

MIF Originals

Episode 5: Alfabus

Billie Meredith [00:00:05] Dialogue is brilliant and dance is brilliant but the second that you put them together it just kind of creates something...

Yandass Ndlovu [00:00:08] It becomes its own artform I guess. It's not dance it's not poetry it's... po-dance.

Isaiah Hull [00:00:28] Welcome to the final episode of MIF Originals! Five artists developing work for Manchester International Festival have been given a blank audio canvas to fill; a chance to try something new with the podcast form. This episode explores if and how poetry and dance can combine to create something original.

[00:00:54] My name is Isaiah Hull and I've been your host for this podcast series. I was also one of four poets that co-wrote the production Alfabus. We worked with three dancers from the New York company FlexN and three amazing dancers from Manchester to create a new show for MIF19.

[00:01:14] So in this final episode I wanted to break down some of the processes that we used and question if we were successful at creating something truly original.

[00:01:25] To give you a bit of background, Alfabus is basically a story about rebellion, about patriarchy, about censorship and a young man who overthrows his father and the repercussions that his colony has to deal with.

[00:01:45] As part of the storytelling, the dancer's role was to be the body to the voice. So we split characters into a poet and a dancer. And it was almost as if the poet had a spirit animal and it was a really cool thing to have. It felt like we had weapons.

[00:02:08] What I found hard was the amount of miscommunication that happened. Often working with other poets there's a guaranteed amount of miscommunication that will happen between ideas if we're jumping off each other's lines. The space for miscommunication also breeds a beautiful moment. So when I say miscommunication it's not a negative - I mean the potential energy in interpretation brought out so much more with the fact that it was a physical body that we had to translate meaning with.

[00:02:49] So I've asked for some help with this one from a dancer and a fellow writer from the show. In a moment you'll hear the voice of Yandass, one of the best dancers in Manchester hands down. Just a fact, just one of the best. And one of the most passionate people I know. The poems in this episode are about nothing in particular. They were written under the influence of Yandass' movement on recording.

[00:03:17] But first here's one of my co-writers the brilliant poet Billie Meredith, OT representative, talking about her practice.

Billie Meredith [00:03:27] I'm a narrative poet - so I will tell a story, whether it's an evening at a bus stop which then has a huger meaning - so it's very candid, very down to earth. All poets have a different voice. Poets go through changes, they can be abstract. There's poets who speak a lot on nature and use those as metaphors. I think coming together to

have all these different voices create an ensemble piece was a really exciting time to kind of see what all these different voices could do.

[00:04:01] When we sat down to write together usually the first thing that is done is creating a word bank. So if we are writing a piece which is about mourning, where they are grieving over something, then you would write down in a minute as many words as you can associate with grieving with death and then from that you then do an exercise where you use as many of those words as possible. And that's kind of the first way to purge all these ideas and words out of you.

[00:04:33] From there we then edit, so we think: what do we want to evoke? Do we want our audience to be saddened? Do we want them to feel hopeful? Do we want them to be reflective? And it's going through each of our free-writes and each of the words that we have written and being more particular; making sure that the words that we're using have meaning and any line that doesn't emote something or doesn't explain something is cut.

[00:05:01] Poets also write in a completely different form. Myself, like I said, I write very narratively so there isn't strictly form, a lot of it is prose which means that it's just a series of sentences. There's other poets who write very freeform and it's a lot of abstract words kind of woven in and out of one another. Other poets write very clearly in stanzas, so sets of four, sets of eight, they are very specific rhyming styles.

[00:05:27] I think the easiest way that we manage to merge these was sometimes using a poem or words from one poet and then applying a different form to it. So if one poet wrote very abstract, we would then apply a structure to it. You would apply stanzas and certain rhymes to otherwise very free flowing words. And I think it creates a really interesting blend where everyone's represented as well. There's a lot of neat tricks and things that you can do behind the scenes which make sure that you get the reaction that you want out of your audience.

Isaiah Hull [00:06:20] I wish ghosts on myself for company in the future. So what, I'm angry. When hers arrived I didn't wipe them thinking 'I could write about this.' I was tired, illustrated, simplifying a sinatra. You won't hear the end of this. Word in the air, abysmal. Noirtier, a symbol. The way growing up is single mine did diamond from oil the temple. Scarecrow large tin foil offended. Please no testing. My water is dicey. Sunrise and midnightly. Ash on a bad omen makes me rich in the eye of a witch. I love being last. I go jag in the foal, layer coon goes sculpt me a blast. Culture is fast. How's it going so far. It's sulphuric acid. The genie in me doesn't tease me with three. Give me something to throw if the audience is mean.

[00:07:56] Next let's hear from Yandass.

Yandass Ndlovu [00:07:57] Currently my preferred style is afro dance, contemporary and hip hop. And I find that with each commission or soft piece that I have to create I've got different approaches dependent on what I have first. Sometimes the music comes first or sometimes the idea comes first. Or sometimes just yeah, I do want to express a certain thing in a specific way.

[00:08:20] With text the number one rule from the DV8 company, they say you can't show what you are hearing. So if I'm working with text, I don't want to be too specific on like, 'this is a gun', so then I'll showcase a gun with my hands. I want to show a little bit more of what is the gun doing? Or the thing that's just happened before, or the thing that just happened

after. Or the feeling that the person in front of the gun has, or the person holding the gun. So I want to look at a little bit more of what isn't said in the text. And sometimes it does end up being a little bit more animated and very specific, but that works when you've consciously chose it to be like that.

[00:09:02] And I find that when I'm freestyling I sort of hold onto a word or hold onto a sentence. I'm like okay cool, this sentence is making me think of this, so I'll express that for a bit until I hear another word or until I hear another sentence that I'm like cool, now I'll express this because that has got the best visuals to sort of show.

[00:09:18] And sometimes I do it more structurally so I create a word bank or set up a movement that an audience would have associated with the word specifically. Then I repeat that later and the audience can be like 'ah cool, that's that!' It sort of works in the musical theatre reprise when you hear a specific song at the beginning, then when you hear it after with a bit more crescendo or something you're like 'okay cool, this reminds me of that thing.' And I guess it's a very good tool, especially in storytelling.

[00:09:47] Audiences are never going to be able to fully understand exactly what you are saying because it's movement. And that can be received in a different way, like someone waving their hand could be perceived as a wave or could be perceived as a surrender, so it depends on what the audience feels. And the text helps obviously but yeah...

[00:10:18] [Isaiah improvises a poem to the beat of Yandass doing body percussion.]

Isaiah Hull [00:10:18] The point was not particular. My voice is more vehicular. It chose you into Dracula or nausea vernacular the umpire shouts vampire. The way I'd say the hate for late Tarantino tarantula the pain was not a paint thinner my veins are unavailable the way a wolf aware is not aware is not for where a loss of hair velociraptor on the rare occasion I fell down the staircase like a dictionary does.

[00:11:02] Here's a breakdown of a section of the show that demonstrates how dialogue and dance work together.

Billie Meredith [00:11:09] So this is one of the dialogue scenes in the play and it's between Alphabus who's our main character and his confidante and best friend Epsilon. At this point in the story, Alphabus has discovered that there are new words that have been hidden from him and his tribe and it's him kind of confused and disorientated trying to explain to her that she's been lied to and everything that they know is not true.

[00:11:33] I played Epsilon's voice and Isaiah Hull played Alphabus' voice. And then we had Yandass who was Epsilon's body and an American dancer called Slick who was Alphabus' body. One character would be represented by two people, one the voice and one the dance.

Epsilon [00:11:54] Are you okay? You look different. The ceremony's tomorrow, come on, get some sleep.

Alphabus [00:11:59] It's not, it's not the same.

Epsilon [00:12:02] What is this? That's not your dictus.

Alphabus [00:12:05] Something else.

Epsilon [00:12:08] Where did you find it?

Alphabus [00:12:09] Something old, it found me!

Epsilon [00:12:11] Okay, what do you mean it found you?

Alphabus [00:12:15] I mean it found me!

Epsilon [00:12:17] Have you opened it?

Billie Meredith [00:12:18] Me as Epsilon's voice says 'have you opened it?' and that was a moment together for the voice to have some movement. So it's a very simple type of tutting which is a dance style which uses hands and 90 degree angles: gestural dance. And it was one move, but within that line, both the body and the voice emit the exact same move so there's that sync.

Epsilon [00:12:41] You fool it could be dangerous!

Alphabus [00:12:43] It's beautiful! You have to see this for yourself.

Epsilon [00:12:45] I don't know what that book is, Alphabus, or where it's from. But I don't want anything to do with it.

Yandass Ndlovu [00:12:51] The fall, it could be dangerous. It wasn't so much of the body trying to say what the voice was saying, but was more trying to show the connection. It could be dangerous to the community, which we then find out later. So I had to have a really big movement moment which was a thud onto the floor, down.

Epsilon [00:13:12] We should tell Lexicus.

Alphabus [00:13:13] No! Please, please. He lies. This is called the Omegas, it tells the truth, the whole truth.

Epsilon [00:13:19] What has happened to you, old friend?

Alphabus [00:13:20] The blood, the bark, the heralds and the hearts.

Epsilon [00:13:24] No Alphabus! Stay here, I'll get help.

Billie Meredith [00:13:34] And then toward the end of the scene as it's kind of divulging into chaos and they're confused and Epsilon's trying to get an answer out of him, the bodies come together and do more duet pieces. So there was slight lifts and spins, so it's less about the voices and you just begin to watch the dancers.

Yandass Ndlovu [00:13:51] Yeah. And it's sort of like, when a boy and a girl are trying to hit it off and the words are no longer important, it's now the actions that are important; it's now the actions that take over. That's sort of almost the visual of what Epsilon's mind could have been going through.

Billie Meredith [00:14:06] From what I remember out of the corner of my eye is a set up where Slick kind of came down to the floor and held Yandass and she circled him. The

energy at which they would do it, it always felt like she could be wind tunnelling off the stage just because of the speed at which they would move.

Yandass Ndlovu [00:14:24] And him breaking his bones because he literally had to turn his shoulders back to the front and all the way around.

Billie Meredith [00:14:29] He has a very powerful movement. I think there's loads of those in there which again, dialogue is brilliant and dance is brilliant, but the second that you put them together...

Yandass Ndlovu [00:14:39] It becomes it's own art form I guess. It's not dance, it's not poetry, it's po-dance.

Isaiah Hull [00:15:04] I don't know if bringing together two art forms make something original or if it just make something married for a moment.

[00:15:11] In Alphas it felt like we were creating new ways of conveying a message to an audience through poetry and dance. I don't know if it made it new or original but it did feel like that at times.

[00:15:27] I think dance and poetry haven't truly been married yet. Maybe there is just another level that I'm not seeing. I felt that we reached it at times and we nearly reached it - so with the idea of the bodies being the spirit animals. And separating the two by voice and body. I think I don't necessarily agree that just by bringing two things together makes it original. There's more than that.

[00:15:52] I saw a poetry and dance show while I was making Alphas. It's called Mothers. And one of the dancers from our show was in that one so we went to see it, went to support, and it was amazing. It felt disciplined. It wasn't tailing off and it wasn't going too far. And it lent itself very well to the movement because the movement felt very similarly like it had its own rules. Mothers created its own rules and stuck to them very well for the piece that it was. And there were things in that show which was poetry and dance that I thought, wow, I didn't think of it in that way. There are different angles to attack this whole genre.

[00:16:40] And that inspired me in returning back to the rehearsals for Alphas. So I do think that this hybrid, this marriage, momentary marriage of two art forms can bring about new ways of conveying the same message that poetry can't achieve or that dance can't achieve, or that they both can achieve but achieve better together.

[00:17:14] Thanks to Billie Meredith and Yandass for their thoughts and words. The music you heard was by Vicky Clarke and Epic B. Epic epic epic! It was presented by me, Isaiah Hull, and produced by Rebecca Gaskell. It's a Reduced Listening and MIF production.

[00:17:31] That's it, our final episode. Guys I'm gonna miss you! I'm really gonna miss you! What do I do now? Where do I go? I hope you've enjoyed this series about originality and being different. All the stuff we've talked about, I hope you enjoy it.

[00:17:51] It's good to have these conversations. It's good to challenge your process but sometimes it's even better to eliminate all of that and just become a true source for whatever inspires you.

[00:18:06] That's it, I'm out.