



Transcription of recorded conversation

Dance Dialogues: Lee Serle & Maya Zbib

24 September 2020

Tom Pritchard - 0:00

Good evening everyone and welcome to this Dance Dialogues conversation between Lee Serle and Maya Zbib. I'd like to begin by acknowledging that I'm joining today's talk from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and want to pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging and extend this to any First Nations people joining us today.

I'd also like to note that Maya is joining us today from Beirut, and to acknowledge the particular challenges currently being experienced there that extend far beyond our shared global experience of the pandemic. So, we'd like to begin by offering our best wishes to you, your colleagues and the wider community during this difficult time.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Tom Prichard, and I'm the Studio Producer here at Lucy Guerin Inc. I'm a white cis man in my mid-30s, with short brown hair and a beard, and wearing a denim shirt with a flowery collar. Behind me is a room with white walls, wooden shelves with various books, and a small wooden mirror.

Before introducing our artists, I'd like to run through a few housekeeping points.

At the bottom of your zoom window, you'll find the chat and Q&A buttons. In the chat, we invite you to first let us know where you're zooming in from today, then use the chat to engage in a supportive discussion with fellow audience members and our two artists throughout. To do this, be sure to select all panellists and attendees in the blue little blue drop down menu. In the Q&A window, we invite you



to write your questions for the artists at any time over the next hour. We'll then pose as many of these as time allows towards the end of the talk. And if someone else's question also interests you, help it to get selected by upvoting it - just click on the little thumbs up symbol below that question. Those questions with the most votes will rise to the top.

Finally, this talk is being live transcribed. If you'd like to view the transcription during the talk, click on the link we've just posted in the chat. The transcription will appear in a separate browser window.

02:01

So, on to tonight's talk. We're delighted to welcome Lee and Maya in a trans-continental conversation exploring what practices now. Before I hand over to them some brief reintroductions.

Lee Serle graduated from the Victorian College of Arts with a Bachelor of Dance in 2003. His work has been presented in France, the US, Colombia, Lebanon, and Australia, and he has been commissioned to create new works for the Lyon opera ballet Sydney dance company, Lucy Guerin Inc, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Dancenorth, the VCA and the visual artist Matteo Lopez.

Lee has performed in the works of many notable choreographers including Trisha Brown, Lucy Guerin, Tere O'Connor, Gideon Obarzanek, and Shelley Lasica, among many others. He received fellowships from the Rolex Art Institute, the Australia Council for the Arts and City of Sydney. Welcome Lee.

Maya Zbib is a theatre director, performer, writer and co-founder of Zoukak Theatre Company. Her work has been shown in the Middle East, Europe, the US, north and east central Africa, South America and South Asia. She's taught theatre internationally in academic and non-academic contexts. She's been commissioned to create work for NYU-AD's Performing Arts Centre, the University of Houston, Williams College Krefeld/Monchengladbach city theaters, Shwindelfrei Festival, LIFT festival and the Royal Court Theatre, among others.



Maya is a Chevening/KRSF alumna, a Cultural Leadership International alumna, a fellowship recipient of ISPA, New York, and was selected as the protégé of Peter Sellars as part of the Rolex mentor and protégé Arts Initiative in 2011. Welcome, Maya.

Okay. And without further ado, over to you both.

Lee Serle - 04:03

Thanks, Tom for the intro, and Hello, everyone.

My name is Lee. I'm a white man, I have light brown hair that's greying. I'm sitting in my bedroom and wearing a black t shirt. And behind me is a very blank white wall. Over to you Maya.

Maya Zbib - 04:37

Hello everyone. I'm very happy to be here. I am a white-ish woman with long black hair wearing glasses and some jewellery. Behind me is a bookshelf and a fern and two small paintings.

Lee Serle - 04:53

Thanks for joining me today Maya. I am really happy to have this conversation with you and I suppose to begin with, we maybe should explain how we kind of know each other and how we met and take it from there, I guess.

So, it was 10 years ago now we met through the Rolex mentor & protege arts initiative and I guess over the course of that year, we had several interactions at various kind of events, talks, performances and things, and struck up a friendship, and also a curiosity in each other's work and practice. And then I think it was maybe 2013, when you first invited me to Beirut, I think, for the sidewalks programme, where I was in residence for a couple of weeks and presented a work in progress showing. All those years ago.

Maya Zbib - 05:58

It was actually in this house, which used to be our studio. And now I, it's my friend's house, now I'm using it for the good internet! It was here that you did your residence, I just remembered. Used to be our little theatre.

Lee Serle - 06:18

Yeah, it was amazing to come to Beirut, that first time. And that was the first time I presented a solo work, you know, internationally. And it was quite a profound moment for me, particularly in Beirut and having conversations in and around the community there that, you know, some...some were dancers, but most of them I think, had kind of connection with your Theatre Company. So I suppose theatre was much more their language, maybe. But it was a great experience for me. And I, you know, I think back to that time, quite often.

Maya Zbib - 06:57

People remember you hear they remember your, your performance, actually.

Lee Serle - 07:08

Yeah, and in thinking about kind of practice, and art practice, I feel like that moment changed, kind of how I envisage making work. But I think also, the second time that I came, and we did a collaboration with other artists, writers, visual artists, and Zoukak Theatre Company. And we spent two weeks together and presented that work at the end of the two weeks.

Which I know we were having conversations about, you know, what's it going to be? What are we going to present? What is this work supposed to communicate? And then it very quickly became apparent that the sharing of our practices was actually what the performance was going to be.

And I think that was a real kind of moment that switched my approach to making performance after that.

Maya Zbib - 08:08

Yeah, I mean, for us, the way we work in the company is really what is really is so much about process, as well, because we are a collective. And it's really how we always end up with a with a performance that is actually a representation of the process of creation. So, I think that was also an example of it, because we were working as a group. And we had so many different disciplines. There was a visual artist, there was a writer, musician, and us as a company and you as a dancer, choreographer. So somehow, collaboration in that way lends itself to...to that kind of form, I think, in a way.

Lee Serle - 08:55

So, in the process with the company—I mean, it kind of shifts people come in and out over the years—but how much of the kind of the creation process is actually just each of you kind of sharing and workshopping with each other in the different kind of forms, not just kind of, in the process of creating the work?

I guess what I'm asking is, like, how much is there room for you and the company to just, kind of, do the practising and the workshopping as opposed to the final product of what the performance is?

Maya Zbib - 09:36

I think because we our work is very devised, mostly, most of the time it's devised, so it's always happening in the room onstage with whoever is there. And so, whoever is leading the performance...because it depends on the project, sometimes I am directing sometimes someone else from the company depends on whose project it is or who proposed the project. So whoever is leading, proposes like forms of creation like exercises or ways of thinking around the topic. And then whatever comes out becomes part of this canvas, that then in the end becomes the performance. Of course, not everything is...is there. And this is the role of whoever is directing to choose what material is really part of this dramaturgy of the work, what material is interesting, what material works with what, and then to do this patchwork or dramaturgical line that is patched along the performance.



So, there is a lot of room to...for the process to be present in the show...in the final show, but there's a lot of responsibility on whoever is leading the work to, along with the collaborators, to try to link things together in a way that makes sense.

Lee Serle - 11:08

Do you find that...umm...you know, running your own company and having a collective, there's a lot of, you know, there's a lot of administration and all of these kinds of things, and plus making the work, do you find as an artist that you have the space to just kind of practice the form, without always having the end goal of creating a performance?

Maya Zbib - 11:35

It's really one of the most frustrating things for us. In the company, we're always saying, like, when are we going to have this time to just train to just practice, because...because we have put so many hats in order to do the work that we do. So we do a lot of...I mean...we have a beautiful team that is managing the company, but we all still have to do a lot of management and fundraising and administration and things like that. And we are doing our work as a company where we create our performances. And we do a lot of workshopping teaching, training, mentoring, and things like that. And we do our festival, so we present the work of other artists. So at the end, there's not so much time to do only practice.

But how we make up for it is, whenever we have a new creation, whoever is leading the project proposes some kind of practice that is directly related to the work but not really. So for example, we would be working on Viewpoints for this performance, for example, but then we would take these...this kind of training to use it somewhere else. But then it makes us...challenges us to sort to propose either techniques that we are in contact with, that you want to share with the group, or ways of working that we think are interesting to start to develop. And it's somehow...it goes in parallel with the creation, but it somehow is a training in itself. And it carries on with the next and the next and the next project.

Lee Serle - 13:27

Yeah, I think...I mean, studio access is something that, you know, I don't have. You have your own studio, so you have the facilities to kind of have access to. And as an independent artist, that's not always possible. So, I feel like the practice of things for me, often sits outside of the studio, writing or drawing, or even just going for a walk and, you know, having your internal dialogue. And all of these kind of other things that are kind of...like a kind of peripheral things.

And then there is the studio practice when, you know...at times I have a residency that may not kind of be for producing a particular work, it can just be practicing. I feel like the practicing, actually dancing, sometimes is kind of rare. And then when I have a studio to create an actual work, it becomes about creating the work and then, kind of, all the practices already...it's like this groundwork that's been incorporated into the creative process.

Which I guess kind of brings me to this thing, which is like the conditions that you require in order to have an artistic practice ongoing that isn't about producing work and also the environment that you're creating in, you know? What it's like to kind of create in a city like Beirut, which is very chaotic. There's a lot of uncertainty around, you know, funding. There is no funding in Lebanon is what I understand. So, you're constantly looking and outsourcing and sharing resources.

Yeah, I'm interested to kind of hear from you like how the environment of the city that you live in work in affects your art practice and the kind of work that you produce.

Maya Zbib - 15:32

Um, we actually we, most of us at the company, and myself, we graduate from the Lebanese University's of Performing Arts theatre department. And it was actually a building...the whole art department was in the building. And the theatre was actually in the basement.

So, for years in the basement of a building that is very small, with very small stages, like there were three, actually three rooms that were turned into stages, but the stages were very small. The whole space was damp all the time. Sometimes we would have, like, water rising from the ground if it rained too much. It was, you know...if you had any kind of asthma you are doomed! You know, very, very crowded, very small. I don't know how I don't know how we graduated from that place.

But what I know is that it was a beautiful spirit. And people wanted to do things. And so, we were just doing things like making scenes, performing, doing scenes in the hallways, rehearsing in a small room or rehearsing on the street, finding a classroom up and the other departments to rehearse. And then we would put it anywhere. So we were able to just, you know, rehearse in very small spaces, even do a lot of physical things, we had a very physical training at university, so a lot of our scenes of physical we would move in space, but in very small spaces, and then we'll put them on stage for our exam or whatever.

And...and then later, when we graduated, we didn't have a lot of access to spaces. When we started the company, we were rehearsing and in another building of the UNESCO, so they were allowing us to rehearse there. And it was this very bad floor with carpets, you know, carpeted floor, I think we were doing dance training, and we'd have like, our knees hurting us! But we didn't care, you had a big space, but it wasn't adequate for dance at all.

So I think everyone who comes out of the university comes from this, you know, from the lack of resources are used to just doing things wherever there's a space. And I understood that when I when I travelled the my Master's at Goldsmiths in London, and there was always like, a long line to find the space to rehearse. And I would always choose a classroom, I didn't mind. Just go to a classroom and dance and do my physical theatre...theatre performance. And everybody would be shocked, like, how are you doing this?

But it's training, it's a kind of training that, you know, wherever you go, you just do it. And then you know, you get...you deal with injuries, you deal with the space restriction, you'll deal with what it means for your performance, to then be put in a big space. And this is something that we've learned because we've been rehearsing in this house, for example, for a long time, which is an apartment, and then we'll go to a theatre to put our play and then we would be shocked.

Like, we had four by six metres and now we have a stage of 11 by eight how are we gonna...we have three days because we cannot rent the space for too long. So we have three days to adapt whatever we've done in this small house. So it's, I mean, a training in itself to transpose yourself in different spaces.

Lee Serle - 19:43

Just using the resources that you have, I suppose, at the time and making it work somehow. But I...and then kind of, you know, looking to Zoukak's work, you know, it's often very political it's can be violent, and it's dealing with a lot of, you know, issues and socio economic problems and you know, all of the politics in Lebanon and Beirut. And then I was, again in Beirut recently, in February, and you were presenting your latest work *In My Heart's Eye: The Love Project*¹, which is very different to what I can see as the rest of the body of work of Zoukak.

So I'm interested to know, kind of like, how that came about? What changed, and was...was it in the way that you were creating that, that work came about?

And I know that we spoke after our last collaboration in New York with Matteo López at Mass MOCA², that, that process kind of changed things for you, and then created this latest work, which is very different to the body of work, which is very physical violence, and dealing with a lot of the terrorism problems in the city.

¹ <https://zoukak.org/productions/my-hearts-eye-love-project>

² <https://massmoca.org/event/lee-serle/>

Maya Zbib - 21:11

Yeah, I mean, for me, our collaboration with you and Matteo Lopez, that we...that we worked on for several months, and then different...different phases, was an eye opener in the fact that...and that was also due to the context of the work that was supported by Rolex that allowed us to take this time as well. Because we didn't...we weren't expected to have kind of product at the end, we were collaborating to see what comes out of it.

But it also has to do with the way we are, the three of us, and I was so happy to get that part of me, which is not about achieving. And I would love...I used to love it, when we would be in material studio or at the...at The Lark³, just not doing anything for two hours, but actually doing a lot, you know, the three of us sitting, not speaking.

And just everyone in the space, thinking about topics that we wanted to develop this piece. Everyone in the corner thinking about their practice and how my practice can meet yours and Mateo's etc, and vice versa. And how, in the end, it all came together. For me, it's just, I knew it would come together. But I didn't expect it would be such a pleasure, such a surprise.

And...and this really taught me a lot about trusting the process even more and trusting the people you are in the room with. And...and because you know, because I do see I make theatre, I'm always looking for meaning. And it's difficult sometimes to pin it down. And what I really enjoyed about working with a visual artist and a dancer is that it brought me to something I know and I like that I forgotten, is that meaning will emerge.

And you don't need to, you know, you don't need to define it from the start. You need to have, you know, the concepts that we'll want to dig into and then meaning will arise. And that was something that I really enjoyed rediscovering with both of you. And in a way it really affected the creation process of *The Love Project* that you've seen *In My Heart's Eye*.

³ <https://www.larktheatre.org/>

Yeah, the process also itself was...I let it be rather than try to achieve things. Of course I had, like phases and I knew what I wanted from it as a director, but I didn't push anything. And in the end, I think it came together of course there's always room for...there's a butterfly, haha...there's always room for...for making it better, there's always room for making it more make more sense. I still think there are ideas that I wanted to go to...to get out of that show that didn't come out fully. But the and I was very surprised again that it happened in such an organic way.

And I think it's about also making the people in the room feel happy while creating. I mean there's something about happiness. You know, you have to be happy while creating and you have to be fully engaged and fully responsible and this is something that we believe in a lot in the company: that the actor or whoever is on stage, is fully responsible for the work as much as anyone else. So, it's...it's something that we are taking together and achieving together. And then something happens.

Lee Serle – 25:17

Yeah, yeah, it was...it was kind of very memorable for me in a lot of ways, particularly in thinking about how, as you say, we spent a lot of time together, you know, working individually on and practicing our thing. But when we got to Mass MOCA, we had one week, and it all just came together. And I think, you know, there are those moments where you kind of go, “Oh, that's right, I do have this practice, and I know how to, kind of, apply all of these things, in order to create something”, whatever that thing becomes, and just, kind of, trusting that that practice and process is there.

And...and it kind of brings me to that question of, like, you know, is his practice, you know, your art practice different to the creative practice, or the performance practice? You know, or the work that you're creating? Are they all part in one of the same thing? Like, are they all part of this one practice?

And I think, you know, when I look back to early, early works that I made. I don't think I've really developed my own practice in the beginning, and I was...I was thinking about it yesterday. But over the



past couple of days, since I've been asked to do this, and I think is my career has been kind of like, as a dancer and a performer for the first half, and then shifting into making my own work. I didn't feel like I'd really developed a practice until I'd actually kind of made a few works, and had studio residencies and, kind of, was working on choreography, and working on how to apply all of those other, kind of like, peripheral practices that I have, and incorporating them into the work that I make.

And so that's why I this, you know, the producing of the work and the making of the work is part of the practice as well. You know, and as we're talking about, like, knowing to trust that, and that that is there, and that the work will kind of sometimes produce itself. And I think in that process, I got really...I've been doing a lot more improvisation in that kind of way, and having an improvisational studio practice. Because that, to me is really the...the way to not work towards a product at all. There is no, kind of, end result that you're looking for.

And so I feel like in the last five years or so, improvisation has become really important to me, in...in just...you know, practicing dancing, but also, you know, choreographing in the moment. And that kind of rapid fire decision making that you have when you improvise. And then knowing that you can access that in the creative process as well, if you are working towards a product.

But yeah, that time with you and Mateo was...was another one of those moments I spoke about, like earlier on presenting my work in Beirut for the first time with a very, you know, with people that are really unfamiliar with me. And then that moment with you and Mateo where we really didn't have an end goal in mind, but because we all just, you know, relied heavily on what we kind of knew, but also like, discovering new things from each other. It just kind of unravelled in this way, that was really quite beautiful.

29:09

I suppose that was another thing that I'm interested to kind of hear from you about is...is the audience's role in the, the making process. You know, my experience of just being in Beirut recently, in



February, there was one particular aspect to the performance which involved you know, a female dancer that was very sexualized and, and I noticed that there was a lot of, kind of, resistance from certain audience members, to the point where they were just like, take her out. You don't need her.

And I am...and of course, you didn't it. You stuck to your guns and I'm glad that you did, but I'm wondering, you know, in the kind of process of making performance, the consideration of the audience for you. How...you know, because you've made some quite radical performance, I guess you'd say, that would be confronting for an audience. And I wonder how much of that is, you know, part of your thinking in the process?

Maya Zbib - 30:24

Yeah, I think the audience in Lebanon is very emotional, they get emotional about things. So not everybody, of course, but you know, there's a part of the audience that gets like, whaenthey hate something, they hate it with emotion, when they love something, they love it with emotion. And there is a kind of also desire of putting things in their role. Like dance is this kind of dance, theatre is this kind of theatre, etc.

So, for me, it was a big challenge to introduce this wonderful hip-hop dancer, Louloua, into the performance because she doesn't have a...like a contemporary dance training. She doesn't come from this school of physical theatre where you can mix the theatre and that's in a way that is usual. And I wanted that wrongness because, you know, I was talking about love, we were talking about love and, and a lot of love is also sexuality. And I wanted this kind of hyper-sexed presence. And I knew it would be offensive to some people, especially in our context. I mean, even the most open-minded person can also get offended, of course.

Um, but the shocking thing is this easiness for some people who were like, "No, no, she doesn't fit. If you remove her, the show will be great, just continue...continue with the show." And I like that. I like that people get so concerned, and they, ... they feel they...they are part of the work and they feel they

are entitled to say things. Sometimes it hurts, sometimes it's rude, it depends on the state of mind you are in. But ultimately, with the distance when you think about it, it's much better than just not saying anything, you know, because it leads to a discussion, it leads to thinking about what people perceive.

Of course, I also had a performer who was not performer who was our colleague, Mo, who came on stage also at perform. So, there was a lot of different kinds of presence. And this was quite shocking for the audience who expect to kind of mastery of, you know, acting or dance or etc. Whereas what I wanted to present is this kind of real life roughness, whether in performing acting or in dance, and that was a choice.

But it means that also, you know...you think about the audience, because you know, that they would have something to say on certain things. But ultimately, what I do, and what we do, is always trying something, you know? And I like that. I like to try something that is out of my comfort zone, and out of the audience's comfort zone. To do try different interactions to see how meaning comes out of this kind of interaction and what it does.

And, of course, a lot of people, you know, loved the show and loved Louloua and loved the presence of Mol and etc. But for me, it would have been really boring to just do it in a safe way. Of course, there are recipes for performance, less, like there are recipes for film, for, you know, blockbuster movies...there are recipes, you can, you know, it's... it's...you can make an easy performance if you want. But that's not the point. For me, it's really about trying different formats, trying different ways of dealing with the audience.

Because also...because of our space, you know, the audience is very close already. So already you are in the same space with the audience. It's not like, you know, you have a space where you can do your thing, and then the audience can feel whatever they want. And also because it's a choice, we really act directly with the audience to speak to the audience directly and to...in this particular performance, we

were you know, interacting physically with them as well, inviting them to do certain things. Something which, is quite, you know, difficult now with COVID. But it's such...it's a challenge.

And I like...I like to do that. We like to do it in the company: to try different things. And even if it's uncomfortable.

Lee Serle – 35:16

Yeah, is this the, kind of, the first time that you had involved in audience like...like participation? Because it's, you know...as you know, a lot of my work is participatory. And how did you find that experience?

I found that when I've made, you know, interactive works, it's ... a lot of time is taken up with kind of trial runs, and trying to understand how the audience will interact. So I found that that, kind of, became so much more part of the creative process was, was this sharing, but also, you know, trialling of the work on the audience over and over and over again, before it was kind of presented. Which has me thinking actually, about this next week that I'm wanting to make about making that the kind of interactive part of the work. Just inviting an audience in every day of the rehearsal and having an open studio, I think.

Because I'm still interested in in kind of the direct and very immediate audience kind of interaction and feedback, but not in the same way that I have done previously. I'm really interested in, kind of, how it can be more of an ongoing interaction. And an ongoing kind of, and...and not that the interactions with the audience necessarily have to be physical or anything like that. It's just having an audience there every day during rehearsal would be kind of an interesting process. I mean, it might be hard to get one in every day depends.

But is it...was this the kind of the first time? I mean, I suppose, no because you've done a lot of, you know, like intervention performances. So, I suppose that would have had a lot of interaction.

Maya Zbib - 37:10

I mean, we always we do a lot of work outside of the theatre. So, we do work in villages and public squares, in certain places, certain cities other than Beirut. So, the fact that there is a kind of interaction. And there are some other shows where we asked the audience to contribute with stories at the end of the show. And my solo, one of my early solos, I had a kind of interaction as well.

I think this one is a bit more advanced, where we actually asked the audience to do things. And we did all these trials as well, we did it with the...the team and Zoukak, like the communication officer, the administrator, like, we'd bring them from the office they'd be like, "No, I don't want to do that!" and we'd test it with them. And sometimes invite some friends as well. And they'd been embarrassed and annoyed.

Lee Serle – 38:19

What are you working on at the moment now that you've wrapped up that the last work? And obviously, no one can really tour at the moment or anything. And, you know, I also understand that you're in the process of cleaning up your studio and offices because of the explosion in Beirut. Are you able to work at the moment or have things kind of completely shut down?

Maya Zbib - 38:49

I mean, we are...I mean, after the explosion last month and until now, we've managed to do some...to fix the space a little bit to make it, you know, usable, but not in a theatre, as a theatre facility yet. We've had to give back a lot of our equipment, some equipment was damaged, so we don't have the ability to do any kind of performance. And also there is COVID. And there's the economic crisis, which makes it difficult to also try to understand who will go to theatre and what capacity? How can you, you know...what kind of ticket price will you ask? And you know, we don't want to make people work for free. So it's a whole long process, I think, to understand all these things.



At the moment, our first thing we're focusing on is we have a kind of a mentoring programme where we support the work of four artists that we are following. Each one of them is followed by one of the company members and we, you know, support them in creating a performance at the end of the year. So we're giving them rehearsal space, a small grant, technical support, whatever means we have, and dramaturgical support, etc. and getting them to the completion of their works.

And we also have other artists...four other artists-in-residence at the studio. So we're focusing mostly on other people, young people, because somehow after the explosion, especially, there's a kind of desperation for the artistic scene and the theatre scene.

So, the most important thing now is to have more people do their work and conditions that are okay. In order to say that we are still here, we're doing theatre, we're doing our work, despite everything. And, yeah, and support young people coming out of university who, you know, have no perspective when it comes to theatre, especially, and dance.

So, we have mostly dance and theatre artists in our studio at the moment. And we're very excited, all the projects are really, really very powerful, very political, but also very personal. It's quite moving. There's a theatre company that came out of the of the demonstrations, for example, a group of people formed into demonstrations, because they were singing and doing puppets. And then they formed a company, so we're supporting that. There's that dancer as well. It's a nice combination of young people.

Lee Serle – 41:40

Yeah, I knew...I know that Zoukak does a lot of outreach programmes like that. That you've had drama therapy, but also kind of mentorship programmes and theatre for young people, refugees. It's a huge kind of programme that Zoukak has, for such a...you know...a small collective, and a small theatre, you're kind of reaches far and wide, which is quite amazing.

And, you know, I feel like teaching and kind of connecting with the younger generation also is really important, as I find for me, and maybe it is for you to...to kind of like understand what their concerns are, what their interests are in art making and practice. And I find that really enriching. Like, I love, you know, teach teaching at tertiary institutions and understanding what the next generation is interested in making and what kind of performance they're interested in seeing.

Yeah, it's...I found it has been really important to my art making and practice is teaching. And I, you know, there is that saying that you only really become as good at something if you can teach it, how well you can teach it. I'm not talking about teaching technique and teaching dance, like, you know, when I'm facilitating improvisation workshops, or kind of co-choreographing the students and things like that.

Yeah, I feel like that's shaped a lot of the way and how I make work over the years. And I'm sure it has for you too, particularly when you're...with these outreach programmes, and you're going to different different countries and...and, you know, refugee camps in the region, and kind of understanding the struggles of different people. But also kind of like, you know, as you say, like, during a protest, positive things can come out of that, too. Like you say a company forming, like, within protests. yeah, it's...it's super interesting.

But I'm seeing Tom. So, I think we're moving on to Q&A time?

Tom Pritchard – 44:07

Yes. Fantastic conversation. Thank you both so far. I just wanted to pick up on a question, Lee, that you asked Maya a moment ago, about how your practice has adapted during this period of time. And I wondered if we can throw that question to you? Obviously, not necessarily having access to a dance studio in this time and I know that you touched briefly on other parts of your practice and how your



practice exists outside of the studio. So, I wondered if you wouldn't mind chatting a bit more about that to us?

Lee Serle – 44:39

Umm, sure! Well, I mean, I've always kind of...no let me start that again.

I think during the time of, kind of, COVID and being locked down, I started practicing a lot more of writing and practiced a lot more of drawing, and other things. I have not danced a step since March. And, you know, there's been a lot of online classes and all these things, and I just kind of, you know, didn't feel that I could engage. And I think I was quite happy just to have a rest for a little bit.

Um, but yeah, so every day, I take a walk for like an hour and a half, and I, you know, have this internal dialogue and kind of a Q&A with myself as I'm walking. And when I get back, I spend half an hour or so just kind of writing, whether that's, you know, something to do with my internal dialogue or not.

And I found that that's something that's been ongoing and was kind of always there. But I...I think it became more like a repetitive and consistent thing that I started to do. Since, you know, we couldn't go to a studio. And that's been a really kind of important and big thing for me, and particularly the kind of writing practice, because I feel like this so much of our career as an independent artist, it's...it's all about application writing. And I was quite happy to just like, not do that.

And it's not for anything, and I feel like, you know, in terms of thinking about practice, often, it's kind of all of those things that are in the periphery that you do or participate in, or do regularly, that's not necessarily about creating a product or product driven kind of thing that has an outcome. Did that answer the question? Kind of?

Tom Pritchard – 47:05

Yeah, absolutely. And I wonder just to, kind of, building on that—and perhaps this is a question for both of you—is...these adaptations that have happened during the restrictions have happened during COVID and other situations, do you have a sense of these things being substitutes for the practice that was before or things that actually have been, you know, unearthed or discovered as part of a practice that you feel have a longevity beyond this period where you can't access a studio or you don't have access to a theatre or those kind of things?

Lee Serle – 47:41

Um, I think for all those, kind of, other practices that lead into my choreographic practice, I feel like it's become more regular and more concentrated and I...I just have more time to invest in them. And I think, hopefully, now that we're able to kind of access studios, we are in Sydney now, that I can continue to kind of keep them being as regular as they are now that they don't just kind of fall away. Um, you know, we'll see how that pans out. Yeah.

It'd be really nice to, you know, have regular access to the studio course, and just be able to practice dancing. And, you know, I think that's kind of everyone's, every kind of choreographer and dance artist's dream, or theatre maker's dream, actor or whoever, is to... yeah, because it's often about resources. And it's like, you know, how can you or how do you practice your art form?

Now, visual artists have a studio a lot of the time or, you know, they may work with paint or drawing, so it kind of lends itself to other spaces. And I suppose dance does too, as well. But you know, I'm not going to go down the local football oval and practice down there. And my home is absolutely not an appropriate space. We need to do that...

Yeah, so I'm hoping that it continues on. That it's...it's much more an ongoing thing than just something that's come up during COVID, that will fall away eventually, once life gets back to normal.

Maya Zbib - 49:33

I have a question for Lee. Can I?

How does it... like, when you start to think about choreography and you start to work on it by yourself, how does it change when other dancers come in the room? Like, do you have it all set up already? Or is there a large part of improvisation? Or does it depend on who the dancer is, their particular technique or physicality, how does it shift your work when you work with other people?

Lee Serle – 50:06

Yeah, when I'm working on my own, you know, obviously, it's a very different thing to working with a group. And I guess your question about how that shifts, is...it really depends on the dancers who I'm working with a lot of the time. And because I like to, kind of, take their interests in and what their creative practice is into the work that I'm making at the time as well.

But lately, it's been much more focused around improvisation with the group work that I'm making, or currently, you know, in the process of trying to make. Yeah, because I feel at this point in time, improvisation is much more interesting for me at the moment, in that it feels like, you know, there's infinite possibilities with improvisation. Because once choreography is set, it's kind of set, and then it becomes repeatable. And, you know, I like the...I'm in that mode of enjoying the excitement of improvisation and where that can lead and...

But it does have a lot to do with the dancers that I'm working with. And obviously, I...I don't hold auditions or anything like that. So I...I asked specific dancers who also have that interest. And then also kind of, you know, sharing our practices together and letting...letting the whole group kind of like, not run the rehearsal process, but just have, kind of, equal input in that way. And I'm really open to everyone proposing things for the group rather than working towards a specific concept or theme that the work should, kind of, like achieve. You know, we talked to...you spoke about it before about this whole need and desire to achieve something or that there is this kind of end goal or something should be communicated. And yeah, I feel like improvisation, just kind of like, lets me let go of all of that. And let go form and let go structure and all of these kind of known...yeah, kind of known things or...

And I think it just, kind of, lets you let go of judgement as well. So there's no like, "this is good, this is bad, throw this out, keep that thing". It just kind of all exists within the work.

Maya Zbib - 52:54

But then when you start a work, is it about an idea, a theme or a way of moving? Like, where do you, going back to the thing about meaning, do you start with a concept, a meaning and a desire for an idea? Or is it just kind of, you know, a way of moving or set of things that are forming? You know what I mean?

Lee Serle – 53:18

Yeah, I think it's...yeah, it's been both, I think.

I've definitely made work in the past where I have either kind of had this imagery of what I think of work should be, or I'm interested in a particular kind of theme or topic or concept and worked towards that. And kind of, you know, done quite specific tasks or processes in order to kind of achieve that.

And I think that was much more in my earlier works. And, you know, I was talking before about, when I was younger, I didn't, I didn't think I really had a recognisable artistic practice. So, I kind of was falling back on all of these known things that I'd learned from other choreographers and working with other choreographers. And taking kind of like these toolkits from each of them and using those as like the method to create the work that I want it to achieve. And then I think over time, in the development of kind of having more of my individual artistic practice, I've relied more and more on just letting things unravel. And...and focusing on just getting into the studio and starting and not knowing where it will end up.

But the problem is *that* is, in the application writing process to get funding to make the work you have to tell them what it's going to be, for the most part. So it's this kind of like, you know, tug of war, like, I



don't want to pin it down to be anything. But I also have to write this application that has this clarity around an idea or clarity around a concept. And that's quite frustrating.

I mean, of course you, you can kind of, you know, write applications, and kind of just, I guess, explain what the process will be and kind of how you will go about the process of making the work. Um, but I'm just not sure that those applications are as strong as the ones that go, "this is what the work is gonna be. And this is what it's about. And this is how I'm going to achieve it." And it just is all very kind of laid out.

So I'm...yeah, I would love to more and more just be in a studio and with other people. And just, you know, as you Mateo, you and I did, we kind of spend time together, we shared our practices, we had many conversations about art making, but also about, you know, the greater state of the world at the time. And this work was about all of those things, without us having to pin it down and say, "This is what it was about", and work towards that kind of, and have all these milestones along the way.

Tom Pritchard – 56:05

So, I think we've got time to just squeeze in one more question. This one's come from Michelle.

Maya, maybe to you first of all: do you find your creative practice and process develops alters greatly with each work that you make? Or do you have a signature method to creating your work?

Maya Zbib - 56:28

Hi, Michelle.

Umm, no, I mean, I think it develops because every project brings with it, for me, and for the company a way of working. Of course, there is a kind of style that is Zoukak, or Maya, or...you can see it, but somehow, sometimes you can see two shows that are completely different. And it's about mostly trying to...again, it's about meaning for us. And the idea, the concept, what are we trying to say

through the play, or the performance. And so what we want to say, and how we want to say it is always interrelated.

So, it's not about a kind of way of working, that is applied every time it's: "this is what we want to say today, this is what we feel is important, how can we translate that onstage? What kind of language are we going to use, what kind of a space are we going to need, what kind of set what kind of text". And so every time it's a whole process, and it's different.

Of course, the way we work is the same because we work in a very fragmented horizontal way. And then in the end, the show comes together. So it's never coming from the top down or from the down, up, it's always very horizontal, and we just produce material. It's very much like dance in a way, like the way we create it's very improvised, very much onstage, trying, generating material, and then a lot of it gets...goes away. But what, what remains is whatever is there to...that makes sense that comes...that that helps the meaning that we want to come up with.

Lee Serle – 58:25

Yeah, for me, I think my process has changed with each work that I've made. I think the solo works that I make, and, you know, most of my solo work has only ever been presented as work in progress, after studio residencies and things like that. And I'm kind of happy with that.

I quite like that I've got this kind of ongoing solo work that's never really kind of been presented in the, you know...in that kind of traditional sense of being presented. And that it is this kind of evolving thing where I take little kind of, it's like the sourdough starter or something, you take a little chunk and add it to the next bit. But then eventually, it kind of gets so diluted and watered down, but there's still this essence of something. So I think my solo practice in some ways has kind of stayed the same.

But the group work that I make changes, I think a lot with each...each process because I tend to...there's sometimes a little crossover in performance, but often it's a different cast. And that brings another kind of way of working and also because most of my work I think has been site-specific that



the work that ends up being made is vastly different because the environment and the situation is different.

And then looking to commission's it's always a different process because you know, they're often people I've never met, and you...and some of the processes and methods that you use to create work get thrown out the window, because, you know, certain groups of people just not going to go anywhere.

Um, but then, you know, there's always a few things that kind of cross over into each project, I suppose. Yeah, but I find that each project is the outcome of each project, I think is quite different. And that's because the process is different, the people are different, the collaborators are different. I don't often collaborate with the same artists a lot. But there has, you know, except Mateo López, Colombian visual artist who have now done three or four projects with he's probably been the most ongoing collaborator of mine.

Tom Pritchard – 1:01:02

Wonderful. Thank you both for this kind of last hour together. It's been really fascinating to hear about how you both speak about the development of practice and how that happens alone, but also in response to the environment and to the group that you're working with. And so yes, first of all, thank you, Lee and Maya, the last hour together.

Maya Zbib - 1:01:30

Thank you.

Lee Serle – 1:01:33

Thank you. Yeah. Thanks, Lucy Guerin, Inc, for inviting us. It's great. Thank you, Maya.

Tom Pritchard – 1:01:41



And thanks also to everyone that's joined us today in the audience. We hope you enjoyed today's conversation. And if you did, I hope you'll be keen to join us in a couple of weeks for our next conversation. More will be announced on that shortly on social media. And if you'd like to share tonight's conversation with anyone else that will also go up on our website as an audio file and text transcript in the next couple of days. So do share that on.

Quick reminder that tomorrow at noon, bookings will open for an upcoming online HOTBED workshop with Ros Crisp, so keep an eye on that that opens at 12 noon tomorrow.

Finally, if you have any feedback on tonight's session or the dance dialogue series in general, please feel free to email us at admin@LucyGuerinInc.com. It's always great to receive input from the community that strengthens our planning and thinking. So thank you in advance for that.

And that's all from us this evening. So thanks again, Lee and Maya, and to everyone for joining us and we will see you all soon.

- END -