

The Dance Centre Podcast Episode 19:

Ralph Escamillan

SPEAKERS

Claire French, Ralph Escamillan

Claire French

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

Claire French

Ralph Escamillan is a queer, Canadian Philippine performance artist, choreographer, teacher and community leader, based on the unseeded territories of the Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh nations also known as Vancouver BC. Starting at age 14, Ralph trained first in breakdancing, then explored a multitude of other street dance styles, such as hip hop, popping, house, waacking and locking. His passion for dance expanded to include training in vogue, ballroom, ballet, modern, jazz, and he graduated from Modus Operandi's contemporary training program in 2015. Ralph has worked and toured with Vancouver companies such as Company 605, Company Erasga Dance, Kinesis dance somatheatro, Out Innerspace theatre, Wen Wei dance and Mascall Dance, he apprenticed with Kidd Pivot in 2014, and was a guest dancer with Ballet BC in 2020. In the commercial industry he's worked with choreographers including AJ Aakomon, Luther Brown, Kenny Ortega, Tucker Barkley and Mandy Moore, as well as artists Victoria Duffield and Zendaya Coleman, and was a guest dancer for Janet Jackson's unbreakable tour in 2015. In the ballroom scene since 2014, Ralph is known as 'Posh' Gvasalia Basquiat, opening his own Kiki house of Gvasalia in 2018. And since 2021 is in the Mainstream House of Basquiat. The founder and Artistic and Executive Director of the nonprofit organization VanVogueJam, Ralph shares his passion for Vogue and ballroom culture. At his weekly pay what you can classes and vogue balls, acting as a beacon for the queer dance culture in Western Canada. His company FakeKnot creates inclusive performance works and focuses on a highly collaborative process that strives to understand the complexities of identity and culture through costume sound technology and the body. As an artistic director Ralph gathers his breadth of experience as a dancer from street, commercial and contemporary dance to create a truly unique choreographic perspective, while also questioning his identity as a queer person of color.

Claire French

I am joined by Ralph Escamillan, very excited to talk with Ralph about his remarkable career activity initiative, motivation, just what he manages to do with dance. I mean, I don't think he ever stops.

Anyway. So, we are talking, we're talking about so many things. But we're going to start by I would love for Ralph to kind of tell our listeners what he thinks his career path is, what the milestones are maybe in his training at this point in his career. And because we'll talk about so many different styles of dance, I think in this and we'll have so many different things to talk about. Ralph, thank you so much for being here first, and would you please take it away in terms of your training? We know a little bit but please just fill us in a little bit more.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah, my name is Ralph Escamillan. And I currently am using he him pronouns. I'm on unseeded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh, I grew up in Vancouver since age five. Dance, I feel like it's specifically my career. I feel like when I hear that question, it makes me think about the different rooms I'm in. I'm learning a lot of the work that I'm interested in, or the work that I do, is all about space. It's about building spaces between people, whether that's a studio, whether that's Robson square, whether that's like a beach in the Philippines or something. I feel like a lot of the work I'm interested in has become about space building and dance, being one of the now many other vehicles for that, that creation, that type of creation. I think my career is largely informed by my need to continue learning continue exploring, and I guess especially after from a very early age, actually, I guess like this want to like understand myself a little more about who I am. Whether that is like from a biological level an ancestral level, or regional, national, global level. And I think it's that multiplicities of self which is like I feel like a tagline I use a lot because I think they're is, there are many versions of me, as I'm sure we'll be talking about today, that keeps me present. I think it ironically, anchors me into myself with the multiplicity.

Claire French

So, what I love about that is that I feel like there's something about your versatility in dance is also another thing that allows you to be present as a dancer. Because you have so many things that you can draw on that you're drawing upon, and that you are perhaps kind of influenced by the space in which you're in to access some of those things. And you can access so many. So, there's something about that kind of being interested in the multiplicity and, and versatility that actually also continues to kind of keep you present in your dancing, right, you can just say, you can keep surprising yourself and other people. So yeah, I think that's really interesting. Really interesting. Would you say that the, this also extends into how you've learned, like, so you say this, the different rooms that you're in. And I think that's a really nice way of explaining that there is a different atmosphere set up with different styles in because the way in which you learn those different styles, how, how the social, I mean, I'm obsessed with this part, but how the social engagement is in a room with the different styles is a big part of how that space is created. And then how you feel, walking into those spaces to feel like you either belong or have to find your mark or have to mark your territory even so I feel like you've had that from day one. And that you have a really lovely kind of invitational kind of approach to contemporary, because of you coming from street dance and all those different kinds of things. Would you agree or?

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah, I would, I kind of want to go back to what you're just saying about access, and I feel like access has been a big part of my ability to keep learning and continue learning and growing and I want to point out like my multiplicity is based on a privilege that I've been able to earn I say earn because I did not

grew up with a lot of privilege. From a monetary way. I think I've been very privileged in other ways through culture through with my mom to my her amazing support, but from a monetary value, like it was it was a pretty hard upbringing, I wouldn't say harder than anyone else's or, or less hard than someone but I feel like there was struggle and I think that that type of struggle allowed me for when I did have opportunities that felt huge, that felt monumental to really appreciate and seek in and then continue seeking them like after there was almost like as this this need to continue exploring. Okay, cool. I performed in this place. And then so what's next after that? What is the next and I think for some for some folks as well the next is I always there's always a fear to it connected to it. But yeah, I think there's an invitation with the next there's an invitation and a lot of too growing up as a single child as well. And this is just like therapy stuff but I think not and also not growing up with family. I feel there's a big space left in the gap of my body, physically or mentally were right had so much open or available storage to learn. That's been a way I've been thinking about it. I'm like, oh, like I may have lost in some ways, unfortunately like a connection to family which I think now as I'm getting older I'm able to take more lead on learning more about and trying to build as mend and build those relationships again. But I think why haven't been why haven't stopped myself as because there has been nothing that has stopped me yet to continue on. I feel Yeah, the different rooms I've been in I think I talked about my first like experience like really training in dancing like technically and I think I talked about my breakdancing training I did with Jared Kaizen, who is a teacher at Harbour Dance Centre. He's part of a very well-known breakdancing crew called an hour never crew. I remember the first day after I took the class, my body was just so sore. And I just remember that feeling that change in my body that I was like, oh, wow, I have an ability to change myself from this physical place. And I think that was so surreal to me because I think prior to that, I was already interested in like art making and crafting and building sculptures and I was very hand handy in school and I think I already had an affinity for art making but to be able to physicalize it, to feel it internally, to feel through the body is was a whole new world for me. And I continue to continue wanting to learn more and keep pushing my physical boundaries, not in a way where it's like I guess like unhealthily, like I feel it's very aware of like, my safety and my body. And that after a certain point, I'm like, this is the career I'm gonna be in so I need to start thinking smart, being strategic of how I use my body and in figuring out listening in the room ways that people take care of themselves in order to continue working. To add on to that, sorry I'm going into a tangent,

Ralph Escamillan

I think the understanding of how a room works, is also a tool that is, that comes from, like an immigrant experience, a way of having to fit in or systemically assimilate. And so I feel like seeing how my mom grew up, my mom worked and hearing her stories from work when I was younger, like, things that happened in the office, or, or maybe I'm learning maybe I maybe didn't hear but I felt her energy and how she had to maneuver those environments of predominantly like white professionals. Like big corporate, I think I was able to understand how to use the room to my advantage and how to position myself in a place where I am necessary. And in the other way around, a reminder that you are necessary, like you are needed, you are valued which I think has really helped me carry on. I think it's interesting, because I think in some dance rooms, I mean, I would say like ballet modern contemporary dance like Euro center, Eurocentrically centered artmaking, I think there is a hierarchical system. And I feel like coming from a street dance background first really gave me that anchoring of like your individual that you are one, you are your own, but you're also complicit in in the community that there is

a reciprocal relationship that one teaches the other one like there's the sharing. And I think because it didn't have such a finite,

Claire French

Yeah, yeah, it's great.

Claire French

Yeah, almost like titles, right, like, division of division of roles or something.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah, but also that didn't I think all since a lot, a lot of times even now, it's not financially driven, like people only maybe now that breakdancing is going into the Olympics, like there are careers for street dance. And like a lot of careers, I wouldn't say there aren't careers, but I think a lot of careers are informed by either battling or teaching in street dance. So, but the rest of that a lot of people just are just do it for the cultural context to be to gather to socialize, to like, listen to good music, to hang out to, like, appreciate each other's style. I know, there's like, there's a lot of ways I feel like that street dance mentality has really carried on to how I work now. And like, I think I've been paralleling a lot, that that kind of cultural context is similar to like, outside other cultural cultures outside of North America, where this idea of gathering, I would say, even reminiscent to, like indigenous cultures of like, how they gather.

Claire French

Yeah, absolutely. Which is absolutely, you know, Vancouver in its, you know, its origins, you know, this land, you know, that we both are on right now, yeah, I feel like the through this whole thing from when you started talking about your beginnings and your discoveries, there's a, there is a real sense of respecting identity, I think, and, and a real, like time to learn about something that you're giving to a room. And I think that can change a space. I think when you come in with the attitude of respecting identity, like everybody's identity, and that you are like you're giving time to learn about something when you're with people, I think that can change the room. Yeah, there's something really interesting there, I think, where there is a meeting of minds, and I mean, minds that are embodied minds, I mean, like bodies, when I say minds, which I know you're completely understand, that is working from that place, right, working with that, and working to care for that. So, I will say, I think there is something in all of the styles that you do, where there is that sense of respect of the form that you are doing, which is why you're so good. Regardless of what you're up to, but I wonder if we could just kind of flip around a little bit and, and talk about some of the choices you've made and which rooms you've chosen to be in. And partly this has to do with the fact that I know you're, you know, working in flamenco a little bit right now, and maybe a lot, but you're also you've also got your contemporary career. You have worked with Ballet BC and with Kidd Pivot, and, and those kinds of, and Wen Wei, and a whole bunch of different dance companies that cross over through the contemporary into other forms that aren't street dance, necessarily. And you're seeking out these opportunities. And I feel like that's a continuation. Having said that, I'm also interested in how you feel with your question around hierarchy. When you put yourself in a position of mentee, intern, apprentice, all of these things that there's a, I think the context you've provided us with a lot of context for you know, you want to learn, but what's that been like for you to be there as opposed to being in a group process or something or working, you know, in an

ensemble environment, but actually going out for this mentorship thing, this targeted, particular kind of approach. And can you talk a little bit about that?

Ralph Escamillan

I guess for the first thing, when it comes to the rooms I've chosen or maybe not maybe just been guided to being in, I didn't know that dance would be a career I could pursue for financial stability, like, when I was when I didn't think it was possible. I didn't know what there was, there's no really, there's not a true map of like a successful dancing career, I think. And I think there is a I guess there's, of course, the, there's gonna be two streams, I could think of it just like the ballet stream is like, you train when like, you're seven or 14, and then you do conservatory, whatever. And then you book work from that, or the other one is like, going through a university, institutional structure. I didn't follow those formats, but I get to still been able to have the opportunity to work in about the end the end goals of those of those training regimens. So, I think it is because of the fluidity of my training. And, and, and also akin to like, what is and what was wanted from dancers, I would say is now still is this eagerness that I think that made me quite, for lack of a better term sellable. And I say this with like, within awareness that like I know, the body is conversation, like right now dialogues of body and selling oneself, and I think I've come to terms with that, like, this is my job that the dancing body, like on a stage is, is a job, we have to work and may think there is a keen awareness from me that like we are selling ourselves in a way in order to work, the bodies being we're for paying for bodies to watch, and then being paid for that work. So, there is a reciprocal transactional relationship there. Yeah, that being said, but we can also watch bodies move outside, like we do much in another culture is dance is for everyone that then I think that's another conversation to have maybe later, but about the lack of dance and the everyday.

Claire French

Yeah, absolutely.

Ralph Escamillan

And then the need for it to be seen on the stage. I mean, North American context is very different. So maybe it's another day. But where I'm going with this, I guess is I feel the rooms that I've been chosen, I decided to, I decided that I would say decided to stay in and I pursued, were always in the interests of learning more, it was always an interest of, of growing myself.

Claire French

And I don't think there's anything wrong in also increasing your potential to be sold.

Ralph Escamillan

Yes, yes.

Claire French

You know, I mean, like your commercial viability, right, your economic viability, this is something that you have learned that you can do, and you you've built skills to be able to have many things that you offer to people in that regard, but it's not how you train, you know, you don't you know, yeah, you're not, you're not training for the, you're not training for the dollar, you know, you're training for something else. And it turns into, you know, possible, it's like an enterprise really, it's like,

Ralph Escamillan

And then I guess, I don't know if that answered that question fully the first one. But the second question about mentorship and leadership. It's so interesting, I don't know, I feel like I can speak first as wanting to seek mentorship, wanting to seek support, I feel it again, that falls in line with my interest of continued learning. And I also have a fear, I guess I also have like an impostor syndrome of knowing everything. Like being like, I know everything and because I've seen in rooms that I've worked in, or that has been, it's been the deficit of a project is, is the director thinking that they've know everything. So I think the invitation in the want to have a mentor and outside eye, a dramaturge in my work, comes from, I guess, a reminder to myself that I still can learn more, even within the work and vice versa, the mentors that I get to work with that I've been able to have the luck in the fortune to be in my in spaces with me, also learn from me, there's been a really strong, reciprocal relationship, that as long as they're supporting me, they're also learning a lot from how I'm working. So, then you have this conversation of intergenerational knowledge exchange that I think is so vital. And this is how many cultures exchange knowledge to each other that, you know, that it's that is foreign, in some context is in here in this part of the world is very surreal to me. But I also think that also comes from me being able to relinquish the fact that, I don't know. And I think maybe that's something that has also been a drive in my career is that being okay to be in the unknown. And being okay in it not, not having all the solutions, all the problems solved, but asking all the questions. And I think instead of asking it into the ether of the, your social media, in the whatever verse we're going to be in, to be able to speak with it with someone that has a lived experience. And I know that comes in a very weighted term, but that comes from an experience that has been of life. I think it was just a very different answer you get, I think, and I think.

Claire French

Yeah, it elicits the type of conversation that gets into, like, that gets deeper and quicker, I think, yeah. And also, it's like, you're faced with different perspectives immediately, like how we interpret each other's words is already, you know, a step towards opening up our inner perspective on what the reality is of our situation if you can do that authentically, then it's wonderful. But yeah, I know what you mean. There's a lot of the time when it when some people can't, are not open to another person's perspective, for whatever reason, for whatever reason, just to have, are thrown by somebody else's perspective, which yeah, so I think that I think that's beautiful. And I think there's something about knowing that you don't know, but still trying are still asking questions. And still having a goal, I think is really important. And I think our goals are, you know, kind of, often poopoo'd these days as, as something that, you know, is too ambitious in the world and too self-centered. But I think it's really important to you, they can change. But I think it's really important that you, you are aiming for something, because that can help you. It helps you learn, it just helps you learn.

Ralph Escamillan

I would say on the other side as mentor for others. Yeah, I'm in a place right now, where I'm being faced with having to mentor people. And I guess I'm learning how to balance my want for them, and also be able to listen to what is present. And it's very interesting. And yeah, I think the way I'm approaching my mentorships are about offerings. And I think for a lot of people, it's a lot, it's hard to just have offerings instead of the answers. And I think that being said, I think that's how I've been mentored. So, I think I'm mentoring the way I've been mentored is it here are offers to how an answer could be

found. And it's interesting, I think, the power dynamic of a mentor, because I think, depending on the context, some folks just want the answer. Yeah, they don't want to have to work, do the offering,

Claire French

No, exactly. And giving them more choices sometimes, like just devastating for them. But at the same time, it just leads to a different, potentially a different set of questions that get them closer to being able to take it on themselves. And you know, like, so I think that's a, I think that's interesting. Yeah, that's really good. So, let's talk a little bit about how you balance all of the paths. Because just to go over a little bit, I'd like to, for me, this gets to a little bit of the commercial world as well, but not necessarily financially. But just in terms of the fact that you do the VanVogueJam, you have your own house, I believe. And you maybe you could tell us a little bit about that, then you're also a model, and you're also so all of those commercial things. And anything that you think fits under the commercial category in your life, please share with us now.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah, I would say so, on the commercial end, I've been a union member of the UBCP/ACTRA union, I believe, since like 2017, or 18, I think. So, it's almost coming to about five years of being a union member. And I think that came out of just like, I have enough credits, and I guess I should just do it. And there was a great deal of the time to be a union member. And I'm like, I don't work a lot anyways, in film. And when I do, they're usually union jobs. So, I might as well just unionize. And it wasn't until more recently where I was able to actually reap the benefits of union because with union you also get health insurance. There's like health insurance packages based on how much money you make on the job, throughout the season or whatever. So, it was amazing recently to have like dental like almost like a lot of it covered and like wow, or like, things like that. So, it was kind of surreal because in in in like in like concert dance performance in theatre, dance world, that it's very seldom the case that you have an opportunity to have a health insurance. So that was a positive for sure. But I think being in the film and TV industry, I mean, that was a really, that was a goal for me when I was younger is like, I want to do film and TV. Like, that's something I'm interested in exploring. I grew up with my mom, like watching like live tours on TV and watching people on like shows like dance and stuff. And I think that was always like a dream I've had, I continue to have that dream still. So, I thought that was like, the just the right progression. But I think I didn't get my success in it until I think a few years after, like, after I was training. And I think what was interesting was, when I was auditioning before I started getting actual work. I was really, I was trying to be something they wanted. And they meaning like proverbial, like industry, Hollywood, TV, Hollywood media world. Yeah. And what's interesting is, I feel like once I started actually tapping into myself, I started getting more work, which is so surreal. And I think it also comes from this awareness of like, what you're selling, who you are, your quote, unquote, package. And my package came through just me genuinely being interested about it, being genuinely interested in myself, and like wanting to learn more about what I did. So, this is also a time of later on, like wanting queer artists, like, artists of colour, like, guest stars of colour, like all this stuff. So it kind of came in a good time. And I think financially was, those are one of the reasons why I stayed in film and TV. And maybe only one or two of the jobs I've ever done, I've ever felt like the most gratified by the room by how the relationship ended, who the choreographer, who the director was, and it's very rare. So, a lot of it is it is a great way of financially supporting yourself. But I think there's also because jobs are so scarce, it creates a type of person that I'm not really excited about being in my life, like I don't think I

want to feel like the necessity or that I'm waiting for the next job. And I wanted more control over my career in my life. And I feel like, ironically, I don't think the funding bodies any better. But I think there are ways to feel a sense of more of more agency in that world, because I would say both worlds still require money in order to create and make things happen. When money's involved, regardless if it's funded by the government, or funded by a Hollywood director, it's still money. So, I feel though with the funding system that are there, it feels like there are ways of accommodating people's lives and care that I think can't happen in the same way in the film world where it's like, so fast pace. I do love both rooms. And I love I feel like now jetting into a world now where I'm getting into choreographing musicals. And in the choreography world now, I wonder if there's going to be this transition back into film with that, but I also I don't like I like I'm patient, but there's a huge line for a successful commercial career. And I'd just rather focus my energy on things that are happening, that are present, that are that are feeding me as well. So, I, sorry, that was a tangent of stuff.

Claire French

No that's great. Let's go with the tangent for a second. Choreographing a musical? Can you talk a little bit about the musical that you are currently choreographing? And yeah, if we can see it when we can see it? Well, because we'll get to all of your contemporary stuff in a minute. So let's do this now.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah. Well, I just I just worked on my first equity musical with Corey Payette, who is a two spirited Indigenous director and songwriter, everything he kind of does everything. He's, he's pretty wild. But we premiered a show, a new show called Starwalker it at the York Theatre on commercial drive. Not New York. I want to preface Y, O, R, K, because people are like New York? and like, no, I did that in 2013.

Claire French

Yeah. We'll do it again. And you'll do it again.

Ralph Escamillan

Hopefully, we'll do it again. Let's see.

Claire French

Yeah, New York's not going anywhere.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah, I mean, it is an island of trash. But so, I did. We did it. We premiered the musical in February of 2023 of this year. And we are now in a phase of filming a film version, indie film version of it so. That process has been really interesting because I was a choreographer first but and then I was also I ended up being hired as an ensemble performer. So, I was I was singing for the first time on stage, which I haven't done in so long. I have a history of singing when I was like a kid. Of course, being Filipino we sing everything. And then yeah, then also I was understudy. So, I was playing three roles within that, that production, which is a lot to carry. And luckily, I had some support with my assistant Ross Wirtanen. But this film version has been interesting, like, because that's a world that I'm more aware of, I understand how, how your call sheet works, and I wouldn't send like, the rules and stuff. So it was, it was cool. I come from the theatre, of musical theatre, going into the camera. And I feel like, I'm so

happy, I feel comfortable, I'm able to transition so fluidly. Because I know for a lot of people like it is a different medium. But I think for me, all the rooms feel like there's like there's different things you have to like, put up in the walls in the rooms that you're in. But the room is a room like the room is a room is a room, you know, and be able to understand how my body, how I fit in the room has been a really interesting journey, I think I'm able to carry the same tools and just shift how I use the tool in a new way. Which makes it feel like I'm not having to take out a whole new toolbox. Yeah, the tool is a modular tool. That's been really exciting.

Claire French

Yeah. That's wonderful. So, when you say you're, you're comfortable? Are you comfortable behind the camera? Like, are you comfortable with shooting? And knowing how to frame and like and what to frame or do you storyboard?

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah, actually, it's, it's quite interesting. I feel because of the different ways of working I've experienced. I carry on some of the storyboarding in my life. Yeah. And my FakeKnot pieces, like I already use it. I love Excel, which I don't know how that happened. I want to say that came from my mom and her brain. But I love

Claire French

And detail. Yeah.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah, and also, I think it comes from also understanding how working especially these bigger projects, I feel like I work with a lot of people in my work. So having like, a document or something that can everyone can anchor to like have if they have, oh, what's happening in this work, I think has been really helpful for the processes that I'm that I'm interested in, in having. And I mean, working and seeing how Crystal works like Kidd Pivot, I'll seeing how like Wen Wei works, but also then seeing how a big Hollywood director works, and then has a single someone in like the Philippines weren't, like these different ways of working has really helped support and find, not that I have, like a formula of making my work at all, by any means. But I think it just gives me ways of approaching how to create based on what is needed at the moment, or...

Claire French

Yeah, and I feel like it's another way of archiving a project, right, because as you as all of the ways in which you are organizing, and coordinating the project, as you go, is also a form of archive of that process. And you know, the different people that you work with need access to different codes and different, you know, ways to understand their role in the work going forward. And to even understand the work in the way that they need to, to be able to collaborate with you. So, you know, we don't all need to have the same information, I think, in order to yeah, I think that's great.

Claire French

So, I'd love to just flip to the art making side. And, and there's so many other things we could talk about, as you've already mentioned, and I think a conversation around art making versus community or social

gathering, dancing, and everyday dancing, and all of those things, is a whole other thing. Because I think that I think sometimes the split is also unfortunate like that, you know, kind of needing to over define one versus the other is a little bit of an unfortunate thing we have in a society. But however, FakeKnot is your contemporary creation interdisciplinary company. And as you've alluded to already, you work with a lot of people and you don't just mean you work with 100 dancers, but it's not just that, it and it's not just working with models to stage a show. It's literally you're talking about sound, mixed media artists, like the costume people, that all have the and your in movement collaborators, there are so many things. And that seems to be what FakeKnot is about. You've built it for that reason. So, I'm just going to mention a little bit that you just had, you've had two I think two big pieces with FakeKnot you've had whip and now you have *Piña*. But yeah, would you like to talk a little bit about FakeKnot in general? And then maybe we'll move a little bit to eat you can talk about whip if you like but move a little bit to *Piña* because I think that brings us all the way back around to the things you talked about with your identity and ancestry and all of those wonderful things. In the meantime, the one other thing that we won't get the time to talk about today, but we'll come up in this FakeKnot thing and we'll save it for another time is your interest in other things like fashion and photography and all of those things. So please feel free to kind of segue, tangent off into that world as well and come back if that if you so desire, but it's really just to tell us about FakeKnot and you're in your way, present today. Tell us your FakeKnot story.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah, I feel FakeKnot is kind of an umbrella and an alias for all my interests in one really, this interest of fashion, clothing, textile and the body. And I think maybe it will become a, be a precursor to a fashion, life and another time. But I think right now, yeah, because my, because my tools and my learning has come about it has come from understanding the moving body. I think garments and clothing inherently become part of that, that, that moving. I feel that when I'm thinking of making and creating the first things I think about is like what it looks like, the visual. So, I think in one way I become a visual artists at that point. And then after think about the sound, what's the sound, so I'm thinking about wanting to work and who am I collaborating with. Because I think historically to working with other artists, when you're using copywritten music, it's actually a functional reason and having your own scores so that you don't have to worry about copywriting.

Claire French

Absolutely. It's true.

Ralph Escamillan

And then also offers an opportunity for another way of collaborating, which I think is really exciting. I think it also allows me to carve the space for the audience even more. So, the choreography is through the music as well. And then then we get into the lighting world. And then lighting is just another tip of architecture in the space and, and the media, I would also involve those two kind of mediums. And so I feel like I've said this in many an interview that like my work I'm interested in making is about building an architecture, it's building scaffolding, or building an environment for then the dance to be able to be built off of. So, I guess it's in a way it's a way of me, maybe showing how the systems that we live in form our bodies in a way I think, and each piece is a different environment, is a different system, is a different society maybe?

Claire French

Room

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah, a different room. A different room. Exactly. I would say HINKYPUNK was one of my first bigger pieces that I did.

Claire French

Sorry I forgot to mention that one.

Ralph Escamillan

It's okay.

Claire French

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. All over it. Exactly what you've just said that is the marker. Yeah, yeah, that's the birth of FakeKnot, isn't it? Yeah,

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah. So, like, for me that work was really anchored in iconography, I was really interested in exploring my relationship to ballroom culture, to voguing. And it kind of spiraled from there. And what I want to use in order to inform me spatially is a four-by-four cube, and there was no way of changing that. So, I kept the four-by-four cube from the conception of the work at the art gallery and views in like 2017, maybe until the premiere, and then until the tour. So, I kind of it was, it was quite a challenge to continue to bring your work by four-by-four cube. But it was interesting, because it really forced me to be through constraints challenge how I can create a work and entice an audience for an hour. We had a projection, of course, was generic panels that would come up and down. So, I was really experimenting with design, how do we incorporate a projection space that isn't in proscenium, you know, and having it freeform and this idea of also touring without the need for a huge rig or a big stage and excessive and finding new ways to present the work in other spaces that aren't a theatre. And that was really radical. And I think it still feels radical. And I remember a lot of presenters didn't like it, because they couldn't get out of the mindset of their theatres not being full or filled in a way that they're accustomed to. Yeah, so it's antagonizing for sure. Yeah. Yeah. And then,

Claire French

But it's a bring it it's a bringing together of two worlds, though, in my mind. Yeah, as well. And more than two worlds, but it brings that it brings Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's exciting now, if you were to do that, again, you probably are not interested in doing it now. But I wonder if more presenters will be on board. Anyway, let's move on to the next one.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah. And then the second mark, my most recent work I premiered in 2021 at the Mai was *whip* so that was a show where again, my constraints became about not seeing so we created, I helped design this like leather hood piece with Lincoln Heller of Five Left Leather, these like long bison tubes. He just had

leather and we want to do a fashion show project. And it didn't end up panning out. But we designed this costume ready. So, I'm like, let's make a piece out of it. And it was really cool. And I liked this idea of not being able to see like so if I can't see then how do I move in space? And I'm like, well sound because that's how you can move in space. Like that's, I've seen I was inspired by another show that I watched in Australia. I forgot the artists but it was I was there for Sydney Fest and the way they use sound was so exciting. And I'm like, it'd be so cool if we had that technology but in the show, so but again, with that one, instead of on a four by four cube, I expanded to a 20 by 20 square foot square. So these choices that I'm making for measuring and like deciding creative, like, try design choices really early on, has also come from like, a need for, like tech riders to come in, like, two years before the show is even premiered from like, the presenter, you know, it's like, do you know, like, how much like, I don't know, but if I guess if I make the space of a 20 by 20, cube, I know this is gonna fit in the theatre. And then I fit in any other, you know, if I create these like landmarks, literal landmarks in the space, then I know what I'm working with, instead of having to like shift in different theaters all the time. So as a function for it, like these are all functional and necessary, and also informed the work inherently through that.

Claire French

Yeah. And so a sellable function, or at least part of that same idea. Yeah.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah. And with that, too, I couldn't see. So then, since I couldn't see, how are you going to know where lights are where our spot where we have to stand in lighting? So, then I'm like, okay, well, I know, because of my wanting to keep learning, I knew that there was technology that could see bodies through either infrared or through like, depth, yeah, so we worked with Chimerik again, to create like a program that would actually follow the bodies in space. But it didn't. It wasn't always successful. But I think the few times that were there, it was exciting that it was there. And then we did set moments of light of course. Yeah. And then this new work is all solely, on *Piña*, which is the name of the main staple of the work and similar to the past works with *HINKYPUNK* and *whip*, *Piña*. Like I just keep I literally keep pulling that thread of what it was and why I like it. Why I'm interested in a lot of it came from the images of Philippine people that I would see in like the textbooks and they would wear barongs, which or terno sleeves, which are like Spanish, Philippine, the traditional garments. The Philippines is a place of many different cultures. So, there's not just one dress but this is the dress that was put out in the world outside of the Philippines

Claire French

Yea to identify the Philippines, I suppose. Yeah, yeah, Filipino.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah. And those dresses, those shirts were made are usually made out of piña. So, the pineapple fiber and I was like why pineapple fiber and then so I just kept asking the questions, and then I always kept looking for the answers. And the answers kept revealing more questions. So, pineapples weren't native to the Philippines, they came from a Spanish galleon trade so inherently as a Spanish colonial history through its transportation of the of the actual plant. So, it inherently, at least for me, connects to my cultural, historical background because my family comes from a predominantly from the part of the

Philippines that has, like the most like concentration of Spanish people. So, I'm like, okay, this pineapple is me. I'm the pineapple, pineapple is me, the piña is me.

Claire French

The piña is you.

Ralph Escamillan

The piña is me

Claire French

Yeah you're pulling the thread of the piña, of the pineapple. Yeah, I love that you said pulling the thread because of the fibrous element of it, but then also pineapple as object from in with Spanish, you know, colonial history now doing flamenco. Oh, like, it's all like, it's so kind of beautifully literal.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah. It's so literal!

Claire French

Yeah. And wonder, and then just like, so expansive, so open, you know, just like, yeah,

Ralph Escamillan

I mean, it's interesting, I've been talking to my friends about the literal, being literal. And I think the function of literal in this is also has been kind of hidden from, I would say, from like, the art that I grew up in learning, I think there was always this need of having to abstract art, abstract what we do, and abstraction was the value was the like, was like the way of was the salability. It was, it made it cool. And I feel like, for me, I'm learning at least for me, I think being on the nose, being literal, is really cool. In a way of that if I can get my mom in the audience because of it, now I can get my aunt, I can get some random person on the street that doesn't know anything to be able, because they can access it because I can play I'm playing a Police song in *whip* they already can instinctually have a connection to the work, which I think if we were having a conversation about not having an audience in the room anymore, in the theaters anymore, how do we get new audiences I don't think we're having, we don't have to build new audiences. We also have to just understand that like, who the audiences are and what the audiences want, and not necessarily have like, having to pander to them because I think there's an issue there's like a thing of like, oh, like, well, they have to just under, like they have to learn how to watch our shows. It's like but no, but we haven't given them access to so how do you give them access to understanding the work? If your work is made in a silo?

Claire French

And also, I think if you're if they don't feel invited, if there isn't something they feel invited to engage with, in some ways, they don't feel like it matters whether or not they come.

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah. So, I think I think with *Piña* what I'm taking with that sentiment is like, how do I give access to my work to this new work? Also, a fiber within even the Philippine, like, within Philippine people don't know

where it's from, like, people don't even know pineapples came from the Spanish, they didn't always even know where pineapples, like are, like made, like, I don't know, it's like, there's a whole like a, a block of information or knowledge that has not been transferred. So and the way I've been finding way to like, support this, like sharing of the knowledge is like, we had a I built a FakeKnot learning series, which became a series where for *Piña* specifically, but I think it'd be something we'll be carrying on in the company as a way of having like, these Vimeo meeting style like casual conversations that would be paralleling the work that FakeKnot is creating so that people have access to knowledge that I applied for grants to learn about, as well to for the public. So working with textile conservationists, the Philippine textile union, weavers like all these things, and even Philippine folk dance and how it relates to the Bronx, or like, the terno sleeve dress and how it shifted in the different time periods like, so we have a whole Vimeo that we've built like a playlist for just for *Piña* alone for people to have information if they if, again, this idea of offering if they want to know more before they go into the theater or after if they're more curious. And then the other thing about that, too, is then I'm interested in also like, because of the work that I'm making is so tangible, it's objects, is there a way we can showcase the fibre in a public setting. So, working with the Dance Centre, will be able to also have a small exhibit of *Piña* in the lobby later leading up to the premiere of the show, which is very exciting. So, people have the ability to actually see the fibre outside of the stage as well. So, it's another way another access point, another access point.

Claire French

Yeah, that's great, because that'll be two different locations. So, until then, in that case, so the installation, then will be at the Dance Centre, but the show will be at the SFU Goldcorp

Ralph Escamillan

Yeah. And I think anything that really also, I think that also really shows that collaboration part to me is that, yes, SFU has like the premiere of the show, but we also have the exhibit, which is also another adjacent part of the work as well. And again, this idea that, that the projects and the pieces I'm making with FakeKnot, I think the performance is just a vehicle for these access, or these ways of allowing others to have knowledge shared to them, I think. Which I think is really exciting. Because it's kind of inspired me again, because of like, wanting to make work because I think it's, it's hard because I would say for me and not to go into this having to go into conversation. But I feel like I also know historically that artists of colour come in and out of trend in North America. And this is the truth. And this is this isn't how I feel, is like I think things are changing for sure. But do I feel they've regressed back to this. Things of the pandemic have been, like, slowly slowing? Yes. But I feel like I came in a really opportune time, I think, to take advantage of the opportunities that a lot of artists of colour were being offered. I think, with the opportunity that I have now, and with this little door I'm able to have open is like how do we continue that dialogue of keeping this door open? You know, and I think part of it comes from education. And that's why I'm so, I think it's so vital to continue offering knowledge as free as possible. Because I've definitely understood the privilege, I've had in accessing knowledge that maybe wasn't meant for me that wasn't catered wasn't ever meant to even see my eyes. So, and how that's changed my role and know how it has changed how I how I can shift the world. I'm around as well.

Claire French

Yeah, thank you, I feel like that's a real kind of legacy is kind of the start of a legacy. And also it just out we won't talk about this much. And we'll bring this to a close very soon. And thank you so much for your time and all of the things you've shared. And there's so much more we could talk about, of course, but I just want to talk about the casting because you have an entire Filipino cast, yet it's in Vancouver. And is everybody based in Vancouver and Filipino? Are you bringing people in and then also from what you've already described it seems like even within that you would have different understandings of your own culture and you would have different relationships to your own culture, of course, that makes so much sense. But then I think just from what you just said about having information that was not necessarily for your eyes that you were given or spoon fed or forced it was imposed upon you in some way perhaps. You know, I feel like there's really interesting space now where if you're open to it, you can learn so much about other cultures and really get information that's so well researched and is actually multi-faceted. Because people understand it differently from those cultures. And I think that's a really healthy space to be, I think is a very positive way of starting a legacy right? Because you are keeping it open. It's not. It's not tokenized in that way. And you're making sure it doesn't.

Ralph Escamillan

So, yeah, I think what the casting of the work, it was important for me because I'm working with something like this so Filipino like *Piña* and I have yet to create a work that is, I think, maybe I skirted away from it out of like, fear of like, what it could offer, what would reveal is like learning about my ancestry. I've learned a lot about pineapples and a lot about its history, and there's a lot of crazy stuff. But with that, I'm also like, this conversation of culture, of diasporic experiences. It's not monolithic. My Philippine Canadian experience is not going to be the same as someone else's. So, I think it was important or even the person from the Philippines. So, it's important for me to have a room that reflected a diversity of those experiences. So, I, it needed there was no way that I could not have an all Philippine cast, lighting, sound, costume, all my mentors, all the dramaturgy there was there was no not having that. It didn't make sense that, the work couldn't be the work if that was not the reality of the room. And I think it's been really exciting like two of the, so I'm performing in the work as a choreographer and dancer and Tin Gamboa was also the other dancer from Vancouver, Kimmortal is composing. This is one of maybe their first actual dance performances they've ever composed music for, a long duration six-minute piece, but with them not having experience in the granting process, I incorporated mentorship to help support them so and some of the music stylings we're playing with kundiman, which is like love music. So, they had a kundiman consultant helping support them. And then Gabe Raminhos is his first bigger lighting project. So, he is working with Jonathan Kim as mentorship. So, I knew there aren't lighting designers who are Filipino, that live in Vancouver that have experience. So and same as composers that live in the city, so I had to integrate that into the research process and as a vital, as a necessity for the project. And again, then we're building, now we have a new lighting designer in the city hopefully, now we have a new composer that could maybe make music for other people s, it creates a new career path for them if they want it.

Claire French

Yeah, absolutely.

Ralph Escamillan

And then dancer from Toronto, Danah Rosales, who's also part of the ballroom community in Toronto and in Canada, really close friend of mine, third dancer, a fourth dancer is Buboy, he's a dancer in the Philippines. He's danced for a lot of contemporary companies there, and I met him through passing years ago. And then my costumer Jill Robyn Laxamana, my dramaturgist is Denisa Reyes who is an ex ballet Philippines director, and also responsible for a lot of the catalyst for new emerging artists in the Philippines with Choreo lab and Neo-Filipino, which she's recently left. She's my dramaturgist. So there's all these intergenerational, international, inter genre interdisciplinary experiences that are all in the work. And I think it's again, it's just another way of externalizing experiences I'm interested in, in learning more about and having those conversations happen. And also, I think the one big thing is like, if we all come from the same more or less cultural history, there are things that don't have to be said in the room. Not that we don't have to say it, but that like little jokes, little things you bring, we eat for lunch, I think that creates a different environment in the room. That that is, especially for the work as about the Philippine, like, the diasporic experience, I think it's necessary and that's so that is also then the really cool part of the process as well.

Claire French

Oh, that's wonderful. That's so wonderful. I think there's, there's so much in that, in the process of like, is you've just brought right back to the body as well. Right and to the necessary body, you know, to eating, you know, to do what you eat to like those kinds of things to like breathing together, to sitting together in a room and how far away you are from each other when you choose to sit together. Those kinds of things, I think are you know, and, of course, there's also the individual inside all of that and, and in that, you know, bringing it back to identity. We have to remember that we're all individuals in this, you know, with our own stories and own like experiences wherever we're from, and so there's a really healthy way of kind of just allowing that to be. Yeah, there's I mean, there are so many other things. And but we're not going to do it. We're not going to even open that window. We just have to talk again, Ralph.

Ralph Escamillan

That's another day. Yeah.

Claire French

Another day with Ralph. Well, there we go. Excellent. Well, thanks so much for your time. We really look forward to seeing the show in May. We'll have more information on it. And I'm sure you will be talking about this with other people. In the meantime, but again, thanks so much, Ralph.

Ralph Escamillan

Thank you so much, Claire.

Claire French

K, see ya.

Ralph Escamillan

See ya.

Claire French

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