

The Dance Centre Podcast Episode 20: Julia Taffe

SPEAKERS

Claire French, Julia Taffe

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

Today I'm joined by Julia Taffe, artistic director of Aeriosa. Choreographer Julia Taffe combines art environmental adventure making dancers for buildings, mountains, neighborhoods, theaters and trees, finding new movement perspectives in the realm of suspension. As the Artistic Director of Aeriosa, which is a Vancouver based vertical dance company, Julia has choreographed over 25 works on location including Stawamus Chief Mountain in Squamish, Taipei City Hall, Cirque du Soleil headquarters, Vancouver Library Square, Banff Centre, Scotiabank Dance Centre and Toronto's 58 story L-Tower. Prior to founding Aeriosa, Julia performed across Canada with Ruth Cansfield and around the world with Bandaloop. Julia attained ACMG rock guide certification in 1997.

Claire French

Julia welcome. So glad that we get this opportunity in the midst of all the craziness and busyness to actually just kind of connect and share your adventures, your stories, your projects, where you're at with Aeriosa Dance with our listeners. So yeah, thank you so much for being here joining me, let's start with how you found aerial dance or vertical dance as you, as you call it, and maybe a little bit about training or milestones.

Julia Taffe

Well, I found my way to where I am as a vertical choreographer, it was a journey through my practice as a contemporary dancer. So, I trained in many different dance forms that contemporary dancers train in: ballet, jazz, all of the old classics, and had a very traditional and rigorous training, and then became a professional right out of high school in Winnipeg. And I was part of a group that founded a new dance company in the city, which doesn't exist anymore, but it was a great opportunity to create original work. And, you know, the thing about being in a small dance company like that is we had a season which was very specific, and then we had a lot of time off as well. And I would say for myself, that's when my interest in movement above the ground came about because I had a lot of friends that were enthralled with rock climbing, which is pretty funny, actually, because Winnipeg is totally flat.

Claire French

It's great, I love it.

Julia Taffe

And yet, they were very adventurous and would drive to Northern Ontario to the Lake of the Woods area, which is Canadian Shield. And there's these beautiful granite, old, old mountains that are basically like mounds above the lake and cliffs above the lakes and it was quite adventurous. So, they were putting up climbing routes and teaching themselves how to climb from books, the whole climbing gym thing had basically just started at that point, because this was, you know, in the early 90s, it was just starting to get popular, and the Canadian military actually had a plywood climbing wall at one of their one of their training facilities in Winnipeg.

Claire French

Wow.

Julia Taffe

And so, we would all go and sit in front of this, you know, 16 foot wide plywood wall and it would have, you know, a few holes on it. And we would all Ooh, and ah, and it was it was thrilling for me because it was so physical. And it was figuring out movement, which is very similar to choreography, discovering movement, you know, figuring out how to do things that you imagine and don't know how to do but training your body to be able to do them. And that kind of body intelligence was really appealing to me. And it got me out of the studio, which is one thing my dance career never gave me was that connection to nature. And at that point, it was a real gap for me. Like I wanted to be outside. I wanted to be spending as much time as possible as I could. And yet, you know, as I mentioned earlier, because my training was so rigorous it was kind of discouraged as a dancer to be doing other physical pursuits. Ooh, skiing's dangerous. Ooh, climbing, that's dangerous. You could get hurt and then you won't be able to dance.

Claire French

Yeah, never dance could hurt you. Yeah.

Julia Taffe

Also, what do you mean, you're not going to summer school, you have to train all the time. If you miss a week of training, you'll be a bad dancer. And I really did grow up with that kind of mentality. And it's something I had to shake off. So, I came to climbing and then that sort of led me away from dance. And I actually had an opportunity where I had to make a choice. A choreographer in Winnipeg, Stephanie Ballard, was continuing a project, which was really amazing. She basically was getting all these women together and doing this work that was multigenerational. And so, we did a version in Winnipeg. And then she had this opportunity we were all going to gather in New York. But I had already made a plan to go to the Yukon, to Dawson City. Because the climbing thing had really triggered my need to be outdoors in nature. And so, I actually said no to that project in New York, and I went up to the Yukon for the summer. And I had the opportunity to go out onto the land and do a really kind of risky climbing, it wasn't a climbing trip, it was a hiking trip back country mountain trip with not a lot of skills, and not, not enough planning. But, you know, it was a very powerful experience for me. And so those two things

together kind of shifted my sense of my body, you know, and like, yeah, connection of, of my practice to the land. And I started to spend more time in British Columbia, in Squamish where there was rock climbing available.

Claire French

Mmhmm, is that what brought you to BC then?

Julia Taffe

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I mean, I did have a few dance performances booked, Dancing On The Edge had allowed me to come and, and perform The Firehall. And then Donna Spencer had given our choreographers in Winnipeg a mixed bill performance. So, we came and did this show at The Firehall. And so, I had these opportunities to kind of go back and forth and, and all of a sudden, my dance season, working in the winter in Winnipeg, and then having the summers free, all of a sudden allowed me to start training as a rock-climbing guide in Squamish. And so, I started living in both locations for a few years. And living a dual life. Yeah. And then I, as I trained to become a climbing guide, I realized, oh, no, I've chosen another profession that has no hope of earning me a decent living and a very, very particular niche.

Claire French

Yeah. That's wonderful. But the exploring I love, you know, the kind of the explorative nature of it, or the fact that you were like you, that's what won you over, it seems is that the space to explore, and explore the body in spaces and not feel confined or not refined to the point of like, ruling out other opportunities or ruling out like you say, the environment or spaces, other spaces, I think that's, I think that's really exciting. I feel like the gradual kind of, the desire kind of grew from what you're talking about. I feel like it kind of, you know, kind of started to consume you everything that's amazing. So, you obviously became a rock-climbing guide. And I heard you're also a stunt performer. Is that correct? Have you done stunt work too?

Julia Taffe

Yes.

Claire French

Yeah, you see, this is all kind of like diversifying your, like not only income base, but also making it versatile. All of these different skills that you're learning, I think is so exciting. So, could you talk a little bit about that maybe?

Julia Taffe

Yeah, well, the thing about being in Vancouver and being unemployed was that you know, the film industry is, you know, it's a small world and some of these worlds have overlap, right. So being a climber I knew some stunt riggers and stunt coordinators, and they knew that I was an athlete. And you know, stunts sounds very glamorous. And of course, it is a much higher paid job working in film and TV and it's very, very unreliable. So, in my case, one of the reasons that I started to get hired was because I had the skills to protect actors when they were filming scenes, going climbing. So, you know, I could set up the belays, I could like rig a camera person to hang over the edge of the cliff, I could train an

actor to know the things they would need as a to play a climber. So, I got a few little jobs like that through word of mouth and then the stunt coordinators that I met said, oh, you know, we're looking for a double for Robbi Chong, who was the sister of Rae Dawn Chong. So, I ended up doubling for those two sisters, in a few bad TV shows.

Claire French

Excellent. I know what you mean, though. Yeah.

Julia Taffe

Anyways, I worked and, and so I got a little taste of that bug: get a nice paycheck and get fed at work and do some fun things. Yeah, it's a really interesting process. I actually really love the behind-the-scenes part of it. And I've done a lot of other roles in commercial film and TV. Yeah, I've made a few little films myself when I'm on a very small scale, with, you know, other filmmakers helping to produce.

Claire French

Yeah, that's, that's great. So, do you continue to do that? Were you doing that before Aeriosa Dance? Do you do it when you can with Aeriosa because you're so busy with Aeriosa dance as it is? Do you continue an independent consultancy kind of career?

Julia Taffe

You know, Aeriosa is getting ready to do a TV shoot right now, which we don't normally don't do a lot. The last one we did; I think was 2015 or 2016. So, we do have one coming up, which is exciting, because you know, emerging out of this pandemic world, most of the lucrative opportunities that we've had to collaborate and you know, requests for performances have totally dried up, and they're just starting to come back. To answer your question about do I still work in the film industry? Well, you know, there came a moment in my career working in film where it was sitting around on set not being needed. I was writing grant applications to do projects, and we got this funding to do a Bravo video in the mountains, and I kind of went to the director of photography and said, okay, I gotta go. And that has been, you know, that's really been my death knell in the film and TV commercial industry is that ultimately, you know, I, while I love some of the jobs, I didn't love all of the jobs there. You know, there's a wide range of work you can do.

Claire French

Yeah.

Julia Taffe

It's, it just wasn't really for me. It wasn't physical. Oddly enough. It wasn't physical enough. It wasn't stimulating enough. No. And, and because I would say no to jobs, sometimes that is your death knell in film and TV, if you have another life and you walk away from it. You don't get called again. So, I don't think I was, you know, I was never the best stunt performer, and I wasn't the most, the keenest. So eventually, you know, the industry got bigger. And I kept getting older, and I just got busier and busier doing my live work and starting a dance company, which is something that I had never wanted to do.

Claire French

Right? Yeah, I think that's fascinating. Because I always say, I never wanted to choreograph when I was younger, that's, that's the one thing I said I would never ever do. And that's the thing I'd done the most of so far. It's kind of shifting now, like you say, but that's the thing, right? You realize how consuming it would be. And then also how rewarding it would be for those reasons. And obviously, you've found that with Aeriosa, and being able to explore the things you've talked about already, the creative side and overseeing the entire project in a managing, the time managing, all of those logistics that you've learned how to do, which we won't dwell on this, I promise. I think this is a really good time to talk about, well, maybe I'm really interested personally, in where ideas for projects start with you, because I'm, as I am with every artist, and I know that it's always changing. But because you have location as such a big thing or a site to such a big element of your work. And then also, I'm imagining that you are invited by places for you know, for your work, as well. So could you talk a little bit about how maybe different ideas have started or how the projects you're working on the projects you're working on now started, just in a kind of broad sense of what came first in a way, if it's possible.

Julia Taffe

I'll start back really where it started for, you know, my love of climbing and my job as a climber, to take people onto the cliffs in Squamish and to climb the Squamish Chief and to spend all of my time climbing. It's very similar to dancing at a high level, like you cannot take time off because you're not capable of doing the movements you need to do. And in climbing, if you can't do the movements, you can risk injury, you can risk death and you can also risk not being able to complete your job, getting paid that day. So, you know, that shift in perspective about what risk is, the risk of failure really helped me with my dance and made me such a, made me a much stronger performer because my inhibitions, my fear of embarrassment, my fear of tripping or falling down, you know, it just became so small, you know, compared to oh, if I fall here, I definitely going to break my ankle, I might flip upside down and get a head injury and my client won't be able to rescue me. So that's not, you know, so yeah, so those things were really linked. And so, for me spending time on the Squamish Chief was very satisfying physically, and creatively, you know, my body learning movements and whatnot. But culturally, there was a gap, because I was trained as a dancer, and I grew up in the culture of dance. And so, I wanted to dance on the mountain. And I knew how to get to these really interesting places, like, they're, one of my films, that I'm really fond of this called the Granite Ocean. And it really centered on this journey of, you know, a woman climbing, emerging from a cocoon on this mountain face, and then climbing up to this little platform and growing wings and learning how to fly. And just to be able to dance on this triangular ledge, you know, 1000 feet off the ground, that was a couple of, not even a metre, like maybe a metre, two metres long and three metres on either side, right. So it was, you know, it was very to me, it was, I wanted to dance in those places. And I wanted to bring that part of myself to the mountain so, so we had to keep going back, like the first time we went, we just went to explore these different locations and build the story so that we would have a video to apply for funding to do the actual project. And that little video that my friend Janet Roddan cut; we use that to explain what we wanted to do. But it also became a film in its own right, and it toured in the mountain film festival circuit, which is where I found my first audiences. And that led to the invitation to create a live performance at the Vancouver International Mountain Film Festival many years ago, I think it was 1999, I did a solo performance for all these climbers at the centennial Theatre Centre in North Vancouver. Was a packed house, no dance audience.

Claire French

Yeah, oh, my gosh, that's amazing. Great. Yeah.

Julia Taffe

And so that was really fun to have, you know, a commission like that. And then that also led to a commission at the Banff Centre at the same time that our film premiere was premiering at the Banff Centre. So, I really had a lot of encouragement and support outside of the dance community to begin what I was doing, and I really needed it at that point, because it just did not feel like the dance community was ready for it, you know, in terms of, is this dance? Does it deserve funding? What is she talking about? That sounds dangerous. All these things were questions that I didn't I couldn't prove that that that could be done, other than by doing it.

Claire French

The relatability of it, you know, like so, that they're already from what you're talking about those, there's already this sense of it, being able to expand the movement audience because the people you were, who were, the people who were coming to watch this had an understanding and an interest in mountaineering and, and so they were not coming to gawk at a spectacle in terms of that's unsafe, or, wow, how daring because they have this insight into the safety, you know, or into the rigor that goes into the practice. But then you introduce them to the creative side, the creative possibilities, which I think is and then the relatability comes from not from the dancers deciding that it's relatable, but from the audience deciding, you know, a different audience deciding that they can relate to dance. I think that's, I love stories like that. I think it's beautiful.

Julia Taffe

Yeah, and climbers are creative, and they see things from different perspectives. Unless you are a climber, you do not get that perspective of sitting on a tiny ledge looking down from the world. Yeah, we have drones, those type of perspectives are becoming more available to people and you see it in the camerawork of films and commercials and photography and, and all of this, our perspectives have shifted based on the tools that we have, but climbers have had those you know, and they've had those perspectives as long as they've been climbing and they have earned their right to be in those places with fear and sweat.

Claire French

And that's a form of embodiment, which is so sophisticated and like, and that we can't get from drones or from visual, you know, having the visual representation of it like that's an embodied absolute experiential insight that these climbers have that is beyond, you know, what, as you say, beyond what dance can teach us in our safe spaces.

Julia Taffe

And they are dancers, because they are they have to learn movement in order to get where they want to go, yeah, they have to discover movement, they've got to link movements, it's not just like, Oh, now I know how to do this move, sometimes you can only hold on to a hold for like three seconds before you have to move on. So, using things like momentum and sequencing and patterning to be able to move.

So, there is that creativity there. And I think that my performance is triggered that awareness which is where the support came from.

Claire French

Absolutely drawing attention to suspension in the most, you know, kind of like literal way, can possibly to give us all a sense of what it would be is kind of exaggerated, you know, from the dance perspective in the work you do. But then there's also the application of movement knowledge, right? That's what you're talking about, which essentially, is a way of defining a good dancer, right? It's being able to apply the knowledge in the moment, you know.

Julia Taffe

Well, then it's also I think, it is applying the value of dance to us as humans into our society. And I really feel it at this point in my career as a dancer, it's much too overlooked as part of a value of professional dance is tapping into that knowledge and making it accessible to more people. So, when I started out many, many years ago, it was very, very clearly defined roles. You're an audience, you're a performer, you're a dancer, you're not a dancer, you know, in all aspects of performance, those things are becoming more blended, and hopefully less hierarchical. And, and that's one thing I feel like I'm still wrapping my own head around is what is a, how can I reframe my work as a professional dancer to love all dancing bodies, and to assess what's a good dance and what's not a good dance and who should be dancing. And, you know, I'm really feeling quite rebellious against a lot of those things these days, because I understand so much of the privilege that it takes to become a certain type of dancer, the amount, the cost, the time, the support, the encouragement that the gates that are in front of you, you know, who is deciding if you're a good dancer, who is deciding if you get money to keep dancing, who is like, all of these things, they're only being cracked open now in terms of professional dance.

Claire French

I completely agree. And also like, who allows you to dance in public in public spaces. So, like concert dance is only one, a very small area of dance these days. But for that to have been defining what dance is for decades, maybe even centuries is the work that we have to undo. Right?

Julia Taffe

It really is and also our role as professional dancers. How can we bring that value of dance to everyone so that it becomes more embedded in the culture and less of an us and them scenario? Because dance is so healing. We need it so much. And we're at such danger now of being digitized. And, you know, just becoming these meat sacks.

Claire French

It's just like these visual kind of like, yeah, yeah, just like, you know, candy on the walls or on screens that you can kind of walk by.

Julia Taffe

A healing from trauma for connecting for just the joy and reminder of being human. You know, I really want at this point, and I'm so interested in finding those opportunities and reinforcing those values because it's really hard to kind of slip back away from them again and start categorizing things.

Claire French

Yes. So, I think there's also like a sense of like, so some of your concepts actually take you into nature, like in the in the forest or in the trees are you was this Tofino? Were you in Tofino on the island for a project? Or is that what you're doing now?

Julia Taffe

That kind of takes us, you know, back to that original question, like, where do your ideas come from? Yeah. So next anecdote about that is, so I moved to Tofino as a life balance decision. It was something that my partner and I decided that we wanted to do and that happened in 2011, kind of when I was starting to feel like yes, I know what I'm doing as a choreographer and an artistic director and people believe I can do it. Yay! And at that moment I moved away from the city, which is not you know, that's not the best career move

Claire French

That seems counterintuitive, but at the same time, balance. It's about balance.

Julia Taffe

I didn't make it easy on myself, let's put it that way but it just it had to happen. And ironically now I'm at a point in my life where I'm like, okay, well work is so important. I'm not sure that I can make the right choices for my life because work seems to be more important than my life's and everything. Yeah. But so I moved to Tofino this. It was a very tiny town at that time and was just about to explode, I guess in terms of global popularity, and it's really different now. But at that point, the woman that married my spouse, and I was an activist for salmon. And she knew about my background as a dancer and dancing on buildings and dancing on cliffs, and she was thinking you need to help us protect the salmon. We are the superheroes for salmon, and we want to fly and well, there's no tall buildings around here. There's no cliffs. I don't know what to do. You know, I can dance in nature. I am a contemporary dancer, but I don't know how to take my practice here. And she said, you have to meet your neighbor. She's a tree climber, and a tree rigger. And then I moved to Tofino and unfortunately Gail died. This woman who married us she had an aneurysm and she just died. She was gone. And I was left with this phone number. And I called Stephanie. And I said, Hello. You don't know me. But Gail said, we should talk. You're a tree climber. And I'm a dancer. And I'd love to think about dancing with trees. And then she just said Yes, right away. And we started collaborating. She showed up on site, we, we picked a site at one point and she showed me how she rigged the trees. And she pulled out this giant crossbow and had this bolt with a fishing line on it and to use it to fold up and over this big old growth tree. And then from that fishing line, we attached a rope and pulled it up and she taught me the climbing techniques. and we ended up hanging out at the top of this huge cedar tree that was like 500 years old. It was just so magical. And we became really good friends. And that's how the tree dancing practice started. It started out of needing to dance in Tofino and not having anywhere to dance

Claire French

Not having a cliff or a building.

Julia Taffe

No appropriate buildings. And so that's how it started.

Claire French

Wow. I love that. I love that passing on of that idea as well. And how that keeps you connected to Gail. You know, like, I think that is a thing seems to be like the trees, you know, connecting of the trees, the under, you know, network is kind of at play there. I think that is absolutely beautiful. Yeah. So can we get to the choreographing upside down part because I kind of this is a little bit my thing, but I keep thinking, I can't help but think that that means you have to plan the choreography upside down a little bit. And for you that's it's probably just so instinctual for you now, but I kind of imagined that your process would be quite different to and it has it has a unique process. But maybe it's only when it goes up that it becomes different. But I'd love for you to talk to us a little bit about that maybe? Or how do you train dancers? Do they come to you trained already? And so, do you all have a language that is already that vocabulary? Do you teach them that vocabulary in terms of the lingo, you know, like that you would need to use for safety, all of those things like and then what does the dancey process look like? Or how does it unfold more like rather than aesthetically look like? But you know, do you know what I mean? Like?

Julia Taffe

Yeah, totally. Yeah, it's uh, those are a lot of questions, Claire.

Claire French

I know. I'm so I'm so interested that I mean, I should just come watch you rehearse shouldn't I? I should just say that if I can at some point.

Julia Taffe

Because the first thing I have to say is it. The work is always location specific. Yeah, it does not tour easily. It has to be recreated in every location and it has to have a relationship to that location. Because with trees no tree is the same with cliffs. It's very rare to find a perfectly smooth cliff. And if you did, it would you may as well dance on a building. Yes. You don't get to dance on buildings very long. Normally, like you're, you're against the clock, right? We'll say you want to do what? you want to do it here when, why? And they might say okay, you can do it for four hours a day for five days. And all of a sudden you have to create a whole show in five days. And when maybe it rains for three of them. Yeah. So, I would say when I started out everything that we've discovered, as a movement was precious, it became vocabulary. And we knew this is something we can do. And so slowly, that vocabulary was discovered, piece by piece. And a lot of the times when we were under time pressure, it would be about assembling that vocabulary and selecting some music and doing something that was kind of entertaining and fulfilled the bill of whoever had hired us to, to place dance in this unique location. And some of our really early supporters were The Dance Centre, because we danced on the building for the opening of The Dance Centre.

Claire French

I remember that 2001 Right now, in 2001.

Julia Taffe

And the street has all of the electric cables for the buses underneath so we couldn't let our ropes hang down to the ground, and the building has, it's got the big ledges on it up near the top, which isn't so great for the rope dropping. So, we had these tiers, the front of the building, which was on Granville Street, which was the busy street, we wanted to highlight that for the opening. As you know, there's no smooth, easy surface there. So, we really discovered and created choreography that suited that building. And that was quite, quite lovely. But it was also very specific. We ended up doing some balancing on the ledge on the seventh floor, which was feels really remarkable as a dancer to be high up in the air and standing on one leg in arabesque or in an handstand or something like that was quite thrilling for us as dancers and for audiences. But once we've kind of discovered that you've sort of left an imprint on that place, it's not like I want to go back and create different shows trying to figure out something new there. No. And so in the early days, when we didn't have any funding, and it was most of our work was responsive to somebody calling and saying, hey, can you do a performance, we would just do everything we knew how to do and make it look good and work fast and get it done. And then when I was able to get a little bit of grant funding and start to create some full length shows, I would go back into the theatre and sort of bring my contemporary dance roots back into the process, work with the lighting designer and a costume designer and play with the equipment in that context and continue discovering, and I would in those early days, I would train dancers as we created the shows. So, you would if you had some climbing experience, or you had the desire, I would maybe take you to the climbing gym or out to the cliffs, and we would try a few things. And yeah, training people from the first moment putting the climbing harness on how to tie your knots how to stay safe how to how to do this, how to do this movement vocabulary. So, I got really good at breaking things down. And one of the things when you're talking about upside down, and how do you create upside down? Well, upside down is only one orientation in the vertical dance cannon. When you're when you've got a stage, the ground is down and the grid is up. But that orientation doesn't really change for as a vertical dancer, when you're upside down, your feet are still the ground basically, right? When you're, when you're standing sideways on a wall, the wall is the ground. Yeah. So, your front of your body, you're always facing front, whichever, whichever way your eyes and your breasts and your knees are facing that's front toes are facing. And if you are upside down, you know your feet are to the sky, and your head is to the ground. But that's only one orientation. So, you know your feet, you can also be feet standing on the wall with your belly facing the sky, right, and then the ground is the wall. So, you know, you have to get really good at describing those orientations and also not losing your awareness of where you are and how you're going. Because all of a sudden, it's much more three dimensional, how gravity's influencing your body, which way you're facing, what happens when you're upside down and you put your feet on the wall and you want to come right side up. How do you do that? Yeah, you have to maintain that relationship to your body basically, is what I would say. And that's so I don't really think of it as upside down.

Claire French

No. And I was thinking of the perpendicular as well like there is this sense of it just felt I don't know if gravity is the right word in this in the situation because it feels like that to feel like it that's overloading that in the moment because at from, from my experience of seeing it, and from talking to some dancers who have experienced it, there is that sense of it is decentralized a little bit. But also, the grounding is so important to find at all times. But grounding the word means something different. Obviously,

Julia Taffe

Well think of it this way. So, gravity is always there, but when you're standing on your feet on the ground, it is pouring down and to your feet, right, so you are interacting, you're pushing against gravity, every single moment of your life, that you are standing on the ground, that is an act of resistance. When you lie down, your surface area is larger, that gravity is spread out over a larger area. So, it's not pushing down on you the same way, which is why lying down is restful. So, if you think of in your harness, when you're lying down, and the wall is your floor, the wall is the dance floor. The reason you can jump higher is because you actually have gravity distributed over more of your body. Right? And so you can you have that sense of suspension. So, I think that for myself, one of the intriguing things about this practice is how the clear connections to physics, and that curiosity about being able to reorient yourself from different perspectives and view the movement from different perspectives while still staying in your body and knowing where you are and where you're facing.

Claire French

Absolutely.

Julia Taffe

And not being so concerned about what is down and what is up. But knowing where your center is knowing where knowing what grounding is.

Claire French

Yeah, and I love that just to back to the concert dance stuff of like, you're talking about multiple fronts, even though you know, the body is always front that the body is not the gaze of the audience, the front body is the is the front, I think, yeah, it's just like that just really helps to like, I think, for me, give me that really embodied sense of it, instead of like, as a spectator watching that, but to imagine a little bit more about what my body would be having to do to be there. I think that's what I'm really very interested in.

Julia Taffe

Also, a trap that vertical dance choreographers can fall into, because we can really fall in love with what's possible when we're facing away from the audience. Yeah, we're working with our belly up to the sky, we can do these amazing, huge leaps that as a dancer, you don't want to stop doing it. This is absolutely, this is absolutely fantastic, after all these years of trying to get up off the ground, doing jete, here I go this jete, what a hangtime with 10 seconds to rotate five times. So that is a feeling, but it doesn't serve your connection to the audience necessarily. Right. So this is something for myself as not a dabbler, somebody who's a specialist and been committed to this kind of work have really had to work to discover and remember those connections to the audience that make the work that make contemporary dance in particular, so lovely, that intimacy of expression of emotion, the access to the softening of your chest, and the that connection to your face, and, and all of the emotion that comes with that front of your torso and your face. And so, finding ways to bring that into the work, I think is you have to do it as a choreographer, otherwise, you're kind of just wallpaper or Christmas ornaments or something. It's pretty but yeah, not enough.

Claire French

No. And there's also the conceptual crafting, right? There's the transitioning out of these, like, wonderful feeling things to the kind of nuts and bolts of like, being able to craft a work that then is audiences are engaging in it for that reason, you know, for the for its whole. Yeah, that's, that's so great. Could you talk a little bit about in the context of what you've learned from your different experiences and on different projects. What would be the ultimate highs and lows, pardon the pun, not like in terms of verticality, but in terms of your emotional like, sense of a project? Maybe? Yeah, the kind of best and worst of times, within, you know, within a dance kind of production context, perhaps.

Julia Taffe

Yeah, well, I will just start by saying it's, it's really intense. And you know, we mentioned earlier on, you did not see yourself taking a path as a choreographer, and I did not see myself taking a path as an artistic director. In my case, it was because I had two experiences with two close friends who were artistic directors, and I saw how challenging that job was and how little support they had. And I just thought, oh, gosh, I'd never want to do that. And I'm happy to support somebody who's doing that, but I don't want to do that job. And so now at this point, that's my job. And I still kind of feel that I way actually I really I am kind of bossy by nature. I really do appreciate the complexity of this job. And it's not for everybody. There's just such a wide range of skills that I've had to like learn as, like life or death, you know, and some things, some things, I had no training in. And because I was such an artist, I've never went to school and learned anything practical, never learned anything about budgets, or how to write or anything like that. And yet, these are life and death skills, in running a dance production company

Claire French

Especially yours. Yes.

Julia Taffe

You can't afford not to be able to write and not to be able to budget and not to be able to negotiate and figure out all of these things. So, I've learned all these things on the job. And I think I'm pretty good at it, because I'm still doing it. But it is really tough. And there's been points in my path with different projects, where the vision has been so ambitious and so intense, that by the time everything gets set up, and it's in motion, I sort of feel numb and drained. And I can't Yeah, I just can't enjoy it. Yeah.

Claire French

But then the audience's do and the dancers do and the whole yeah, there's a sense of it kind of leaving you. and like, the, the motivation and everything is picked up by other people, right, which is kind of a beautiful thing.

Julia Taffe

Oh, my gosh, I have to say, yes, I just have to acknowledge like how much support people have given me how much trust they've given me how much of their time they've given this work, and what they trust is enormous. And so you, it really is really is very special in that way. And, yeah, it so that's really, really rewarding. And it's interesting, because starting off when I was dancing, I was so involved in myself as an athlete, and myself as a dancer, I really never thought about anything else. If it didn't apply to me, I didn't think about it. Honestly, I was not that I was just like a greedy selfish person I had

lovely relationships and appreciation of the world and nature and people and things. But ultimately, in terms of what I was doing, it was taking care of myself and making sure that my body could function and that I was a dancer, where everything was framed that way. And, and in order to become the director of Aeriosa and to lead all of these people I've had to totally changed who I am like, I barely even feel like a dancer anymore, actually, which is which I'm really sad about and I really need to change at this point in my career, like I kind of need to come full circle and make it more personal again, because I feel like I've really sacrificed so much of my own life and health and time, that that where it all started. It's all gone so far in a different direction. And it's really, it's really rewarding in a different way. But it's just not healthy. Yeah. And starting to really feel that as I get older.

Claire French

Yeah, I hope you do find that for yourself. And you do pull that back because I think what, that would be an amazing offering, as well to the world to come back around to, to that

Julia Taffe

I'm gonna go back to the Chief

Claire French

Yeah, I was just gonna say, to do that piece again, or to do something there, again, with all of this experience, and all of this knowledge and all of this wisdom, you know, embodied and kind of, you know, like, thrown at you from the outside wisdom, you know, like, it would just be, even if it wasn't even for anybody else, even if it wasn't a film just for you, I think just Yeah.

Claire French

So, I'd like to talk or maybe we can just finish around this, there's, I'm going to tie in a few ideas that I shared with you beforehand, but just around collaboration, producing the work of other artists. And I'm going to tie in with that you won the Crystal Dance Prize this year. And there are all sorts of things that your you and your collaborators in collaboration are kind of the kind of, there's a lot of germination happening. Like you have a lot of generative ideas and other people's work as well. So, the question is around collaborations now you moving into producing other people's work, but also it seems like with the Crystal Dance Prize, there's an international component and a collaboration is really big and producing is really, really big. And could you talk a little bit about that project for the Crystal Dance Prize and also you producing other works? Because I think that's a really exciting space, especially in our conversation around expanding dance and expanding dance perspectives.

Julia Taffe

Yeah, well, thank you for asking that because I really do feel like for myself this awareness of becoming a producer again and it just sort of happened... it wasn't part of the plan was the, you know, so the project for the Crystal Dance Prize is something that's been in the making for many years now. And we're so thrilled to have that support. There's an artist in Croatia, her name is Maria Šćekić, then she actually trained at Concordia and won a prize for choreography there back in the day. But she went home to Croatia after the war, she came to Canada partially because of the war there. And I'm quite drawn to her because she found her own practice in the mountains in Croatia and had no other dancers to work with. She recruited the mountain rescue team to support her in her work and recruited the

National Park to produce her performances in the canyon. And she's making site specific work. And I was just thrilled, you know, it's so thrilling when you think, wow, I'm really discovering something new for myself. But then when you find that other people are discovering it, too, you really start to think well, we always have to remember that thing. Just because something's new to us, doesn't mean it's new. You know, this type of work has been going on for many, many years. And the fact that I've met these artists all around the world who've had similar, they're alone, and they have an idea, and then they, they build it from nothing. And so, I've met other vertical dance choreographers that have basically gone through the same revelations and process that I have, and Maria is one of them. And so we have this opportunity to create a theatre performance that's going to feature her work with some Aeriosa dancers and for me to bring some of my most recent choreography over to continue developing it and bring it over to her hometown of Jakov which is in eastern Croatia near the border with Serbia, and as you know, a city that was quite affected by the war. And we're also going to go back to the mountains where Maria has established a relationship in the Paklenica region, which is the Velebit mountains and there on the coast and Dalmatia. And there are these beautiful limestone mountains where General Tito actually hollowed out the mountains to create a home for his army back in back in the day when that went down. So that infrastructure still exists inside these mountains. And there's now there's a gallery and a theater space and a cafe and all these places where we can use to stage our events. Plus, we're getting permission to use these climbing routes to actually stage a performance in collaboration with Sarah Fuller, who creates these camouflage garments, so that we can so that we can connect to the landscape and call attention to some of the endangered species in the canyon. So, there's all of these connections coming in, for me, the end of one piece, that relationship, always it's kind of hard to leave. And so, I always feel like my last work is the starting place for the next work. Always those connections. And quite often it's the people that are the connections, the collaborators that you really connect to that you want to pick up and do another project with, because it was so satisfying the first time.

Claire French

Yeah, that's wonderful.

Julia Taffe

So, the Croatia project is going to be a multi-year project. Yeah, you know, we'll be doing we'll be doing some workshoping of these very different two very different presentations in different regions of Croatia in September, and then continuing to develop them on location in those communities over the following years. And then Maria will be coming to Vancouver and bringing an iteration of something that we're doing together

Claire French

So wonderful. Will you have time to actually document the process? With Aeriosa on your website? It's something because I think people would probably be quite interested in trying to follow this project over the over the years. I think that would be amazing, especially going inside the mountains. I love that idea that now you're going inside the mountains. I mean, just when we thought you couldn't go find any other space to do you're, you're going inside. Yes. It's brilliant.

Julia Taffe

Yeah. And I think that yes, we will be documenting it. I mean, Maria's very, she's got she's nurtured a really amazing crew of photographers and videographers that she works with and, who can edit video really quickly. And one of the dancers who's been working with Aeriosa since 2003 Chandra Crown is also branching out into video editing and filmmaking and so she's going to be coming along on that project as well. And she happens to manage our social media and things like that and update our website, so yes, I think there's a really good tie in there for that diary.

Claire French

Oh, wonderful. Yeah, that's so good. And then you have the thing, you're producing other people's works. And I believe that this is what we'll be seeing at the Dance Centre. Is that correct?

Julia Taffe

Yes. Well, you know, Aeriosa has our long-term artists in residence relationship with Butterflies In Spirit. And there are a group of family members who advocate for their missing and murdered Indigenous relatives, mothers, grandmothers, the other families as well. And we started working together in 2017, when I asked them to participate in a performance we were co creating with Spakwus Slulem in Stanley Park. And we wanted to bring the community together to do different performances in the park and Butterflies had been recommended to me and they were very sweet and showed up and explained why they were dancing. And, and this is part of my journey towards dance as healing. And that understanding is that these women are professional dancers, now they celebrated their 10th anniversary. But they started out, they danced for a reason. And that was because they needed to call attention to their lives and their family's lives. And they shut down Granville and Georgia too with this message. And so, dance, having a purpose that is so vital. And so important is something that's really mean something to me as a contemporary dancer, sometimes you wonder why am I doing this? And who understands it? And there's no, there weren't any people there.

Claire French

Yeah, we're just doing it for each other, you know, dance community sometimes. Yeah.

Julia Taffe

And so yes, so recognizing how the how vital the work that the Butterflies is, in terms of them, being able to do their own healing and help with the healing of others is something that is really compels me, and establishing that relationship between us where I can provide some administrative support and help with some of the nitty gritty that I've had to go through to get where I am as an artistic director to make that easier for other artists.

Claire French

Yeah, absolutely. To carry some of that carry some of that weight. Right.

Julia Taffe

Yeah. And to give them the flexibility. I mean, really, they're advocates and activists, so they need to be one step removed from some of these designations and hoops, you have to jump through. So that's become another thing that's really important to me, that makes my work meaningful. Yeah. So, there's that and, and is really interesting, because it does, it often challenges, just even what I know and how

things are supposed to be done. And, just seeing what happens when people have time and money to really do what they want to do is quite an eye opener, too, because you start to realize a lot of things. What they're really suffering from is time and money.

Claire French

Right, right. Exactly. Yeah. Because it gives you it gives you a lot of it gives you space, to be able to think differently, if you're not in survival mode, you know that it is a different it is a privileged space, but it shouldn't be, it shouldn't be a white privileged space in that same way, it's not the same kind of privilege space it because you have to be ready to be able to think differently if you have the time and the money. I think that's the point. But yeah, I mean, I think that's just a that's so that's so great. So, we will see this work in May.

Julia Taffe

Yeah, what you're gonna see in May, it's quite interesting, because, you know, we're talking a little bit about the Butterflies. And the thing about Butterflies is that we've created a work to honor their 10th anniversary, which was produced at the Playhouse last April 30. So, we're almost coming up on the one year anniversary. Yeah. And that was the biggest thing I've ever produced. There was like 95 artists and designers and crew members involved, and most of them were indigenous. So that was really exciting for me, and to see that sense of family and those connections and to do a four hour show. That really gave people a sense of, hey, this is how we do it, right?

Claire French

Hey, you and spectacle to live together, then I see what you mean about work taking over your life. And when it's not just work. It's like spectacle.

Julia Taffe

Exactly. And then so all of a sudden realizing, oh my gosh, this is a huge production and realizing, Hey, this is kind of an interesting job. Because on the day, I wasn't dancing, I wasn't doing anything. I was just kind of walking around and at that point, my work was done. So yeah, it was quite exciting. And then, but in this so we're going to be presenting some excerpts of that work because what happened is during COVID one of the Butterflies who choreographed a duet she got COVID her partner got COVID. So Aeriosa dancers had to step in, they were able to perform and this in this really important community event, they didn't get to dance their own choreography. And so this is an opportunity to continue sharing our practice with the harness dancing and bring that work to a Dance Centre audience because audience at the Playhouse was not The Dance Centre audiences, it's a very different audience.

Claire French

Yeah. And it's great, because it's there's an intimacy to this to this presentation, that we wouldn't Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's great.

Julia Taffe

Then the other part of it is Landon Krantz who is a deaf theatre artist. Yes, yes. And so I've been working with Landon, he's come in to do some workshops with us, we did our first one just before COVID hit. And we did it. So, 2020 I think in April, we managed to squeak out a few days of practice or

something like that. And then or maybe it was February, and then the next time we saw each other was at Playhouse before they reopened, right. They let us come in and do a workshop on stage. which was so Amazing. And so, he's coming back and what we're trying to do together and we're figuring out and this is the first time we're gonna be able to try and share that concept with the audiences is find a way to bring deaf, hard of hearing and hearing audiences together. Without you know, it's not about creating a work that's accessible for Deaf audiences by adding ASL interpretation. That's not really what it's about. It's about recognizing that ASL is an unspoken language, dance is an unspoken language. There's a lot of cultural connection between choreography and sign language and how communication and Deaf culture because it's so visual. So, a lot of things you don't do as a hearing person, like tap someone on the shoulder or stand right in front of someone or walk in between two people that we don't we don't even understand as hearing people that these are normal parts of Deaf culture. And that the way that we relate to each other, could use less talking and more physical interaction. Yeah. More proximity, more paying attention to each other like.

Claire French

Yeah

Julia Taffe

So, I'm really intrigued to sort of discover those connections between Deaf culture, ASL and movement practice.

Claire French

Yeah, that's amazing. Do you know the date of the event?

Julia Taffe

Yes, it's May 18th. And as part of the Discover Dance! series, so it's the noon time performance, it's a nice, easy, easy ticket price and easy, easy length, because it fits into about an hour.

Claire French

And I've I go to these sometimes. And sometimes I do the talkback for these. And I've always had a wonderful time at them. The conversations are always very exciting. And it just it kind of grows, the interest grows from the like experience of the presentation to the conversation to when people are leaving, like they're always such wonderful events to go to. Oh, this is really exciting. Julia, I think that's great. Well, thank you so much for your time, I would love to, or we could keep going with other projects. But we've got we've got so much information. I think this is a really good place to end. And I just want to yeah, I really look forward to seeing that show. And to seeing whatever we can see film wise of, documentation wise of the other work that you're doing. But yeah, this has been really wonderful. It's been lovely to get to know, you and your work and your journey a little more for all of that. Yeah. Great.

Julia Taffe

Thank You Claire

Claire French

Well, your pleasure. And I'll see you in the in the flesh perpendicular upside down or straight out very soon.

Julia Taffe

I look forward to that.

Claire French

Okay, great. Thanks so much again. Bye for now.

Julia Taffe

Bye for now.

Claire French

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