

Welcome to LIVE AND NOW, a new podcast series from the Live Art in Scotland project at the University of Glasgow – led by me, Steve Greer – exploring the histories and possible futures of live art and experimental performance in Scotland.

In each episode, you'll hear from one of more than 50 interdisciplinary artists and practitioners interviewed for the project, as we explore their work, its influences and the circumstances which shaped its development. You'll hear from artists based in Scotland as well as those whose practice has seen them return here again and again over the past thirty years.

Each episode is accompanied by a transcript, context notes and links to the full interview – you can find these on the Live Art in Scotland website – [liveartscotland dot org](http://liveartscotland.org)

EPISODE INTRO

This episode is taken from my conversation with multi-disciplinary artist, researcher and facilitator, Ashanti Harris. Working with dance, performance, sculpture and installation, Ashanti's practice often focuses on recontextualising historical narratives – and does so by exploring the knowledge and social implications of the movement of people, ideas and things.

Recent works include *Dancing a Peripheral Quadrille*, a commission for the Edinburgh Art Festival that used sound, memory, and movement – and the lens of Caribbean carnival – to explore questions of cultural identity.

With artists Romany Dear and Letitia Pleiades, Ashanti founded Glasgow Open Dance School, also known as GODS – a community organisation and collective which facilitates spaces that are supportive for people to explore movement, whatever their level of experience with dance.

As one of the co-directors of Project X, Ashanti's practice also involves the creation of opportunities and contexts that platform dance and performance from the African and Caribbean diaspora – and it's with Project X where the following excerpt from our conversation begins, leading into a project which emerged from Ashanti's archival research into Les Ballet Negres, Britain's first black dance company – and the chance discovery that they'd performed in Scotland.

In common with a number of other artists interviewed for the Live Art in Scotland project, Ashanti's work calls attention to the importance of artist-led activity in creating new contexts for performance. It also points toward the significant – but perhaps still underacknowledged – role that dance and movement practices have played in the development of interdisciplinary performance in Scotland.

One of the limitations of a historical narrative that sees live art emerging from the exchange between fine art and theatre is that can too easily overlook modes of expression and exploration that start in other places, and which might produce or reveal different orders of knowledge. As I've gone further into this project, I've been led to explore how choreography might be intimately bound up with the act of remembering – and with the act of transforming memory, all of which may be another way of saying that dance is a form of world-making.

In any case, here's Ashanti Harris.

INTERVIEW EXCERPT

I think a lot happened in those years between 2011 and 2018, we'd been doing G.O.D.S for a number of years and it had had lots of different manifestations. I also had a period of time where I was working with another dance company in Glasgow called Indepen-dance who do dance with people who have additional support needs and learnt so much from working with them. When I was working with Indepen-dance that I met up with Mele Broomes who is a Glasgow-based choreographer and Rhea Lewis who is an Edinburgh-based creative producer of dance, and we'd started having conversations about things we thought were missing in the Glasgow/Edinburgh, I guess the Scottish dance scene and what we wanted to do, this project we wanted to make, and we called it Project X because we didn't know what the project was yet, and then [laughs] we decided we liked that name, I think the possibility of 'X' and the relationship to the civil rights movement was really exciting for us.

Project X particularly platforms dance and performance from the African and Caribbean diaspora in Scotland. I think when we started we were just thinking about these silenced and invisible histories, between us these little individual bits of knowledge we had about dance of African and Caribbean diaspora in Scotland, about how hard it was to find what our unique journeys were and I think when we first started we wanted to create a sort of legacy

project. We wanted to create something that was celebrating what was happening now, but also celebrating and what had happened and recognising what had been happening for a long time in Scotland. So when I went to do the research Master's I went really wanting to do that, really kind of in this is what I'm going to be researching. My thesis was dance of the African and Caribbean diaspora in Scotland. I started with a dance company who came to perform in Glasgow and Edinburgh in 1946 and they're also known as the first British black dance company. They're called Les Ballet Nègres. That was what I was doing, but also the uniqueness of this research masters that I'd chosen to do at the art school with a really incredible course leader called Ranjana Thapalyal who really encouraged what she called critical interventions. I guess they were creative critical interventions, and it was recognising that everyone on this research degree had a unique background. I was studying with product designers, writers, painters, people from creative backgrounds and she really encouraged everyone to write critically and think critically but also to make critically and to make these creative responses to the things that we were learning about, but also things we weren't learning about. In doing that, I think I went in thinking, I'm going to be an academic researcher and I came out remembering that I'm an artist [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

AH: It was also a nice moment, I'd been so dance focused, and I'd also remembered, I'm an artist with a background as a sculptor, and starting to remember those processes and that way of thinking that's based around materiality and making and starting to find a little bit more of a link between them and adding in this new element which was my research practice. So thinking about how sculptural processes fed into research practice and taking the sort of movement and embodied knowledge that came from that. That's what kind of came out of that.

SG: There's one project of yours that I'm aware of which I guess links directly to that which is *Presenting Les Ballet Nègres* which has the subtitle *A Contiguous Archive*.

AH: Yes.

SG: I want to say that you were working with the work of Roshini Kempadoo, if I've got that name right. I've only ever seen documentation of that online, so maybe you can tell me a bit more about that project because it looks to me like you're working with a live dance

practice or a live movement practice and also archival materials or projection of archival materials.

AH: Yes. Doing that particular part of the research project, it was really this embodied experience [laughs]. I can't even remember actually, how did I first find about Les Ballet Nègres? I wrote about this [laughs]. I think actually it was a Guardian article that was titled, 'They were Britain's first black dance company. How come no one's ever heard of them?' and I think that kind of said it all already, it's this sort of invisible dance company. I'd spent some time in the black cultural archives in Brixton that had some more records about the company and there's also part of the black cultural archives in Leeds. There's a documentary work made by Stephen Dwoskin about the company and there's also the Dwoskin archive. So I was rooting through all of these resources, and off the top of my head I cannot remember where I saw the list of everywhere they've performed in the UK but Glasgow came up, and as soon as Glasgow came up that was it, I was just on a mission to find a record of what they'd done in Glasgow and I just went to the newspaper archives. They only existed for eight years which made it a little bit easier, but I just kind of arrived, got this stack [laughs] of newspaper archives and just had to start from the beginning!

SG: And just worked your way through?

AH: Work my way through, yes. Just looking for any kind of reference to the dance company, because typing in their name, things weren't coming up. It was this kind of constant flipping of pages, being in this room and this sort of stack that's getting smaller as I'm going through it all. Eventually, I found a record that said that they'd performed in the Theatre Royal and then I'd gone to the Special Collections at Glasgow University and was looking through their theatre archives and found nothing. Then when typing in a really particular name of one of their dances, called Aggrey, I found a copy of the program from their show. It didn't have a date, there were so many things missing from this document, and that moment of being like I found it! I can tell you, Special Collections, this is the day that this happened and filling in all of that information was amazing, but also that really sparked a bit of a research process that I've worked with since then. When you're working with archives that are so limited and they are so hard to find and there's so little information, I guess it's about what you're bringing to the interpretation or how you're speculating on them, how you make this story come to life. I was working with these

documents, really looking into every element of them, but I was also having conversations with dancers who'd been working in Scotland, dancers who had worked in the rest of the UK, and with dancers that worked with similar dance styles, or had similar dance experiences and also telling them about Les Ballet Nègres, showing them bits of archival resources that I had and letting that personal knowledge come up. Obviously when you start having conversations with dancers, they're moving and they're teaching you things, and it kind of just went from there. I think I developed my personal understanding and interpretation of this dance company in relation to their importance in this moment when I was starting Project X with my collaborators. I was looking at dance in Scotland now and the representation of dance of the African and Caribbean diaspora and I was speaking to people of African and Caribbean heritage working in Scotland now and starting to find links, both physically and also in their stories of dance, to this dance company and starting to create a narrative that was personal as well. With Roshini Kempadoo and her concept of contiguous archives, what I really loved about her theory of the contiguous archive, I think all archives are contiguous, it's about what the audience or the viewer or the reader is bringing to it. It asks you to be active and I think in relation to archiving black histories, you have to be active by nature of what has been archived and what is there. I like this idea of presenting a movement piece that I'd made with a choreographer named Erick Mauricia Valentin alongside a sculptural work I'd been making. It's an African philosophy that's transferred into a Caribbean carnival in sculptural form. So I thought by making these sculptures in this technique that's also giving me another type of embodied knowledge that's feeding into this narrative. Alongside these archival documents, there were these performance lectures I was making, and also with video documents and cutting out particular moves, and putting all of these things together and allowing the reader to bring their own kind of interpretation, their own perspective, because mine is just mine. I'm the curator of these objects in front of you, but I want people to be active in this archive.

SG: Maybe this is jumping around a bit, I'm just thinking there was something you were talking about there that made me think about *Jumbies* possibly because I feel like that has had a few different existences, perhaps the most recent one being the version created for Glasgow International as a 360 video, as a digital work, and as a publication, but am I right in thinking that there were earlier versions of that, I think 2017 or 2018 maybe?

AH: Yes that is the never-ending project! [Laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

AH: There are so many iterations. *Jumbies* actually started from this sculptural process that I was also working with in Les Ballets Nègres. There's always so much bleed between all of the projects that I do! [Laughs]. I think it is just a continuous, it's like a rolling mass that gets bigger and bigger and bigger as it goes along. When I first started making *Jumbies*, it was when I was doing my masters and I was thinking about Yoruba philosophies of self, and how that's been interpreted in Caribbean carnival through these mesh masks and these mesh masks that you see them in Junkanoo, but you also see them in multiple carnival costumes from different countries across the Caribbean. I guess this idea of mesh and the divine self. When you are behind the mask, you can see out into the world, you have this powerful position but you are concealed, you're hidden so therefore you can be anything. This kind of power and possibility of the mask. I was working with different ways of making these mesh masks, I was doing lots of hand-based processes, making plaster casts of faces, using this casting form called alginates which is made from seaweed, then making plaster casts and getting these different metals of mesh and pressing them into the details of a face, so it's also like taking a trace. I really liked how that process and exploring this idea of interstices and traces, and this thing that could be pulled out and reshaped and reformed, but having these multiple faces, stories and narratives embedded in it. I was also thinking about that as a haunting. I think I'd first started reading about hauntology then and was collaborating with a textile designer who was studying at the same time as me. He was looking and thinking about really similar things in relation to textiles, and we just started having conversations and working with cloths and movement, thinking about carnival costume, carnival histories, but also thinking about hauntology. We started by playing with materials and movement together.

SG: Is that Zephyr Liddell?

AH: Zephyr Liddell, yes. I think most of the iterations, I mean they sit under different words, but I guess it's a continuous work in progress. We did a performance in The Art School but as part of The Work Room ten years and beyond, ten year birthday evening of performances. We also did our own private sharings in The Art School as an exhibition as

well. We did another iteration of it, collaborating with a musician called Paul Shofolahan at Platform as part of their Eastern Promises programme, and then we did some more work with them to turn it into a video work to document it, and then we started working with Patricia Panther, and working towards what was going to be an intimate, interactive performance [laughs] collaborating with a lighting designer and really looking at the physical. material and audio hauntological possibilities.

SG: And that became the 360 video version?

AH: And also multiple versions in between! [laughs]

OUTRO

This episode was produced by me, Steve Greer, as part of the Live Art in Scotland project supported by the University of Glasgow and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

You can find more episodes of this series with links to the full interview archive – along with the project's other free resources - on our website, Live Art Scotland dot org.