

SHOTPUT.

The Shotput Podcast

'Screendance w/ The Motion Dance Collective (Anna Clifford & Omari 'Motion' Carter)

Released 20 September 2022

Lucy (L):

Hello, and welcome to the Shotput podcast. I'm Lucy Ireland, one of the Artistic Directors of Shotput, a dance theatre company based in Glasgow. In this podcast we have conversations with people from different practices investigating some ideas that are feeding us at the moment and that are informing our shows. We hope that this allows you to walk with us for a while, to take a moment to look at some things in the world outside. This first miniseries is all about film. It's being released in tandem with the Scottish tour of Shotput's live show 'Ferguson and Barton'. 'Ferguson and Barton' was inspired by Alfred Hitchcock's 'Vertigo', and that's why we're focusing on film in this miniseries. In this episode, myself and Shotput's other Artistic Director Jim Manganello sit down to speak to Anna Clifford and Omari Carter, two of the brains behind The Motion Dance Collective, a film production company based in London that makes screendance. We go into this form in a lot more detail in this episode, but in a nutshell this is how Omari has spoken about the practice: the choreography of the camera, the choreography in front of the camera, and the choreography developed through the edit. We discuss Anna and Omari's roots in hip-hop and ballet, how dance and the camera fit together, their collaboration with cinematographers and other creatives, and money and how it affects the work we make. Some information about Omari and Anna; Omari 'Motion' Carter is also, in addition to being a screendance practitioner and creative director of The Motion Dance Collective, a lecturer at the London Contemporary Dance School at The Place, a choreographer, and a body percussionist. He founded the MDC in 2011 and has since made many, many pieces of screendance, served on panels and given lectures on the practice around the world. He's also an incredibly open, positive soul, and a wonderful person. Anna Clifford is MDC's producer, as well as a choreographer and film maker in her own right. She's worked as a dancer and choreographer on stage and screen. Anna has also worked as a project coordinator for dance companies, and somehow also finds time to have an extensive yoga teaching practice. My relationship with Anna goes way back, we trained together on the dance course at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and it's been a real joy to see the different directions in which she's gone. There's more information on how you can catch Ferguson and Barton on tour at the end of this episode. For now, here's our conversation with Omari Carter and Anna Clifford of The Motion Dance Collective.

Jim (J):

Hello, Anna and Omari, it's so good to have you.

Anna (A):

Thank you so much for having us, we're really excited to talk with you.

J:

We were watching a lot of your materials, it's just so good to go back through what you do. These screendance pieces, these pieces of screendance, I receive them almost like little poems.

A:

I love that interpretation. I don't think we've ever heard that before. Obviously Omari is super connected to rhyme, especially with his recent academic work, and many of the films we've made in the past, but I've never heard screendance described as little poems, I really love that.

Omari (O):

Yeah, when you think about the film industry in general as well, a lot of people write their shorts first, right? Their little poems first. And then in the hope that one day those poems could potentially culminate into the book. In some ways it's like chapters, you're just trying to get some pieces down and then at some point all of these little ditties of writing that you've done can come together into something more fully formed.

A:

The book. The feature, the feature film.

O:

Right? Exactly.

J:

Do you feel that way? Do you feel that these are sketches or stories leading towards a feature?

A:

Definitely with some of them. Some of the shorts are part of a bigger series in our minds, I would say, and then others are just individual, have their own lifespan. But I think many of the shorts we've made range in length from like five to fifteen minutes.

O:

What I hear from a lot of filmmakers is they say there's always a shorter version.

A:

Yes.

O:

And I think what we've done is we've got on really well at short form screendance, it's a practice, it's a way of making. And even with poetry, it's a way of writing. But then when you get to maybe feature films or even writing for academia, it's a different type of writing so you have to be able to shift to that new way of writing. So, as much as we are excited about making a feature film, it involves a different practice.

L:

Do you have a feature film in mind that you would want to make?

A:

Yes. And we are not going to tell you about it! [LAUGHS] In case someone hears our idea and tries to make it before us.

L:

It could have been an exclusive on our podcast.

O:

I think when we think about it, the challenge is can we make a film with no words that is feature length? And how do you hold attention with that being the through line of it all? But then you've got places like DV8, for example, is such a big example of works without words that can grab attention for test of time.

A:

A long period of time, absolutely.

O:

So I think they were a huge inspiration for me in particular when thinking about what I want to achieve in the future, but to have the privilege to get the time to do that is something we're hoping for.

J:

But I suspect to that the brevity of your films is a challenge in its own way.

A:

Yes.

J:

I don't know if you have this experience, but more and more when we're in the rehearsal room, and I suppose we usually are making like hour long pieces, so somewhere in between short and long, but my impulse when we watch our videos back is "god, I just want to cut all the fat."

A:

Absolutely. It's like with anything, exactly what you say, cutting the fat. You can be watching something for one minute and be bored, or you can be watching something for an hour and a half and be enthralled.

O:

And we all know theatrical time is different from film time in terms of how much we can hold attention.

A:

Very much.

O:

You find that more in digital work. And I guess we're also conditioned in that way to get these short bursts of information and be able to read them quickly with digital, but you start to go... oh, what do we call it, killing the baby. Such a harsh term, but it is your baby, and it's really hard to cut the material when you love all of it.

A:

Yes. Especially when you're in the editing process and it's really hard to let go of things that you're attached to for whatever reason.

O:

Yeah, you were at the shoot, you knew it took three hours to get, you finally got it throughout the rain, and then you realise you don't need it. Wow.

A:

Yeah, that's hard.

J:

When you say you don't need that, is that an impulse, or is it more collated to, I don't know, an idea about story structure, or something that's more analytical?

O:

It depends on the process of the film. If it's got a very strict narrative structure, then half of the time we're pretty much keeping it as it is – most of the time. But sometimes you also get those pieces that maybe the choreographer doesn't know exactly how it'd be put together later on, it may be something a bit more improvisational, something a bit more abstract where you've gone to the space, you had three hours, and you've got pieces of your puzzle, and then you're taking it to the editing room to shape it – there's a lot more of "don't like that, need that", and trying and testing.

A:

Absolutely. Fractured Frames, one of our recent films that we sent you, I didn't know what the edit was going to look like when we shot that. I had created scenes of movement and intention and we shot them in the way that I wanted them to be shot, but when it came to the edit, Omari and I very much sat down and were like "how do we put this together?"

J:

Since we're onto specific films, can you tell us a little bit about 'Fractured Frames'? Okay, I just saw it, but to expand on that.

A:

Of course. 'Fractured Frames' was actually the second iteration of a film I made in college about the body, and it was a solo work and it was my first exploration of choreography, I would say, the first year of exploring my style of choreography. And I always knew that I wanted to revisit that concept, and so I kept it very abstract because that just is how my brain works in a more artistic way. When I'm choreographing, I don't often follow a strict structure, I just start with emotion and follow where that intention leads. So, with 'Fractured Frames' I worked with this amazing dancer, Alice, who is a very intuitive mover, which is why I wanted her for the role, and we just worked in the studio for a long time, we started with improvisations, I got inspired by the way she moved and then we set some choreography, made some phrases. And then I had this narrative structure in my head of what I wanted to say with the movement, what I wanted to say with the work, but like we said, I had no idea what it was going to look like at the end. [LAUGHS] And we also didn't have any music until after the edit was finished, so that was really interesting too, because normally when I choreograph, I choreograph to music, whereas this time around I did it in reverse, which was a really interesting experience. And I

really enjoyed it, because the movement was just so much more... it felt like it was coming from inside, instead of an external inspiration, if that makes sense.

L:

Did you have any music in mind?

A:

I think I had a vibe in mind, which I definitely sent some reference tracks to the composer, and some intentions. And especially for certain parts of the choreography, I was like "I'd really like crescendo here", or the strings here, or whatever it was that I had in my head. But she's such an incredible musician that I very much gave her free rein, and we went back and forth, I think she sent me maybe three drafts.

J:

Nicola?

A:

Yeah, it was Nicola. Nicola Chang is fabulous. And we just went back and forth with the music and I just did some feedback, she did a few tweaks here and there. I didn't want to dictate too much of what she was creating, but at the same time I needed to connect with the film.

L:

And you talk about 'Fractured Frames' started with the movement first, is that always the process?

A:

Good question, not always.

O:

No. [LAUGHTER] It always shifts. Even me coming from a hip-hop background, it was always music first, but then learning how to work in this way that we did with 'Fractured Frames', it's definitely more of a Hollywood film way, you make the piece and then you send it to the orchestra and they record over the top, the mood music you could say for some pieces. So, yeah, working that way I definitely am excited about, but sometimes it might start from poetry, if we're working with a poet, or it may start with Catriona MacPherson in her book 'Making Video' calls this starting point a formal starting point, where you start from the technology, or the camera is always moving forwards, that's our starting point, now what happens to the choreography based on that?

A:

And I think for our work in general, what would you say was our most common order of events when it comes to our process? I think we've done it so many different ways now, which has always been a great learning experience, but I think we're probably inspired by concept first and foremost and then build from there, right?

O:

I think so. I like narratives. I definitely am comfortable with trying to find at least a beginning and middle of something. But that also stemmed from what I see from a lot of the hip-hop dance community on screen now, is a lot of just freestyling spectacle battles and things like this for the camera, for the audience. So for me it was always something that I wanted to try and

break those bodies out of that pattern and try and tell more stories with those particular bodies.

J:

It's really interesting to hear the different initiators in the process, whether it's another choreographer or a choreographic idea or a story, so it's really clear that those shift, and I think that this is something, that film is so inherently... it's not even that it's good at it, it's constitutive to the form. And I very much feel like that's bled back into a lot of theatrical process, like film has inspired us to think about how a piece of performance can be woven together rather than just staged, if that makes sense. Sorry, there is a question at the end of this, which is are there any processes that you keep going back to in order to maintain that North Star, i.e. storyboarding or scripting or certain collaborative conversations?

A:

Absolutely.

O:

Yeah, I think you mentioned two of the kind of same things that we like to use, and what I would say templates. Oh, my goodness, I love a template. So, our scripts, when we write scripts everyone uses a different program, although I have a certain template that they use. Your storyboards, once you've got your storyboard template you're using that same template for every single piece. Our shooting schedule, we use a certain app for that. We always go through the same process of working our way through these templates. And whether that's the call sheet, all these admin things, our proposals. So I think for us I feel like we've gotten more efficient by having these strategies of our templates in place and we always kind of just work through those regardless of what the process is, these things need to happen.

L:

Yeah. Do you feel like having that strict template restricts you in any way? Or do you feel because it's there you can then go off and explore many things?

A:

Yeah, I think all the templates that Omari is talking about, they're all very... we're talking bare bones, "this is what we need to make this happen", so to have those templates in our treasure chest, as it were, means that when we get to each stage of the process, we know we can go here and use this and we know that it works because it's tried and tested.

O:

Yeah, you need to put those boundaries in place to know that you can play within a remit. So, yeah, I think they're important and that's why I really love them because we always say they stay alive. The budget is always changing, you may have your budget template but it's living. Every single day, something's going to happen and something's going to change within that, and that involves creativity within itself. So all of that comes into one, but once you've got that in place, you can be creative and free and perhaps even innovative knowing what boundaries you have to work with.

A:

The templates help us be more efficient in the way that we work as a team and in the way that we infiltrate our process with every team that we work with.

J:

Do you think that these templates, these restrictions... would you say this is one of the dividing lines between live performance in your experience and film? Or do you feel like this is something that crosses both of them? Because we don't have shot lists, for example, on a Shotput production, it's just not there.

A:

Of course.

O:

But you have script.

J:

Well, we don't.

O:

Oh, right.

A:

They specifically don't have a script but I think that some of them very much cross over, to go back to the question, I think our initial answer is yes, a lot of them cross over. And I think a lot of artists use some element of what we've been talking about, some element of a template, some element of organising your ideas or thoughts.

O:

Yeah, I definitely think there's a lot of crossover in the way that all creative industries work, but they just give different names to everything. One's speaking French, one's speaking Spanish, but we're saying the same thing.

A:

Like you said, you might not use a shot list, but you use lighting cues. You might not use a storyboard in the same sense...

O:

But you've got a scene breakdown.

A:

Yeah. So, there's just a different essence, but they are essentially the same thing.

J:

So, can you tell us a little bit about your journeys as artists? I don't mean to make it sound like it's only unidirectional.

A:

For sure, you go first.

O:

I started off as a hip-hop dance practitioner dancing, I like to say, dances of hip-hop culture rather than specific styles, but I love all of them. But, yeah, I started off doing that and doing backing dancing and choreography for music videos and adverts. And I absolutely hated it. And the reason I hated it was I realised there was a gap between the film making side of things and the choreographic side of things and the dance side of things. The production meetings were separate. We would arrive on set sometimes and not know what angle we're being shot at, or what the storyboard was, or they wouldn't realise that we needed a five minute warmup before we started doing some of these moves that we were doing. So, I realised that there wasn't really a conversation between the art forms that they were capturing, in some way. So, I was doing my degree in performing arts at London Metropolitan University, studying contemporary dance there, that got me in my contemporary dance world. And while I was doing that, I got my first music video that was dance specific, it was by a group called Stanton Warriors, who are kind of a production group, so they weren't in the video, it was just dancers in the video. And so from then I realised you could have a conversation, they were giving me certain rigs and asking me what I wanted to do with these rigs, and I'd never been trusted...

A:
You'd never been allowed inside a process before then, yeah.

O:
Right. And so I said "I want to do this only from now on."

J:
Sorry, they were giving you certain rigs, did you say?

A:
Yeah, like camera rigs.

O:
They were putting me on a dolly, and the dolly would slide and I would be standing on it, and then they'd ask me what I could do with it. Or they'd put me on this rig, I call it the Professor Green rig or Justin Timberlake rig, where the camera is mounted to you, so then you have all these boundaries and restrictions to play with. So I said I want to make work like this where this conversation is happening between the dancers and the film makers, and so I realised there was a whole world out there that was doing that, and that was the screendance industry. And just recently completed a Masters in Screendance at London Contemporary Dance School, and lecturing there now in all things dance, film, and hip-hop culture.

L:
Before you go, Anna, I just want to ask you – you talk about, Omari, as if you've been in music videos and then into screendance, is there a difference between the two? They both involve film, music, dancing.

O:
With screendance, I would say that screendance as a term is the umbrella term for any type of dance on any type of screen, so that includes music video, that includes TikTok, that includes Vimeo, that included VR 360, all of these things where we may encounter dance on the screen. But within that you have dance film, you have people who say video dance is another

practice. You have dance for camera and dance adverts and music videos. So, all of those come within the umbrella within screendance.

J:

Can I ask an ignorant question to distinguish between dance film, video dance, and dance for camera?

A:

Can I just say before you answer this question, because he's going to give you a very great explanation for this, but this was one of the main reasons we started our podcast, because this amazing conversation around definition of what do all of these terms mean? Because a lot of them are interchangeable, some people interchange them, whereas in some cases they are very specific.

J:

And we should say, we can plug your podcast now.

A:

Yes, our podcast, The MDC Talks, all things screendance.

O:

So, what was the question?

A:

The question was the difference between the terms that we were listing.

O:

You have the mother of screendance, they call her Maya Deren. When she was making work, her work was termed choreo-cinema. That was around 1940s, I would say, was when Maya Deren was making work. And then you had Catriona MacPherson, Scottish based artist, was the person who termed... I don't know if the person was using the term video dance, and video dance was very much so more integrating the camera within the practice of the work, so you'd see Catriona on stage with the dancers with the camera doing live feeds and integrating the camera into the improvisation of the dancers as another dancer.

A:

Camera choreography.

O:

So, it was a bit more around video art based practices. screendance is not a term used everywhere in the world, a lot of people just say dance film. But when I think of dance film, I'm thinking a bit more of a cinematic practice, potentially. So, yeah, I think 'Step Up', for me, is a dance film where something maybe like 'Fractured Frames' is probably a bit more of a video dance because it's a little bit more abstract, out there, and is incorporating the camera into that work in some way. So, yeah, I think within those practices come different values and ways of actually making the work and thinking about the making of the work. So, yeah, I think there are a lot of arguments and discussions still about the delineations of it, and even the people who have written books about screendance don't like the term that much. But for me I love using screendance as the umbrella term for everything, but also as a way of thinking about

the practice of the form. So, it's not the film, and it's not a dance, we are breaking down these languages to find a new common language that arguably be termed screendance practice.

J:

Do you feel like you are working within one of those categories more often, or not? I suppose you've just distinguished between two films, so perhaps the answer is no.

O:

Yeah, I think there's definitely a float between them. I think there's understanding whether we're being a bit more radical with it, because there's some films maybe where dance isn't as involved as heavily and we're a bit heavier on maybe the filmic side of things and looking more at the cinematography. Or there's the other way round where it's very dance orientated and now we're just trying to merge the film process into that process that has already been quite a theatrical one.

L:

Introduce yourself to us, go on, Anna.

A:

Introduce myself. Yeah, I started dancing from a really young age, I started when I was five years old, and then went to university in Scotland for dance, which is how I met the lovely Lucy, we were on the same course. And, honestly, I didn't know what screendance was until I met Omari. So, I was very much in the ballet world and then the contemporary world, the neo-classical world, just auditioning as a dancer, performing as a dancer. I moved to New York for a year to train and work at Joffrey Ballet School, and then after that I moved to London and was just auditioning, finding my way in the circuit here, and then I met Omari actually pretty quickly after I moved here, because we happened to work at the same place; when he was performing in Stomp I got a job as an usher at that theatre, which is how we met. And he basically at that time was already making dance film and he had already made a number of films with his company, The Motion Dance Collective, at that point, and he found out I was a dancer and so we started talking with the intention of making a project together, and he just introduced me to this whole world that I didn't really know existed and I was just taken by it. And then very quickly got involved with some of his projects, and then the rest is history.

J:

I feel like I should know this about both of you, but I'm realising that there's a gap in my knowledge about whether before you were working in screendance were you being the creator of a project? Was your introduction to being a creative of the project screendance itself, or was that something you were doing before you were making screendance?

A:

I think we were both choreographing on different projects. Omari was working a lot in the music video industry, like he was saying before, choreographing for it and performing in it.

O:

Yeah, and I was doing a lot of street dance theatre at Young Actors Theatre Islington, which is an acting agency that I used to go to, so I was doing a lot of long form dance performances with them, filming it, editing. I guess that was my introduction to screendance but I didn't realise it was.

A:

Yeah, editing those performances together. And I definitely was choreographing before I was making dance film, but for live work.

O:

I got Stomp four months after finishing university, so for me it was “oh, I can’t start my company now because I’ve got this full-time gig, so how can I keep making work?” and so film really fell into my lap in terms of being able to be flexible around my full-time...

A:

And just exercise your artist on the side of performing however many shows a week you had to do, right? Because when I met him obviously he was still working full-time in that show but he had... I don’t know how many films you’d made at that point, but he had all of those films that he’d made over the years and they were all so unique and I was just like “wow, okay, this is really cool”, because in my eyes he was like living the dream, performing and also creating in his own way his own work at the same time, which I just thought “this is an amazing way to do that.”

L:

When you’re making your films, are you always the same role within each other’s work? Or does that differ?

A:

I think we’ve kind of found where we want to be now, over the years we have definitely discovered our strengths and how we work best as a team. I would say now Omari directs mainly, and edits.

O:

Yeah, we had a go at doing everything. I feel like I definitely delved into doing as much of the different roles as possible, so now when I direct them I feel I can speak a few different languages.

A:

It’s the best way to learn.

O:

But I also now know my preferences. The third core member of our team is James Williams, and he’s our main cinematographer, so when opportunities come to do that we let James director of photography up that whole thing, because that’s his thing, that’s what he loves to do. Then we find roles within that. But if James needs me to operate at any point, then I’ll operate.

A:

Yeah, I think we’ve all done multiple roles for sure. You definitely the most because you started literally doing everything himself before he had a team. And then when I joined in I think I very much started on the dancing side, being in front of the camera mainly, that was our first few projects together, choreography and dancing in front of the camera. And then I got really interested in all of the roles behind the camera, so now I’m producing, assistant directing, directing.

O:

But that's the joy of the form, it allows us to jump. If we want to be in front of the camera, we can be, and if we want to be behind it, we know how to do both. So, yeah, I think that's what's kept me interested is it's such a lovely process to be part of something with such hybridity.

J:

You mentioned James Williams, cinematographer, director, production, other missing person – or not missing, but missing currently, right now – I wonder if you could talk to us a little bit about what that creative collaboration is like, and whether – I assume – it changes from project to project, but are there things that stay constant?

A:

We met James in 2017, I think, because we met him when we met 'I SEE YOU'. 'I SEE YOU' was our first project together, which is another film that we made as a trio. And it was also our first film together co-choreographing. And, yeah, basically I think we met, he slid into your DMs or something?

O:

I slid into his... [LAUGHING]

J:

Someone slid somewhere.

A:

Someone slid into the DMs.

O:

We were doing something with paint, and he had just...

A:

He had just done a project with paint, and we were like "this guy..."

O:

And I was like "oh, what was that paint you used? And would you be interested in meeting up?"

J:

Was this code? [LAUGHING]

A:

But he was already film making and operating, and so we invited him to collaborate on this project with us, and it was great, and I think we instantly clicked, all three of us. So, from that point on, we started working with him more and more, and then eventually he became an integral part of the team and we couldn't imagine working without him. Now it's very much when we don't get to work with James it feels like an arm is missing. When you click with someone creatively, that's an incredible asset to have on a project, and it's something that we wanted to just hold onto. We didn't really see where it was going, we were all freelance, and so we weren't sure if it was something we could carry on, but we sort of approached him at some stage in our relationship and were like "let's do this."

J:

So, what's the process? And you can talk to me a little bit like I'm an idiot, because I am in terms of film making. Is this a talking thing? Or do you all arrive on set and it's like "okay, here we go"?

A:

Oh, gosh, lots of talking beforehand.

O:

There's lots of talking. Because, yeah, the first thing we want to do is say "this is how we work. And tell us a little bit about how you work", because everyone's going to come from a different space and background, and we like to do things that bridge the gap between the two practices which may not be comfortable for everybody. For example, we're trying to integrate it more, we still haven't managed it.

J:

The two practices being film and dance?

A:

Film and dance, yeah, exactly.

O:

Yeah, yeah. And so I started to want to do warmups with the crew.

A:

Physical warmups.

O:

Before we started the shoot, just to bring everyone together, "you're going to be holding the camera for this amount of time so let's all just circle our shoulders together for a second", right? So, what was happening the crew were unable to do it because they had to set lights, they had to rig the camera, they had to set all of these different things, so what I did was that I wrote the warmup into the shooting schedule. So, let's look at the form of film, if I take the rules of film and write my process into your rules, then you've got no excuse because it's in the shooting schedule, I've given enough time for this warmup to happen.

A:

We've given time for it to happen.

O:

So, little things like that is where we go "right, this is what we love to do, this is the way that we work, how do you work?" and then we finalise that with "how do we need to work for this film?"

A:

And I think just to bring it back to our core team, in terms of the roles that we've now adapted as, I guess you could say, our main hats, the ones we feel most passionate about or feel that we can excel at the most as a trio, for example on 'Don't Play With L(Kn)ives', which is the film we made in 2021, Omari was directing that, James was the director of photography, I was the

assistant director and one of the producers – we had many – and so the process of that, obviously there was a million creative meetings beforehand, the dancers were creating, we were gathering the technicians. All of the nitty-gritty was going on behind the scenes. James and Omari and I were breaking down shooting schedule, all those things. James was talking light equipment, what kit was needed. It's all about pre-production for us. We relish the process of pre-production, because we have found that we work best when we have this level of preparation that allows us to show up on the day and the shoot just runs as smoothly as possible. Obviously you always have problems, things don't go according to plan, but when you have all of these things in place, all of these templates in place, and a team that you know can problem solve together well, I think at this stage we just feel like we know we can work as a team and so when things don't go according to plan and when things do go wrong, because they always do, we know how to react in a timely manner and still manage to capture everything we need.

J:

I guess what I'm interested in too, and sorry if I'm digging, picking at a scab, for example 'Don't Play With L(Kn)ives', which we'll talk a little more about, and 'Fractured Frames', on a really... I'm going to use a terrible word, but on a surface level they look very different to one another.

A:

Oh, 100%.

J:

So I guess what I'm asking here, I assume that look is born in the collaboration between you and James, but what makes those films look different? What conversations have you had with James? Or what intentions have you set?

O:

[LAUGHS]

A:

I think we are going to say the same thing. It might not be the same thing. But on a very base level, money.

O:

Oh my goodness! That's literally what I was just about to say.

A:

'Fractured Frames' was a passion project that I made with no budget, zero.

J:

But surely you were talking about what you want. I understand these, and I know I'm being picky, but I understand collaboration, money, all the things that aren't a talk about "what do we want from this?" but surely you talked about what you want.

A:

Oh my god, yeah. So, with 'Fractured Frames', I knew that I wanted the camera to be handheld. I knew that I wanted it to be very intimate, and a lot of it to be very close to the dancer, which is why the feel of that film is entirely different from 'Don't Play With L(Kn)ives'. Obviously

'Don't Play With L(Kn)ives', there was so many more different elements involved, and also many creatives, Brook was the choreographer and the creator of the concept but he was also collaborating with Omari and James to create the visual of what this actually looked like on screen. So, there was a lot more at play in terms of "I have this choreography and this idea, but how do we make it look its best and get the story through?" Whereas in my case with 'Fractured Frames', it was all me. I didn't have to compromise on anything, because James and I, I just told him what I was going for and he made it happen, whereas 'Don't Play With L(Kn)ives' was a bigger team and therefore a lot more strings involved to make the puppet dance, if that makes sense.

L:

Yeah. And I feel like the reason that Jim is bringing up these two films, and because we're interested in them both, is because when we watched them we thought a lot about film genres, so for Fractured Frames we were like "there's like horror overtones to it", and for 'Don't Play With L(Kn)ives' it was a little bit sci-fi when they pop into this other world.

A:

Yes, absolutely.

L:

And do standard film genres influence the work when you're making them? Or do you think about them at all?

A:

Maybe subconsciously. What do you think, Omari?

O:

Yeah, I don't know necessarily if I think about film genres, more so that I think about the authenticity of what's happening in this piece. I guess with 'Don't Play With L(Kn)ives', we knew it's not a comedy, we know that it's about knife crime and it's probably going to be quite dramatic and dark, so everything is geared towards that and moving towards that, so that if there is something that feels funny, we'll address it on set and go "actually, that's not the right way to do it, change the way you're doing it." So, yeah, I think there definitely is a theme to it. Anna's was definitely another dark one, and the themes had to do a lot with body image and all of these sort of things and being looked at and stared at, so James was a lot more voyeuristic in that film, in terms of looking through the forest. So, all of these starting points and the way we construct the work, we then put it onto the camera and go "well, can we choreograph for the camera the same way we're choreographing the dance?" Then we put that onto the edit, what makes this feel dark? What makes this feel like the character is being watched from afar by how we're organising these clips? So, yeah, the starting points really fuel how we develop the work throughout the different members of our team. And then James will have ideas that are specific to that. In 'Don't Play With L(Kn)ives', for example, when we go into this other worldly space, James wanted something to be a little bit wrong, because the film is about something that's really wrong, so he broke a wine glass and he put pieces of the wine glass in front of the lens in order to make a very slight distortion in the frame. So if you look at some of those images, you'll see that maybe a shoulder might just warp a little bit, it may have another shadow of a shoulder on it. And that is just from James going "actually, this is dark, something's wrong, so let's do something to the camera physically to make it wrong." So, that's why it's really hard to go "okay, what is the process?" because...

A:

It's different for every single project.

O:

...is always fed by the narrative and by the story.

L:

And did you discover that when you were shooting?

A:

It was an idea in pre-production for sure.

O:

Yeah, and James and I have tested it before in another shoot where we were playing with shooting through glass. And I'm pretty sure he was watching a few things online about it and other things like that, so we definitely draw from things that we're researching in our own time and our practices. We like to do test and experiments too, so we'll do those tests and little short pieces just to play with light for a day, and then we'll have these little ideas and things that we can bring into the work later on.

J:

Since we've been mentioning it a few times, could you do a little synopsis, or could you introduce us to 'Don't Play With L(Kn)ives' a bit?

O:

Yeah, totally. So, 'Don't Play With L(Kn)ives' was a fantastic commission made by DanceXchange, now known as Fabric, which was for the Birmingham International Dance Festival, and they commissioned a fantastic choreographer by the name of Brook Milliner, who is first of all a hip-hop aficionado and one of the popping champions for the UK alongside running some of the best dance groups in the world. But, yeah, it was an honour to work with him because I've always been a big fan of his. But within this project, the commissioned artists, and Brook was one of them, got the opportunity to work with a production company, and so Brook got the opportunity to work with us to bring his commission to reality. And the reason I bring this up is because it forged a different process than what would usually happen where really the choreographer has as much autonomy as possible within the production process, which is very rare, and is something that we try and push forward, how can we make that happen where the choreographer is really at the top of the food chain within the process? So, yeah, the piece he proposed was about knife crime with not just the UK but specifically in the Midlands as well because the piece was about themes to do with the Midlands. So, we had maybe a trio of stories that we got of knife crime from the Midlands...

A:

They were inspired by true stories.

O:

Right. And Brook made choreography based off of those stories in order to make a piece for young adults that would hopefully allow them to see knife crime in a different light and in a different way, and a way that maybe is a call to action to do something differently.

J:

I know a lot of theatre makers will have a specific person in mind in order to aid the making, is that a tool that you use when you're making film, like "this is for my mother", or "this is for a young person"?

A:

Yes, absolutely. I think it helps as well. It helps you sort of narrow your scope a bit too. And like we were talking about before, when your creativity runs away from you and you get overwhelmed by all the possibilities of what something could be, it's one of those things that you can come back to that reminds you why you're doing it and reminds you who it's for and therefore what it should be.

O:

Yeah, and I think a lot of the time for us it's about working out who the camera is. Because the camera is your audience, it's the person that you're speaking to. So, it's one of the first things we have to work out, actually who is this other person in the space with us, and how are we interacting or not interacting with them? Because sometimes, and to be completely honest, the films are for me. Sometimes it's like "this is just what I need right now", as maybe catharsis or another thing, but I need to get this out. And if it hits other people, then that's a bonus. And then when you're writing your funding application, or sometimes finishing the film, then you're going "actually, yeah, it does actually look at mental health. It does actually look at BAME community and BIPOC" and you start to look at the web it can weave. So you can see that specificity and authenticity as something that is really important when it comes to writing applications, and it can be hard.

A:

And just creating in general, like you said, you can really tell when it's not coming from a personal or an intimate place. Because if it's not coming from you, why would you do it? We don't make art for other people. It's a natural side effect that it's for people to indulge or enjoy in, and maybe we like the feedback or the validation of the sense of an audience, but I think in general, it's fair to say a lot of artists don't make their work for other people, they make it for themselves and they hope that it connects with somebody else out there. And most of the time it does because our nature is so connected that most of the things we're talking about, whether it's very specific or very general, those themes, those concepts, can connect to a lot of other people.

L:

Do you find that being on panels or judging I'm assuming some form of competitions, or even Omari teaching at The Place now, do you think it's honed your practices? Or made you key into what you're really interested in?

O:

Teaching, in some ways, depending on how much time you're given, can be quite a lovely process of being able to play with different ideas and things. But half the time – and all teachers will agree – sometimes you're teaching the same thing each year, and it can get a bit stagnant and you're dying to make some art to be able to practice some of these things that you're teaching, because also some of the things that we teach and the processes that we want to play with we don't get enough time to do a lot of those things, including the pre-production,

all of these talks and conversations. Sometimes they can't happen, we don't have the time. The judging is great, especially if it's screendance work, we work a lot of dance film, like more than any other type of film. So, I feel like that puts you in the idea of what's out there internationally in a very short amount of time. And then you just get to see work, you get to see what people are choosing to be in their festivals and the patterns and the tropes that are appearing in a lot of different work where not many people would get a chance to do that. So, that has really opened my eyes to see the patterns and the things that are regular in screendance, and then we would hope to fill those gaps in what we're seeing.

A:

From the little bit of judging that I have done, it's sort of opened my eyes to this desire for everyone to be original without reinventing the wheel. So, when we make work, we're always striving to be innovative and create something original, something new, something different, as is probably everyone else, but it's a way of doing that without overextending yourself to the point it doesn't actually land or connect anymore. Too often we get hung up with this idea of trying to make something brand new; it doesn't really exist anymore.

L:

I was just going to talk about in our work each show we make is kind of just a different iteration of things that we're interested in.

J:

You're not supposed to say that

L:

We can cut it!

A:

Absolutely, which is why the arc of any artist's work is incredible to watch, because what they make is normally a reflection of themselves or a reflection of how they're feeling in that moment of their lives, and the change that happens in people's work and the way that they approach it and the processes, and just the way that it looks and it feels is super interesting, and that's one of the things I love about when you do something like this on a podcast or you're just having creative conversations with other artists, we would always do lots of research into the artists that we had on our podcasts who we admired. Naturally we'd watch as much of their work as possible beforehand and just try to understand the lifespan of their work as it existed at that point in time, and I just loved watching the arc that took place over their life, because watching their first film and their most recent film, you just really get a sense of, wow, who this person is, what they like, what they don't like, what they're attracted to, what speaks to them. It's just a really interesting little insight into who they are.

J:

A film that we haven't talked about yet is 'Finding My Feet', and you said something in that, Omari, that stuck with me, which is – and sorry if I'm bastardising the quote – but you talked about the bits you're not supposed to see.

A:

Yeah.

J:

I don't know why but it hit me as a kind of statement of intent as well, at this moment in your career. I wonder if that's true, or if it feels like you're using the camera or using screendance to show the bits you're not supposed to see.

A:

It's a great question.

O:

Yeah, it's such a good question. I love those bits that you're not supposed to see.

J:

Hey, this is a family podcast! [LAUGHING]

O:

I think because I love moving both between in front of the camera and behind the camera, when I make work I always get fascinated with trying to break that wall between the two, and really 'Finding My Feet' was just a conversation with me and James in a room for like three hours, that's all it needed to be.

A:

It was a total experiment, wasn't it? You, at the time – obviously for context for the film – Omari had had a knee operation and was out of action, he wasn't allowed to do anything. [LAUGHS] He had just started walking when he made that film. He wasn't allowed to jump, he wasn't allowed to run, he had literally just come off the crutches and was allowed to walk. Which, as you can imagine, as a dancer and a physical being, is a struggle mentally, and not just physically. So I think obviously in the interview you hear a lot about his journey and what he was going through and just kind of finding his way and finding his feet, but I think what we loved the most – what I loved the most – about what came out of that process was it had this documentary feel that really just kind of clicked.

O:

It felt very authentic. And I set a couple of rules of things that James and I would play with, but, yeah, I wasn't even sure if I wanted to release it. I think I tried to edit it...

A:

Oh, yeah, that's true.

O:

And it tried to do it and I just couldn't do it.

J:

And was that related to the trauma of... sorry, we don't have to get into this if you don't want to, but the trauma of the injury?

O:

Yeah, 100%. It was like I'm in it still, I'm still here, I haven't left it. So, really, it was a bit too close too home. So, James edited it the day after in one sitting and we never changed it after his edit.

A:

It was very raw, very authentic to how you were feeling that day and how you and James just interacted in that room. And then he just did this brilliant edit of still being in that headspace, I guess, the day after.

O:

Yeah, it was really good. That was another cathartic one for myself. And it allowed me to move on from it a little bit. But then I realised that so many people were also struggling to talk about their injuries, a lot of dancers had contacted me, we ended up doing a lot of different research about health of dancers and things like that. So, it spurred on a lot more than I was expecting. But, again, sometimes you find your audience through showing them a little bit of your true self. But, yeah, it couldn't have been a theatre show, no one would have paid for it.

[LAUGHTER]

J:

We can put that to the test.

O:

Yeah, come see a dancer that cannot dance.

A:

Come see the dancer that can't dance, yeah. But it was just an interesting exploration of "okay, I'm a dancer who make dance film and I cannot dance right now."

O:

But I can make a dance film about it.

A:

So, what is this film? What can I do? Right? Like what can I do with this? You guys just tuned into instincts and went with it and trusted it and that's what came out at the end.

L:

Sometimes that's the best way, isn't it? It's like let it out speedily and then...

A:

Yeah.

J:

This very week we've just come from rehearsal – you can't even call it rehearsal – but this week we're R&D-ing a new project, and the first thing we did was put a big piece of paper on the wall that says "instincts" on it. You can experiment and experiment and make and remake and recut, and in a way I think it's analogous to the editing room process, what we do with a new creation. But it's so important to capture what those first instincts are because very often two years later you'll look back there and you're like "it was on that board. We could have done this in a week."

L:

We just want to end with a little fun thing.

A:
Uh-oh! [LAUGHS]

L:
So, Omari 'Motion' Carter – Motion in the middle. Anna, if you had one, what would yours be?

A:
Oh, god, you know, I've never thought of this!

O:
You've got nicknames for days, though.

A:
I have a million nicknames, but... let me think, okay.

L:
We've put you on the spot.

O:
Anna, Anna Banana.

A:
No, but it has to be cool, equally as nice as 'Motion'. Anna... I have a middle name, obviously, but I don't have a tag-name, because that's very much something from the hip-hop community, right? Like 'Motion' was Omari's tag. Honestly, I don't know.

O:
We'll have to think of one.

A:
I'll have to think on that and get back to you.

J:
That's right, let this be an intention that we're setting at the end of the day, just like at rehearsal, what's our intention for tomorrow?

A:
Yeah, what's my tag?

J:
Well, thank you so much, it's really great to talk to you.

O:
Absolute pleasure, it was awesome, thanks for having us.

A:
Yes, thanks for having us, great to see you.

L:

That was our conversation with Omari Carter and Anna Clifford, we had a great time chatting to them. You can find some links in the description of this podcast, including The Motion Dance Collective's website and other ways to find Anna and Omari. Thank you for listening to this podcast, the first miniseries of the Shotput podcast. This podcast was made with the generous support of Creative Scotland, it was hosted by me, Lucy Ireland, and Jim Manganello. It was edited by Sonia Killmann, thanks Sonia. If you would like to engage with Shotput further, we would love to catch you on tour. You can find all Ferguson and Barton tour dates on our website, www.shotput.org. We are touring from the 17th of September to the 15th of October 2022. And some theatres where we are performing will also be screening Hitchcock's movie 'Vertigo', so there are many ways to engage with Shotput and our work just now. Thanks for listening.

[END OF RECORDING]