Finding the Dancer's Voice:
An Interview with Gracefool Collective

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello, and welcome to the Gallery.

Our guests today are Kate Cox and Rachel Fullegar, two of the four founder members of Leeds-based Gracefool Collective. Having met at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, at the time when the institution was beginning to leave behind the rigours of technical training in favour of creative experimentation, the four female dancers united in a shared quest for finding their voice.

The conversation we are about to hear gives us a glimpse into how they make what they describe as 'post–intellectual–pseudo–spiritual–feminist–comedy–dance for the modern day era'. We hear about the company's relationship to the possibilities and limitations of dance as a medium and about their conscious choice to use speech, humour and direct address as part of their choreography. At the centre of Gracefool's work however, is the politics of collaboration and a commitment to sustaining a shared practice that is truly pluralistic and democratic.

Gracefool Collective is one of the four acts chosen in partnership with Battersea Arts Centre to be supported by the Aural/Oral Dramaturgies Project.

This conversation took place on Skype on 6th April 2020, during the Covid-19 lockdown in the UK.

[00:01:41] FIRST STEPS

Duška Radosavljević: There are four of you, and you all met at the Northern School of Dance in Leeds. Maybe we can talk about how you individually came into that school and why? And how you discovered that you had interests in common, or a desire to work together?

Kate Cox: I came to Leeds to study Spanish and Portuguese at the university in 2009, and I spent a year doing that, but after about three months, I realised that I didn't want to do it. But I wanted to stay in Leeds, and I'd done a bit of dance but not loads, and Northern was one of the only places that did a foundation course, so I decided to just give it a go and almost accidentally ended up doing a dance degree. I'd met Rachel actually in the foundation course. After a year, I auditioned to stay in the training programme. But I'd done quite a lot of theatre as a kid, as a young person, probably more than dance – I'd danced with Saturday classes in dance, but I had done quite a lot of creative projects at the Hackney Empire in London, where I got put into through my drama teacher. Then I ended up doing dance stuff but it was quite collaborative, the creative process. There would be like 50 kids from the local area, and some were there to do music and some were there to do drama and some were there to do dance, but in the end we ended up making a kind of mish-mash show together. So, that was my coming to the creative process – [it] was, to begin with, really collaborative. When I got to Northern, I started doing dance and left behind theatre for quite some time. I think when we started training, we were in this weird transition phase where the Principal that was there when we were first there was kind of quite old-school in his approach to dance, contemporary dance particularly, this quite austere way of thinking of it as all about the body and very abstract. There wasn't really any physical theatre or fusing theatre and dance very much in our first years. My first choreography in the foundation was very abstract, which now seems bizarre to me. It's so far away from what I would make now, but just because that's what I thought you were supposed to make in dance.

DR: Because of the Principal?

KC: Yes, and because I had done some contemporary dance Saturday classes, but not that much other contemporary dance before I started training, so I didn't do it in school at all. So I hadn't really studied it, and I didn't really have a sense particularly of what it was. In a way, in the first year, I was really just replicating what I saw people do, and at that time it was our Principal who had this particular idea but it was also contemporary dance that was being produced at that time that we were watching and taking in. It was very abstract, it was a lot of like low lighting and beige clothes, and rolling around

on the floor and bodily-movement stuff. I didn't read it as saying anything in particular. I remember really clearly the first time – I can't remember whether it was in my foundation or my first year – but seeing another student in a student platform putting speaking on stage with dance, and it was the first time I'd seen it. Something clicked in my mind, where I was like: 'Oh, wow, that's so much more interesting! We can also use our voices!' In our third year, Rachel and I, and Rebecca and Sofia, we did a physical theatre module together with Rod Dixon from Red Ladder Theatre in Leeds. By this point also, our Principal had changed around. Janet Smith came in what must have been our second year. So that shifted quite dramatically also how people started – she opened out a lot how they thought about the training, and they brought in other practitioners that weren't just pure dance/movement practitioners. It started to open our minds a bit, I think. In that physical theatre module – we were all in it together – again it was learning to use our voices and our bodies at the same time. I think the thing that brought us together in a way was a shared disillusionment with the old-school nature of some contemporary dance. Like getting a bit frustrated with the limitations of just being able to say things with the body, plus that renewed interest in exploring work with the voice. Sofia and I, in our second year, did a choreographic research project on just speaking and moving, which now feels really basic, but was totally integral to where we are now – that we were exploring, in a really rudimentary way, like: How could you speak and move at the same time? What if you didn't move? What if you just spoke? And that led on to lots of our projects of working together, and I think that's kind of the thing that brought us together as a four, that we all were a bit bored with the contemporary dance that we saw being made and wanted to bring in different elements to make it more exciting. And to say, I think also, all of us had quite clear ideas about politics and themes and our values, and we did a lot of chatting about that. I think that we felt that there was no way we could get that into the work that we wanted to make without also using our voices and tapping into all of the things at our fingertips, which we discovered was more than just body.

DR: Yes. Let me hear Rachel's story as well, and then I'll go a bit deeper into some of that.

Rachel Fullegar: I'm from rural Dorset and my experience of any sort of performance growing up was pantomime and various working-class methods of performance. I really hadn't seen a lot at all of anything. I was quite academic, and then the school were quite persistent in me applying to Oxford or Cambridge, because we were a state school, comprehensive, and there weren't many young people that did that from the area. So I got pushed down quite an academic path, and one of the biggest things for me was English Literature and History. Those were my key interests, but I always kept Dance up alongside it, because it was my fun subject. When I went on a shadowing scheme to Cambridge – they used to pay for people whose family hadn't been to university to test it out before they applied – I remember coming back and saying to my mum: 'Oh, it's great here, but I don't want to do it, I want to dance. That's the only thing I really enjoy!' I was in a class of four people and the other three didn't turn up, and a lot of my sessions weren't very practical, they were more analysis-based. And I loved that because you marry that language-interpretation aspect of history and literature with movement. So I applied to Northern. I didn't have any concept of what dance school was going to be like. One of the reasons that I got into Northern – something that was always said to me throughout my training was that I was never a very technical dancer, I didn't have a lot of proper training from before, I didn't have a really good physical grounding and technique. So I struggled a lot throughout to kick bad habits. Quite early on, I realised that if I carried on this path of trying to be technician, it was going to be more of a struggle. And so early on I started looking at alternative things around me that I could do. I didn't really do drama. I went to drama club a couple of times when I was younger and enjoyed it, but dance was always the [main] thing. I really clearly remember being in Kate's piece in second year, I think, and I was doing a duet but we had to speak. It was the first time I was like: 'Oh! This can happen!', and I tried making choreography in a much more traditional way before because of the reasons that Kate already explained, because that's what we were asked to do. I wasn't great, they didn't go down very well, they were rubbish. I was just like: 'What? I'm not quite sure this is for me.' You could still try to figure out why I was there, you know: 'Why have they chosen me?' And it began to dawn on me that actually it was because I was much more of a performer. The feedback that I'd get from teachers was like: 'Oh, Rachel, you are often at the back, doing it wrong, but I'm always watching you.' So I was like: 'Okay, so if that is the base line, if there's something there, then how can I explore that?' Alongside that, I was building tools in improvisation, and that was like another toolset to use. In improvisation

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sometimes, obviously, sounds or speech would come out. But from my second year I started going back home and doing projects with the local arts organisation in Dorset, Activate, and the projects they got me involved in were really diverse. I'd done some producing work for them and I've been involved in a huge community project. So my world got opened up a little bit more. I was just interested, and that has always been slightly on the opposite of what people wanted me to do.

DR: Earlier, when you were talking, Kate, you talked about how you were all talking to each other about your beliefs, what was driving you in terms of your political orientation and so on. Was that something that was emerging out of what the course structure was, or was it just simply the zeitgeist among the people of your generation, if you like?

KC: Probably a bit of both. There was a massive shift in the way that the course was structured as soon as Janet came in. It was quite a radical shift that I think encouraged us to be thinking, challenging dancers, rather than just passive bodies – which I felt in my foundation course and a bit in my first year, that was all I was expected to be: a body that could learn someone else's movement. And suddenly she brought in a whole new, fresh cohort of teachers – guest teachers and new permanent teachers – who came from really different artforms and were really good at challenging us. We had a really great guest teacher in our second year called Amy Bell, who taught us choreography for a term. She works at The Place now. She makes a lot of her own work. But I remember it being the first time – and this was mid-way through second year – where we were being challenged on our views and in our choreography classes, we were being forced to articulate and explain why we liked something or not, beyond just being like: 'Yeah, I like it, it's nice!', which I just felt like up until that point had been the go-to – 'Yeah, it's nice, I like that movement, it was good!' She was really forceful with getting us to pin down what it was we liked and didn't like in order to know what we wanted to make or not make. I think there were quite a lot of turning points like that, where we had all of these teachers that suddenly were challenging us and forcing us to broaden our perspectives outside of the system. What felt to me, particularly in foundation, was that really niche, closed world that didn't feel like it had anything to do with the outside world. It was this weird dance bubble, and suddenly what Janet did is make students see that you were making work to go out into the world, and therefore you have to allow this world to influence what you were making, and have thoughts, and be a thinking dancer that made stuff that was relevant and important to you and your values and your politics. Probably another thing that brought us together is that we all have also been interested and done lots of different things, or been interested in different kinds of subjects. I don't think any of the four of us were ever just interested in doing dance. I think we all came to it, in some ways, in a weird, kind of accidental way, just to see what happened a bit, but I almost feel like all of us could have done different things. I think because of that, I certainly wanted to keep hold of the perspective of there being other things going on in the world, and that that could influence the kind of work that I was making. I've always been interested in politics and talking about that a lot, and before, with my foundation course, I didn't really see how that could be brought into dance, how it had any kind of relevance to it. I think we spent a lot of time amongst the four of us talking about the stuff that interested us or the stuff that made us angry or the things that made us laugh and all of the things that we thought were absurd about the world. I think it started to dawn on us that we didn't have to keep that world separate from the creative work that we were making.

[00:13:30] INFLUENCES

DR: What would you say then are your formative influences? You've just mentioned Red Ladder, and you mentioned Amy Bell. Is there a way in which you might be able to map the territory of what your practice is by reference to artists or musicians or other dancers that might have in a way shaped the way in which you make work?

RF: For me, if I'm really honest, there are dancers and choreographers that I admire and who I'm really interested in their work, but it's not often dancers and choreographers whose work I would definitely be like: 'Oh, I'm so inspired by that!' I didn't really see a contemporary dance work until I was 15/16 maybe. That was Lea Anderson. I remember coming away being just completely confused, but in a really great way by it, because she's so intricate in the details that she puts in her work, but it's very performative, it always feels like really strong portraits. Well they are, you know, based on portraits of

people behind it. Also Hofesh Shechter and *Uprising* was one of the first contemporary dance pieces I saw. In opposition to that I saw Siobhan Davies' – I think it's called *Four Quartets,* or *Two Quartets,* or something, and I hated it. I hated it because I couldn't understand why you'd want to watch people running in a circle. I just really felt like I was drawn to things that in a very basic way were more relevant to me, that I could see a reflection of myself in. And so, with all of my experiences before that had been pantomime or the occasional straight play – and very much comedy. I watched lots of comedy as a young person, with my family. Particularly, my family went to see a lot of children's theatre. I went to see *Fireman Sam* when I was little and things like that, live, rather than actually it being something that they did as adults. But then, when we were at Northern, one of the first pieces that I saw was Maresa von Stockert's *Trapped*. It had this amazing set where they had like a huge cube that they tilted and rotated and they hung from it, but the movement to me felt clear, like I felt like I was being talked with rather than at, it wasn't deliberately trying to hide something from me. I felt really sort of – I vividly understood it, but also there was room for my own interpretation. That felt like I wasn't being talked down to in a particular way. And actually, Amy Bell was in that piece. She really stood out as a dancer to me. It felt like that was her on the stage but also telling a story, being a character. As the years have gone on, it's people like Pina Bausch who within the dance context have been influential. But on the other side of things, [there's] Lucy McCormick and theatre-makers that are coming from an experimental aspect or live art aspect of things, that I felt that there's just a realness or just a sense of like honesty within it that I related more to. I've never been into fantasy or mystical things. I'm more interested in the nitty-gritty of what it means to be human.

[00:16:54 to 00:18:04] 'What are we talking about?' from *This Really Is Too Much* (2015)

DR: What about you, Kate?

KC: I did loads of projects with Hackney Empire in London between the ages about 13 and probably about 19. They do a massive pantomime every year. We always used to go, and I was in it once, which was weird, but they sometimes asked some of the young people to be, you know, gingerbread men and stuff. When I was growing up, I watched a lot more theatre and comedy than I did dance, so I didn't have really that many cultural references for it until I got to Northern. Initially, the dance that we were watching was quite abstract and it didn't move me that much. But then watching Tilted, and I also remember watching footage of DV8 shows in our Academic Studies classes, and that was the first time I'd come into contact with Lloyd Newson and physical theatre basically. And again, I remember it blowing my mind that you could utilise dance and movement in this way to tell something very human, and relate something really clear to people that felt, for me, that dance often couldn't do on its own. I actually did this project – it must have been in the summer after my second year – called *Street Stories* with East London Dance and the Royal Opera House. They put young choreographers with other artistic disciplines, like costume designers and musicians, and we had to create some work. We had workshops with people – one of them was with Lloyd Newson who's quite a formidable character. I've come into contact with him a couple of times since then and he's an interesting character, but I remember really clearly one of the things him saying, and he has some quite strict views on this. He said: 'There's no way you can tell anything without speaking!' It was something along the lines of dance in and of itself cannot tell a story, you need more, which I wouldn't necessarily agree with actually now, but I remember at the time thinking like: 'Yeah, I can really relate to that! I just don't get it when people just do movement. Like, it's beautiful, and I can be moved by it, but I don't get what you're trying to say to me unless you tell me!' It was seeing some of those physical theatre, the big-name physical theatre ones, like Tilted and DV8 and Gecko, using movement but very much to tell a story, and also using set and also lots of other influences that I felt was a little bit where I had come from in terms of making theatre that would have a narrative or tell a story. Actually, I think I did, later on, get really into Pina Bausch. I think my parents took me to see a Pina Bausch once, when I was like ten or something. I remember finding it hysterically funny, but thinking it was super weird and just like: 'What are these people doing on stage? Like why am I watching? Why is everyone watching?' Like, this was mad to me. But since then, as I got older and went into training, I feel Pina Bausch has been a massive – I mean, how could she not be – a massive influence in terms of her… I think that the difference with Pina Bausch versus some of these other more physical theatre companies like Tilted and DV8 is that sometimes it's incredibly abstract. Sometimes I watch it and I have no idea what she's thinking but I

always believe, I always feel moved by it in a way. She's always presenting something incredibly human, whether it's through speaking or through movement or through visuals. I never feel with her work that I need to get what she's saying, because I just fundamentally go in with the trust that she knows what she's saying, and that you can interpret it how you want to. That was a shift, I think, in my perception of viewing work, in a way that I didn't and still really don't feel with most other dance work when it's more abstract. And then, yeah, like Rachel said, the getting into more live art, fringy stuff. Now I feel like I've shifted away from this – the initial DV8, Gecko, Tilted – now, when I watch those, they seem almost like too slick and perfect to me. There was something about watching a lot more DIY stuff that was more messy and trashy and had much more references to pop culture. For me, I found it more relatable in some ways because it dealt with the messiness of life, and also – I think, crucially – didn't try to pretend that it was anything other than what it was, which I think shifted for us between our first and our second works. Suddenly watching all of this fringe stuff and seeing that you could name that you were in a theatre, that there was an audience there, that you were watching it and they were watching, and we all knew that we were performers, and you were paying us to watch us perform, and we were trying to please you as performers. There was something really freeing in really watching some of those shows at the [Edinburgh] Fringe – Lucy McCormick and also Ira Brand, who did a really interesting drag king show – 'Yeah, we don't need to pretend that you're not there, the audience. We can acknowledge you and then, you can acknowledge us and be more involved in it.' Now I find it very weird going to traditional plays and thinking: 'Why are you pretending we're not watching you?' This is like watching a weird film where you're shouting very loudly.

[00:23:03] POLITICS

DR: You mentioned the Hackney Empire a couple of times, Kate, and I just was looking at the history of the Hackney Empire recently. Specifically I was reading about the years of Roland Muldoon running it and how important it was in the 1980s and so on, in building the alternative comedy scene in London. Is that where you're from, Hackney? Is that why you went to the Hackney Empire, or was there a political reason?

KC: [*Laughter.*] Political reason! I'm from Northeast London, the borough of Haringey, which is the next borough along from Hackney – so not that far. I was one of the first cohorts in this thing that they called the 'Artist Development Programme'. I think it was number three when I came into it, now it's number 20 or something. They were trying to recruit young people from in and around the local area. So maybe now it's more Hackney-based, but at that point basically they were just going into lots of state schools in and around Hackney and doing workshops with young people, and trying to encourage them to audition for this project. That's how I got involved, because they came into my school and my drama teacher told me to go to this workshop/audition thing. Then they described it and I just thought dance sounded more fun than drama, so I did that without really thinking about it very much.

DR: Was there a legacy of this alternative theatre scene as part of what you were doing, or was it just simply now having a completely different identity as a venue?

KC: In some ways, Hackney Empire has kept up this alternative scene in that it's one of the only theatres I know, in London at least, that's really, really rooted in the community. The audiences they get are so much more diverse than any other theatres in London because they really stay true to what people in their community would want to see in terms of their programming.

DR: In terms of your politics as a company and the way in which you brand yourselves as radical feminists and you are committed to this idea of shared leadership, where does that come from, and how has it evolved over the years of your working together?

KC: In some ways, it just started because we didn't want a boss and none of us wanted to be the boss but also didn't want to be bossed around. It grew quite organically in terms of just – we all basically wanted to do everything. We're four quite strong characters, none of whom wanted to be told what to do by anyone else. And because we started creating work collaboratively and we did quite a lot of projects together in our second and third years – and often we would make it together or we'd do it in pairs, the way that we created and devised was always very collaborative – it made sense to just keep working like that. It happened quite naturally because we just got asked to do things – we got

commissioned, for example, to create a short piece for a festival at Northern about two months after we graduated. It got offered to us as a group, so unless someone had really pushed for leading that or several of us had really stepped back from doing that, it was always going to go that way, where we just all took on everything together. It took many years of us playing around and testing methods of making that work better or worse. Our whole first couple of years were real experimentations in terms of how we devised collaboratively, whilst also it not needing to be everyone doing everything all the time. I think that at first, we interpreted that as everyone needs to be equal in everything. Over the years, we managed to find tools and methods to do it more succinctly and effectively, whilst also keeping true to the ethos of there not being a hierarchy or not being a boss. But some people over the years, ended up with different roles but those roles were equal.

DR: Have you found over the years, though, that you individually had natural affinities towards particular aspects of running the company together? That somehow the division of labour occurred naturally?

RF: Looking at it very crudely, definitely Kate and I had more of an affinity with words. It's difficult to say you like writing a funding application, but we're more into that. You know, you can find interesting things within that about wordplay and how you put your ideas succinctly, and Kate and I have always been people who've been interested in speaking and articulating our ideas if we have to present, et cetera. Rebecca probably sits quite more balanced on both sides of a numerical and written brain. Sofia very much likes numbers and maths. In the early days, when things were proportioned out, they were almost done from necessity. It was like: 'Okay, if you have a handle on this and you have a handle on that, then, we'll just keep going in those lanes.' After we'd done the 'everyone doing everything', it became a bit more fluid. It became a bit more in the lanes, but certain things would always be brought back to the group to be discussed. We stayed in those roles for a very long time because of some practical reasons. For example, I wrote the Arts Council applications after we had a producer phase out of helping us do that. Mainly because it's so complicated and it requires so much particular language to do with the Arts Council and understanding the sector, I just kept going in that lane. We haven't really until recently – we went down to three last year, and now Kate and I this year started to have conversations about how we re-divide. How it looks now, is a current question. That isn't from an admin point of view, but when it came to being in a studio, I guess, understanding ourselves personally as artists and what our own skills are has been really important, but we had lots of conversations of trying to break out of those roles, not just saying: 'Okay, so, Rebecca and Sofia are really good at complex patterns in space, so they just do it.' You know, trying to make sure that we don't just go: 'Oh, it's pattern time, it's your go.'

[00:29:14] COLLABORATIVE STUDIO WORK

RF: But I think in the moments where it comes to something, which is more equally-shared as a sort of interest and wanting to get into it, there's a lot of starting a task, not really finishing it, passing it on, passing it back, looking at it together. It's a really slow process of evolving with lots of different voices coming in, and then you don't really know where the start point was. For example, in a written task, it might start from something that we've improvised in text in the studio, then the idea gets somewhat bashed out on a keyboard, then the laptop is passed to someone else and the task is writing questions, and then it's passed back and changed. Those are the moments where it builds, and in movement, we'll have one clear start point, and then we'll do it loads of different ways, and then have discussions about, you know, what were the interesting bits, and then build again, and build again, and build again. Admin worked quite differently for a long time to studio, as it became more about the practicalities of getting stuff done. We don't really like admin. So we haven't wanted to spend loads of time unpicking how we do it, because we'd rather not do it.

DR: In the studio, it's more a matter of really collaborative authorship, where things get passed around. In terms of decision-making then, how does decision-making work in a situation like that?

KC: There's a lot of chat, there's a lot of discussions. It's a very slow process although I think we've got better at it over the years. When we first started in our first year and we had this programme Catapult, we had this luxury – which I think is a luxury for early-career artists – to have an Arts Council

bid that basically allowed us playing time to test what the hell we were doing without really needing particularly an outcome. We did quite a lot of playing around. I think our first piece was made really differently to our second piece, and we made a conscious effort to try and shake up our methods.

DR: What were the names of the first and second pieces?

KC: The first work is called *This Really Is Too Much,* and the second is *This Is Not a Wedding*. It was a coincidence that they both ended up with 'this'. The first one took a very long time to make because we really did do everything together. We didn't really have anyone leading any of the processes – just the four of us were like: 'What should we do now? Should we do this thing? Okay, maybe let's do–' – we'd stop and discuss everything, all the time, before we made any decisions. So it was a very, very slow process. The second piece, we made a conscious choice – and this was through our own decision-making processes but also through doing various mentoring. Early on, we had some mentoring with Gillie Kleiman, who kind of forced us a bit – she makes very different work to us – and forced us to shake up our processes quite a lot. We also did some with Kerry Nicholls, who again makes very different work to us. One of the things that we'd started testing in our second work, which we hadn't done in our first, was allowing for there to be days in which one of us would be leading in it. So it would still be a collaborative process between the director and the dancers but we would make a conscious choice that: 'Okay, Tuesday is Rachel's day, and Rachel's going to come prepared for the whole day to lead us in tasks. We can shift and change the tasks and we can input in like suggesting ideas, but Rachel is making those choices and those decisions on that day. The next day would be someone else, and that person can take things from the previous day or they can come up with a totally new set of tasks.' And that would be the early process. Obviously, later on it became a bit more 'all of us doing everything' again, when we were sculpting the work together and structuring it. But in terms of the early days of research and development, we actually found that that worked really well, because one of the things we found really difficult was to make this distinction – and we just couldn't really do it in the first – the distinction between being the choreographer, director and being the performer and being able to have equal weight. Because we were all doing everything, it felt quite difficult to be investing loads into your performance as a performer and your devising creative skills whilst also having a mind all the time on what the structure looked like: 'What does it look like from the outside? What does it mean? Should we do this?' – it felt too much and it was so exhausting doing both. Apart from everything else, it was a way to give us a bit of a break and decide to be like: 'Today, I'm not being a performer, I'm just being a director and I'm just having that head on.' Then the performers in this day can relinquish control of what it looks like. It also allowed us to go with ideas for longer and say 'yes' to things, even where originally, in our first work, we would stop things all the time and be like: 'Ah, but what do you mean by this? Or where is this going? I'm not really sure about this idea.' We'd constantly be questioning and discussing things. This was the way in which we could just – even if we weren't sure about the idea, we didn't have responsibility for that day – we could just go with it. Then sometimes interesting things came out that we might have had shut down earlier, had we all been in the process together.

[00:34:16] MAKING *THIS IS NOT A WEDDING* (2017)

DR: Great! Since we've started talking about *This Is Not a Wedding* – where did the impulse for this piece come from? What was the starting point? What was your intention with this piece, and then how did that change in the process of making it?

KC: We were really interested in the idea of a wedding as a recognisable structure and ceremony – initially, not so much about the themes of marriage or love or monogamy or weddings. We wanted to make this distinction between making a piece about weddings and making a piece as a wedding, if that makes sense. We were really interested – in our early work we had this version of an auction, and it's something that we were really drawn to: this very recognisable structure, where the audience comes into something that they think that they know and then it's broken. It gave us almost like a map for what to be creating, but within that, it felt like it would also give us lots of freedom to mess with these structures, to mess with the ceremony and the tradition. I think initially we were more interested in the themes of tradition, and ceremony, and expectation, and pressure than we were in weddings. Of course in the end, because it follows this structure of a wedding, it is also about weddings and it is something

that people interpret to be about weddings or about marriage or a critique of marriage many people interpret it as. But for us, it was like: we sometimes describe it as an exploration of our existential crises. It almost felt a bit arbitrary that we chose a wedding. We wanted to pick a very recognisable structure that everyone would have some relationship to, and a wedding seemed like a relevant one. But in a way, it's not a coincidence that it was a wedding, given that we'd all turned 30 or been about to turn 30, and there was this thing that was a mega rite of passage that women in particular are expected to be aiming towards their whole lives. And that it coincided with that point in our lives meant that all of those themes, those things that we were thinking and feeling and talking to each other about also came into the piece naturally. It became this piece about time, and mortality a bit, and the pressure and expectation of having to achieve success in a very particular type of way. Particularly given that we have chosen career paths that are not the traditional career path and that don't lead you to this successful rite of passage that other people do in their lives and they can tick off nicely. You know, it definitely does change things, turning 30. I mean like: 'Am I going to spend the next ten years of my life not knowing what my work is going to look like in two months?' So in a way all of those things became really relevant and I think it was no longer a coincidence that we'd chosen a wedding. It became very relevant.

DR: What comes first in a piece like this? I was watching it earlier, and I was thinking, actually probably a very good encapsulation of the piece as a whole is that number where you do 'Too Good to Be True' and it switches between speech and music. The whole piece does that as well: it switches between the dance numbers and the spoken interactions with the audience. So what came first in the process of making? It's like asking a musician what comes first, the lyrics or the music?

RF: I think, honestly, the dresses came quite early on, and the physicalisation of struggle in the dresses. But to go a little bit back to what Kate was saying, there're two of the things that were in our minds. One is negotiation. We talked very early on about: 'Is this going to be a piece about collective values?' It was there. And the beginning negotiation that you see in the first quarter of the piece, we talked about whether we kept that in or not, whether it was going down a different avenue, but actually the negotiation with the audience is this big thing. I think that was probably something that came out of us addressing our processes in the studio and working in a different way, because that was also on our minds, how we're going to work differently. But also space. We've worked in site-specific ways before, and sometimes we think, as Kate said: the recognisable structure of something, or the connotations of some things – space can obviously add something very literal to that. But the idea that we're breaking the fourth wall with the audience – they are a part of the performance space – that was something fairly early, because we had to perform it. The first R&D period that we had, there had to be a performance as part of Bolton Octagon's Reveal Festival, and it was in a church. So obviously, the practicalities of space in a church were that we were going to use the aisle, it felt a more cohesive thing. Probably the first 20 minutes of the piece at least are the same in the final version, and that was almost set very early on in relation to some of those factors.

DR: When you say 'negotiation with the audience', I just want to delve a bit deeper in that. What exactly is being negotiated with the audience?

KC: It's funny, because the negotiation in some ways came throughout the process, and then we added it – the initial what we call 'the negotiation', which is the chat with the audience at the beginning – we added probably about two days before we first performed the entire thing. It was this meta-theme of: weddings are this thing that you're doing a bit for yourself but often for other people. And it is a performance, there's something so performative about a wedding – that everyone else is there and people are expecting it to be a certain way and people have their own ideas about how it should be. It suddenly felt so relevant to us as performers that that's always what we're doing, is negotiating with the audience and trying to please them. No matter how much you try and divorce yourself from that as a creator and an artist that you don't care about the audience and what they think, of course you do, because they're the ones that ultimately pay your bills. You know – live performance doesn't really exist without an audience, and therefore there's always this feeling in the back of your mind that you want them to like it, or you want them to feel something or engage with it in a certain way. It suddenly felt really relevant to us in the making process that we would include that as part of the piece, that it would be something where we both wanted it to be this thing that the audience came into and had no

choice about. It was just that they were coming into this situation that we, as performers, were assuming that they knew and were acting accordingly – and also something where we needed their constant feedback and needed to be hearing from them and asking their advice, and trying to constantly please them and keep things nice for them. So we had this weird mixture between asking them questions but not really waiting for their responses or just ignoring them. We wanted to have these two things existing at once, where actually the audience were involved and they're asked to be involved but we don't really care what they say. There also is this process throughout, where it's us as performers slash brides, slash women in this piece, letting go of needing to please them. Everything is falling apart at the beginning, and we're trying to hold it together, and by the end we let go of any semblance of control over the situation, and therefore any desire to make it better for the audience.

DR: So what are the strands? There are the dresses, there is this negotiation with the audience, or rather this acknowledgement of the shared time and space, and then, of course, there is the dancing, which is what you as a dance company are expected to be doing. And then there are decisions around how you use voice which are not necessarily straightforward. There is the lip-syncing, there are the different kinds of use of the microphone in the show, and the non-uses of the microphone. How did all of that get knitted together? Where did the lip-syncing come from?

KC: At the beginning, we would layer more and more tasks on top of more and more tasks. Sometimes, we'd have a long improvisation where we would put post-it notes on someone so that they had to suddenly do an existential vogueing sermon on top of a box while they tried to eat a packet of crisps. It's like, you know, impossible things that we were adding on top, and on top of each other. I think the lip-syncing we kept bringing back as something that was quite aesthetically pleasing. This interesting thing I think of having a voice and not having a voice, of being seen to look like you're saying something that actually someone else is speaking for you. Those are themes that also ended up being woven into it almost unconsciously and then bringing it forward more consciously. For example, with the 'Fred speech', this idea that 'you're expected to say something but you're not really actually expected to say something, we'd just say it for you', I feel like that became a bit of a present theme throughout where we were speaking but not speaking while someone else was taking our voice, or we were taking someone else's, and that also felt relevant.

[00:43:09 to 00:44:57] 'I'm not going to talk about this' from *This Is Not a Wedding* (2017)

RF: I think there's also a really big thing in the work about the backstage and the frontstage, which relates to the use of the mic and how you can hear us. We talked a lot about which bits the audience needed to hear and which they didn't. You probably noticed that a lot of the text in our work doesn't quite make sense or it's not designed to be particularly – it doesn't give the audience the exact thing that's going on. It's a sense or a feeling. Sometimes you can see us in the back and hear us a little bit, talking to each other, and the talking does make sense within the piece, but the idea is more that there's something going on backstage, you can see the gradual build-up of tension in the performers by exposing how DIY this whole thing is. And then the ludicrousness of sometimes using the mic to address everybody, and as a pretence that the mic is somehow more official and in charge and in control and clearer, which sometimes it just isn't clearer. We really joke a lot about using our lighting very differently to a lot of contemporary dancers because we're always going to our technicians: 'More on the face, more on the face!' I think we're quite interested in this presentational aspect of like: 'I'm here in front of you, for some weird reason you've paid to come and see me. Therefore I've got the mic, so I'm going to tell you things.' But as Kate said, we're also wanting to please. I think a lot of the use of the sound – we've been interested in our pieces a lot in the external force that cuts you off, whether that's because the mic is dead or the music is too loud – or maybe the music is too low. You know, there's this sense that it provides an external force that we have to adhere to. There's a lot of pretence in what we decide to use and what we don't, down to what Kate's saying about holding the mic to someone but then taking it away so you can half-hear what the audience is saying. That was a big thing to talk about and has actually played a part in our previous work as well, the idea of taking away the sound. It goes back again to the ludicrousness of pretending that people aren't there and are there. And acknowledging that we are in a theatre but we're pretending that something else is going on. We like to play that in the sound. And also because you can hear, we refer to each other with our real names, or tell each other off, or there's more of a reality to be seen in that as well, how we speak

to each other, versus how we speak to the audience.

DR: What about the chorus number, when suddenly all the other dancers come on? Where do they come from?

KC: That is a section of the piece that changes depending on where we're touring it to. It can be delivered as an outreach workshop to local communities or to dancers or whoever ends up being there, as a way of getting them involved in the piece. But it was something that – that particular performance was at Northern so we used Northern dancers – it was something we thought of, again, towards the end where we had this – 'Backing singer dying' is what we called the section. We had this repetitive music that comes on where we do this bizarre, slightly boring backing singer dance which is this performative element of almost like everything, as Rachel said, we have this constant idea of: things are falling apart in the background but it's almost like we as performers don't know that you can see that. So the front of the stage and the microphone and all this presentational aspect is what we want you to see versus what's actually happening, which is everything is falling apart. This thing [is] I think particularly relevant now that everyone has this presentation of their life, versus the life that they're actually living, and we're able to curate how people see that to a certain extent, and what would happen if we could actually see what was going on – all of the things that went into making that photo look so perfect or that short image. We wanted to show that on stage, and I think this repetition of this perfect backing singer dance that just repeats and repeats and repeats is bringing it back to this performative element. As long as we do this, they'll be very impressed by this dance that we do, and it will be so neat and so perfect that they'll just forget everything that just happened, which is that everything's falling apart. There's a crucial moment in the piece where it's like those two worlds start to meet, and that's the moment we can't hide it anymore. There's the presentational, and yet we're just falling apart, like we're dying. It's something that we really liked doing a lot in our early pieces, having plants in the audience, people that you think are audience members that aren't actually audience members, that are going to come on stage. We really like the idea that suddenly this party would be filled with guests that were all part of the audience and somehow being brought on stage. It's also demonstrating this desperation with the situation by dying really dramatically and then just carrying on as if nothing's happened. It's like the inner and the outer world combining. This, like, 'We cannot possibly hide anymore what's going on but we're going to keep trying and keep just laboriously, repetitively doing this dance, even though people around us are dramatically dying, and then getting up again.' We aesthetically really wanted to have that with a load of people, but when we've toured it, sometimes we just do that section with four of us. Sometimes, depending on who is in the community, we do workshops. We did it in Dorset, for example, with an older performance group. They were all between 50 and 60, something like that, so it was a very different aesthetic. And there's a simplified version with people that aren't dancers, so it's also a way of really getting people directly involved in the performance.

[00:50:41] BEYOND THE APOCALYPTIC SERMON

DR: Great, that's fantastic! I could probably ask more, but I'm aware of the time, and also I don't know whether we can also touch on the current project before we finish. Remind us, what was your intention with the new piece?

RF: One of the big things that we've been talking about, and carrying on from *This Is Not a Wedding*, is the 'Apocalyptic sermon', [as] we call it, at the end, where it's like almost a preacher telling you how to live your life and 'why don't you just party'. And also because on our minds had been, you know – we talked a lot about climate change and whether time was running out, and this suddenly mounting pressure with the end of the world coming and the idea that it might not be too long that climate disaster changes the way that we have an outlook on life. Because I thought, you know, both of our pieces had been in response to our thoughts and feelings about the world and the current situation, and that was a wide enough frame. Definitely now it's very relevant to us. As Kate said, we've had lots of personal experience of the feeling like it's the end of the world, but I think there were some big shifts that we wanted to acknowledge within this work.

KC: Yeah, I think just in terms of the structure of it being site-specific and more immersive, it felt like a

natural progression from where we were at with *This Is Not a Wedding*, where it was half-in, half-out audience participation-immersion. It was a piece made for theatres. So I think, particularly in making something about the end of the world, it felt really important to take that out of these, in some ways, quite restrictive, traditional structures of a theatre that only specific people come into, and that feel quite closed in a way. To take that out into a different kind of space somehow felt really important particularly with the themes of this work being something that's going to and is now currently affecting everyone. The end of the world as we know it is like – I think when we wrote that pitch we didn't think it was going to happen quite so soon.

DR: So let's say that the end of the world slows down, that we actually re-emerge from this crisis and things get back on track in whatever way. What will happen in the week that we spend together in terms of developing the idea?

RF: One of the first tasks that we did in the early days of *This Is Not a Wedding* was basically, providing space for everyone to free-speak on the ideas. Every day people would record five minutes of them talking about weddings and just let them meander. Then we would go back, listen to everyone's and we would, again, free-write things like, 'coming together and apart' – which of course actually is a big thing in the piece, the coming together and apart. I would imagine that we start with things quite as free as that because we work a lot on the notion that if it's going on in our minds, it comes out in our bodies. A lot of the work, as Kate said, is about these interpersonal relationships as well. Our work often looks at the absurdities of hierarchies or the structures imposed upon us and the fact that this might change that. So I'd be interested in how people play together, how they meet, how they come together, how they express something which can be quite – your own mortality is not something you necessarily discuss with strangers, how can we create lightness about that? Or what are the ways that people reach out to each other and discuss it or physicalise it? Probably a lot of that week will be to do with meetings and comings together, and figuring out what it is to be able to share some of those quite difficult conversations and be in the space physically and support each other, whether there are frictions that maybe emerge between people, you know, senses of resolve: 'No, I'm not going to deal with it, I'm going to carry on doing this.' How does that sit next to someone who wants to sit in it? That's an interesting tension if two people are wanting to deal with something differently in a space. I guess there might be a little bit of that.

DR: Excellent! Okay, I hope it goes really well and that we are all back on track quite soon!

Transcription by Kalina Petrova

Clips Summary

[00:43:09 to 00:44:57] 'What are we talking about?' from *This Really Is Too Much* (2015)

[00:43:09 to 00:44:57] 'I'm not going to talk about this' from *This Is Not a Wedding* (2017)

Audio available at www.auralia.space/gallery2-gracefoolcollective/.