitter.com/dancecentre) and Instagram at [the dancecentrebc](https://www.instagram.com/dancecentrebc). And if you'd like to support our work, please consider making a donation. Just go to our website at dancentre.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 through dance. Until next time.