

BA - Okay, so Hi! I'd like to welcome Joel Brown to join me Ben Ash, today in continuing with this little experimental podcast series of like, getting to spend time with you and yeah, in this peculiar time, interesting time that we're all in at the moment. How are you today Joel?

JB- I'm well! thanks for having me! It's been a while since I've been on a podcast.

BA – is it! So

JB - Yeah.. once! Yeah, my friend Rachel's got a podcast called 'Dance dialogues'.

BA - So you got some experience? That's s nice. (laughter) Well, so where are we today..? We're at Siobhan Davis studios, in Lambeth.. Southwark?

JB - Southwark, Elephant and Castle. Yeah.

BA - And, yeah, it's early March. And we're just, in fact, Today's the first day that the children go back to school.

JB - We can hear them!

BA – Yeah, we even heard them outside, which is really, really nice. Something thing I always enjoy about being in this space.

Yeah. So this is something I'm learning about doing as I go along doing it.. like this, like idea of meeting and kind of having a recorded conversation. But it was partly for me, as a way of, sort of getting to spend a bit of time with each other and just sort of meet again, although we've been working together now since September, I joined in September of last year, in the midst of the kind of pandemic, which has been an extraordinary time to start anything, I think! How have you been like, in yourself across the, across this this time what's it been like for you?

JB - The truth is most of this year I made food Yeah! I played a lot of poker, Uh huh like poker with my friends and like flat-mates, and online poker, and I played a lot of video games. And I didn't.. I didn't do much! There were bits of things I.. I did. Like, like, I got a grant to make 10 one minute, sort of instructional videos around, like the way I dance. Yeah. But it's, in a way, it's been a nice year, and that I've got to just sort of be at home with my, my girlfriend. Because Anna and I actually kind of, because we were together and we actually broke up last January.. And then this sort of pandemic was like, we're like checking in with each other, you know, how are you doing? and then we just basically stayed together, it's 'Love in time of Corona' for us, because I think in terms of career, it's been like a really bad year, especially for me... as 2019 was such an amazing year for me with Candoco touring, and my own work was touring, and then this Royal Opera House show was great for me. And then it all kind of.. and we all just kind of.. and then we just stayed home for the year. . So I want to say it was a bad year, but It was

also.. I got to be with my girlfriend and play video games, so I don't know what the what the what the balance is. But it's.. artistically.. I will say the artistically I do feel uninspired by this year. Umm I think it's been.. I think it's been hard.. It's not my favourite year! But..

BA - Maybe this is a good moment to do a little product placement! And maybe tell us where we can see your instructional videos!..

JB – Oh.. yeah?!

BA – as they're really cool.. like I've seen maybe one or two of them. But, well if I was to go and try and see that where would I go?

JB – YouTube. (laughter) I should have a better answer... It's called 'Tips and tricks', Joel Browns Tips and tricks. It's a playlist, and I think it should be searchable for everybody. Yeah. If you were to find that.

BA - For those of us who maybe don't know so much about you, or what.. what would be driving that, for you to make that? How would you describe what's happening? What's actually happening in those tricks and tips videos

JB - well they're tips and tricks videos, I guess it's like.. how to dance in a wheelchair. But it's not well, how to... They're their little insights that I highlight.. and most of them are about me and my wheelchair, I think there's one video that's about floor work.. ok but they're like, there's one video where I talk about a wheelie, and I think everybody knows what a wheelie is.. But I share a little bit how I think a wheelie is really important in the way I see it.. is not.. I do not see a wheelie as a as a trick like a singular trick, I see it as both a relevé and a plié. Like, in your wheelie your tail drops and your knees lift. And, and when you reduce your points of contact with the floor - because if you have four wheels on the floor – when you do a wheelie you really have two points, then you can actually say you're going fast.. when you go into a wheelie you can actually turn faster.. yeah So there is a lot of utility around what we would call a wheelie.

BA - Yeah, I love this

JB - And so my encouragement is, at least for wheelchair dancers is.. and not everyone can do a wheelie.. And of course there's different.. different wheelchairs out there and different people who use those wheelchairs.. So it's not a.. it's not a one size fits all thing. But for those who can do wheelies or are interested in, in that.. my sort of message is that a wheelie can be used throughout a whole spectrum of movement, And it's not just like, looking at me do a wheelie

BA – Yeah, yeah, right! That's fascinating! I find as soon as you begin to speak about that, and kind of you went into the language then about how you both got this kind of 'Relevé and Plié' in there, and the sort of.. the fact that these kind of.. two in a way natural opposites, like 'extension or folding', or you know, kind of, you know, we can talk about in terms of 'out to the

periphery or into the centre'. I love that that came out in the language and the way you describe that.. It seems so natural.. I mean for me, I'm always going to come back and reference - and maybe this is provocative, but I think it's my point of reference for objects that roll - is Skateboarding, I have a passion for.. a fascination for skateboarding, but maybe in a similar way, like.. in that terminology a wheelie is called a 'Manual' when you float your front wheels.. but of course that then gives you this option like, as one wheel goes forwards, then the other wheel goes backwards. and you kind of have this revolution around the centre

JB - Yeah, yeah.. or in a wheelchair! Yeah, yeah, and same on a skateboard as well. Yeah! You'd just be pivoting around. Yeah. Yeah, that back axle..

JB - I find that a lot! Or say I'm um.. I just, I just use it a lot. And I like it. And if it is tricky, that's fine for me, too. It is kind of a bit of a trick... but I'd say it's a, it's a trick that comes from somewhere and it goes somewhere.

BA - Yeah.. that's so great!

So.. we are.. we're in a period of time, which I guess could be called Candoco's 30th anniversary year, or year and a half - I think it's going to span for a while - and as a company, we've been working in two kind of divided groups across the last little period of time, as we've just started to come back to spending some time in studios together. And we were beginning to look at some of the material from the 30th anniversary.. well, in relation to the 30th anniversary, we're looking back at the archive of material, or are continuing to do that a bit, although we've been doing something a little bit different last week. And in terms of that for myself, as I've sort of said on a previous episode or two, I was looking back at Rashid Ouramdane's piece 'Looking back', but I'm also doing these podcast chats. Could you take a moment tell me how you were working in that period in terms of the archives, what have you been up to, what have you been doing?

JB - So I've been looking specifically at a show a piece called 'And who shall go to the ball' by Raphael Bonacella, so I've been looking at that specific piece and specifically a duet, we can even say a Pas de Deux in the piece that was performed by Mark Brew and Jorge.. we'll just say Jorge! And so me and Ihsaan will be learning this duet. So the the first thing was just at home basically watching it right a few times.. and we watched the original with Mark Brew, but then the piece was revamped for GCSE, an educational pack for GCSE students, so we did have another version with different dancers that we got to watch

BA - so you've got to watch different casts yeah?

JB - yep, so two different casts, and then we.. after some testing and the group divided, we came together.. and the whole thing is in contact, and there's no way we were going to be able to make a non-contact version, so we just decided to get our COVID test and just

BA - yeah play it safe

JB - Just go for it yeah .. so we did that and we just learned from video

BA – how.. how was that? Because I mean we've.. as a group we've worked in the studio for several months in the autumn without

JB - Without contact.. it was kind of.. it was pretty normal! I think if we.. if we both.. what was going to feel bad was if we tiptoed around it yeah, we both decided 'let's go for it' do our COVID tests, we practice safely.. whatever.. here we are, let's go for it. I mean I'm not convinced that skin-to-skin contact is going to transmit Coronavirus any much more than breathing air near each other, so in terms,, in terms of that it just felt like 'let's go for it' but I haven't danced with anybody in that way for about a year! And I've never danced with Ihsaan! So Ihsaan is a new person, so on the very first day we sort of were taking our own time warming up and it was just like.. 'well, shall we?..' and our.. our first point of contact was a fist bump, and then I said "well I guess let's play, let's play a game..' and so we improvised, and I can't remember what the proposition was.. I would put on some music and I said how about.. something like.. I do something and then you do something, and then I think that was the starting point, and that quickly just turned into kind of contact and spatial improvisation, and then we just got to the work of watching the video and learning from there.

Oh! What I wanted to.. I wanted to say to you earlier in lunch, I really enjoyed doing this with Ihsaan because it was just like.. Hah!! This year has mainly been a lot of zoom meetings, and check-ins.. and it's accidentally become sort of existential.. at least from my experience!

BA - This is part of the zoom room, what I would call DOOM, you know the potential for an existential crisis Yeah! (laughter) Also, the kind of.. something about the nature of being in this kind of zoom world

JB – Maybe!

BA - I just think we get a lot like in the same spaces that we can't pick up in those spaces Yeah so for me it can actually be quite a triggering space

JB – Zoom? Yeah! Yeah I .. well I agree.. I agree but.. So what I liked about doing this dance with Ihsaan was that we are just dancers.. we just get in and we do it!

BA - yeah

JB - and so we just did! And it was quite refreshing and fun.

I did some.... I feel like I'm about to say something.. but maybe I'm not

It's just like a dance, it's a Pas de Deux, and it's just nice.. it was just nice to work on a Pas de Deux without I don't know.. what's the word.. it's like, it's..

like it's just like a normal dance right! We learned, we learned a choreography and it was really nice to do

BA – Set material

JB – Exactly, yeah!

BA – and you've got to kind of work out your own way of basically making that form happen

JB – Yeah! Yeah, but it was it was special for me to be learning material from Mark Brew right because I know Mark, I've been in two of his works when I.. when I was with Axis in California I did two of his works. One of them 'Full of Words' is probably.. is still one of my favourite pieces I've done! And so inhabiting some of his movements in my way was.. was nice for me

BA - yeah

JB- yeah

BA – Yeah. I enjoyed really seeing how.. because we worked across the week in the same studio some of the time, as you and Ihsaan were working, was seeing you know.. how quickly that really began to find its own kind of gravity and dependency. I mean like a Pas de Deux is an inherently kind of dependent situation, like you need the other, you can't.. neither of you can succeed at it without the other.. yeah and the more that you worked in it in that week, the more that kind of was really knitting in.. and happening.. and it just really took it to sort of a sweet spot as the week progressed I thought , and to see you know, how like.. that kind of working element.. how, working out the puzzle of things.. I love seeing that kind of craft in dancing.. it was so nice to see

JB - I'm pretty confident when.. when it's done it'll be nice! It's nice to feel confident that when we get there, I'm pretty sure it's gonna be nice to do, and nice to see.. (laughter)

BA - So in terms of talking about like working in contact which obviously involves touch - as I've done for everyone who's going to take part in this – I set you a little like homework proviso like.. could you do something where you think about touch or contact, maybe in terms of the sensation or the absence of that.. in how we've been working and you know make a little collage with some things that you have around at home, just as something to.. to do, and kind of bring with you, and I wondered now if you could show me your collage? I was going to say maybe you can send it to me but I left my phone upstairs.. because you didn't bring it with you, you took a photo of it

JB – That's right, I took a photo of it

BA – Can I have a look at what you've done.. I mean I'm not like going to grade because it's it's not like it's a test, but

JB - Ok

BA - it's not like I'm anybody who would be able to judge anything like that but.. Could you kind of describe to me what's going on in the image there and how you arrived at it?

JB - There's four.. four things. One of them is a small, maybe six inch by four inch painting by my friend Eve Mutso that she painted and made for me

BA - Is that this one? yeah kind of almost like black and white tones

JB – yeah, it looks like.. and the black leads into the whites and.. and it's.. it should be on the wall but at the moment it's not! it's next to next to my books.. and on the back she has a note for me and it's it says a little quote, it says 'Everything is allowed' which came up once as we were collaborating together, and.. and then below that is a photograph of Eve and I dancing, it's actually a photograph of a photograph

BA - yeah there's a lot of that feeling in what you've drawn because you've bought a photograph of your thing, and there's kind of a photographic feeling within what you've made.. is it this one?

JB - Yeah this is a.. this is a postcard really selling a show by some artists called Cardiff Miller, it's called 'Night walk' and this is in Edinburgh.. so this was in the Edinburgh The International Festival last year, and you take a walking tour of Edinburgh holding your phone with headphones, and you're told a story. And on your phone you see where you're walking. But there's stories going on in the phone that aren't happening in real life.. and one of the stories is me and Eve are dancing in this courtyard.

BA – Ah Ok! Lovely..

JB - Next to this is a Polaroid of

BA - Another photo but of a different format!

JB - Yeah,

BA - I yeah, I feel like I'm in a Robert Frank book!! (laughter)

JB - There's a Polaroid of me and my girlfriend Anna. She's, she's putting some lipstick on me, I think.. is what's happening.. I think this was on her birthday, a year ago.

BA - And you're in an embrace..

JB - Yeah, she's.. she's, well I guess straddling me. So she's sitting on my wheelchair facing me. And then below that is a note from Anna that says we should do it again.. which is quite sexual. Well I'd say it's.. it's romantic too. I

quite like that note. So, two things from Anna and two things from Eve it looks like. Ok, I didn't.. I didn't intend that. But I was...

BA - And how did you get to those materials? Kind of what.. what you chose to show me

JB - Well, in a way, they were accessible. They were 'collage-able' because I didn't have to take them off a wall to be honest, that was part of my thinking. But they're all they're all images that I really like, like I love that note.. I want to I like the.. I like the torn edge of one of the sides, I like.. I like the sentence 'we should do it again'.

And I.. so these these things weren't really things that I came into. I didn't like improvise in my room and come into contact with. They're all just images or pieces of arts maybe in my room that I, that I like.. that I certainly don't want to throw away. Yeah. So I just brought them together. I even like the.. they're on my.. that's my sheet, that's my bed sheet Yeah behind. So it's just kind of a blue. Dark blue bedsheet.

BA- Yeah, I was just taking that in, a background on which they're resting.. those pictures. Wow! Thank you for doing that.

JB – (laughter) You're welcome

BA - For sharing it Yeah, I'm going to spend some time this week doing something along the same lines I think, because this week, we're going to continue a little bit, I think some of us at least, with going further into something around the archive and research that we've been doing, along with maybe some other little strands of activity. Yes, while we were still working in divided groups, that's because currently Joe Bannon is doing some choreographic work with some of the group whilst we're here, doing some other things. So there's just like kind of two or three other things that I would like to touch on in the time we've got together if that's okay, one of the things I'm going to reference you to yourself now is, I think I was talking with Megan, and we when we were talking about these sort of situations where you get sprung into some sort of interview situation, where someone throws something at you like 'What are you good at?' (laughter) For me.. for me that puts me in like a real freeze.. like ask me anything else apart from

JB - What are you good at!

BA – But I remember.. and I asked you about it actually last week, so you know what's coming because yeah I asked you to clarify it for me. But we were.. we were with Janine and we were doing this practice that she called Experts, and then you commented afterwards about this practice of rolling, and I think maybe you should say in your own words, but I love the way you said it.. because for me, it kind of really went around the outside and came from somewhere that I just didn't expect at all, and it just spoke to kind of expertise in a way, or not necessarily even expertise but actually just kind of

something really human and comfortable.. which just sort of knocked me out for a minute! But could you, you know what I'm asking you to say?..

JB - Yeah, I'm trying to remember it as well. It just, we were.. we were dancing and rolling, and I thought to experts yes and I thought, 'Oh, yes. I'm an expert at rolling'. Yeah. 'I feel like I could, like I could meet God.. I could meet God now and.. and proudly show him what I've found out how to do!' something.. something like that. Yeah, 'I'm ready, ready to meet God and present my work'.

BA – Yeah! So I mean, there's something about that I just really love, the way that comes across. 'I'm proud to show you what I found out'. (laughter) I just love that as a way of kind of going sideways at 'What are you good at, what can you do?' which if you were someone else in the company, and I was having this conversation, like now I would ask you to say 'so what is that for you?' But you've already said that it's rolling!

JB – It's rolling!

BA - Maybe there's more that you'd be proud to meet God and say, 'I found out that I'm good at this thing'.

JB - What else am I good at.. Is that the question? (laughter)

BA – But you don't have to answer it because you've said that already said, but in case there's more that you want to say

JB - I mean, I can do a fair amount of pull ups.. I can dead hang from a bar.. I can hang on a bar for quite a long time.

BA - Do you.. how long can you do that for?

JB – I haven't.. I haven't.. I'm sure I can do it for two minutes.. Is that a long time?

BA - It is quite a long time Yeah My daughter - who climbs - they were doing this thing and kind of hanging off these finger holes and seeing how long they can do it

JB - how long they can do?

BA - Some people can do it for quite a while

JB - Yeah I mean I can.. I can.. I sing and play guitar. But actually, I don't, I don't..

I can sing and play guitar 'at the same time'. But I never felt very, really very talented in either of those things. Like I'm an okay guitar player, and I'm an okay singer. But playing music is.. is one of my favourite things to do to be honest.

BA - Did you find that you played music in this sort of lockdown?

JB - At first I did, at first I did quite a lot, and I would even do little social media live concerts. I went back and learned a bunch of my old songs that I wrote as a teenager. But, it went away a little bit..

BA – It's like any sort of period of time, it was long enough for there to be changes in terms of those things.

JB - I wonder what would.. I wonder what my mother would say, in terms of in terms of 'what's your.. what's your son good at?' (laughter) We'll see..

BA - Maybe, maybe we should ask her.. I could be fun. Do you think it would be different?

JB - I don't think she would say rolling over. But that's the answer that I liked the most because there's something as you said unexpected, or poetic about it.

BA - Well, I think it is it's sort of turns things on its head.

BA - So yeah, one question, or one sort of topic.. And I guess I'm coming at this because I'm sort of a bit new to this.. well I'm fairly new to the, to the company and there's, you know.. it's a mixed company of abled and disabled dancers. And there's a term about 'Inclusivity' that has been I think, like a fundamental sort of ethos within, hopefully the way the company practices and works. And I wondered about exploring this term, you know, through this series of chats, in terms of what 'Inclusivity' means to you, where you experience it working and failing? Because I mean, and I ask you because for me, it's something that I feel like I want to learn more about.. and through exploring that in the group, I might become more informed and more useful within.. within this sphere of practice

JB - Yeah, I don't .. I don't know what the word, what the word means.. I think the word's.. I think it's such a large nebulous word that it should be taken as that. I see it as sort of even like a political word of something that we're trying to sort of do. But it doesn't really mean much.. I wouldn't.. I wouldn't necessarily.. If I had a company right now I wouldn't call it an inclusive company.

BA – Ok

JB - I don't know.. I don't know what the word accomplishes..very much. I think in the realm of inclusive dance, what it means is, one or more of the people has a disability.

BA – Ok

JB - and who knows.. who knows you know.. what even that means!?! Yeah.

BA – Yeah

JB - So, yeah... so I don't really, I don't really know what to say other than I think it's a nebulous word, and that should be kept like that. But I think it's used a bit too much, because it'll be the same conversations. I just had this conversation last week with some people in Georgia, the country

BA – Yeah, not the states.

JB - And, and nobody, nobody quite knows, and I don't know why they're like, because even the word disabled is so large, even because the company I was in California Axis in America, inclusive as I think is used less the term that they will use, and we can argue of terms till forever, it doesn't matter, but they would ever say physically integrated dance, which meant they would integrate people with and without physical disabilities. Inclusive dance would be like, you know, seniors or people with Down syndrome, or, or something, something beyond just physical disability. Okay. And that, that sounds good, too. But I think one of the strengths with.. with Axis at the time, I don't know how they are now, in specifying that their mission was to work with people with without physical disabilities is they sort of narrowed their population a little bit and were able to focus there, and I think that's actually always a good thing.

BA - Yeah

But this is, this is not quite.. I know this is this is so off topic but, to be honest this is so off conversation it kind of bores me, it exhausts me so much because, because I don't know! But in my in my brain, I don't really need to know, I don't really want to... words like.. I could theorise about what it's like but I think if you just like.. I don't know.. if you if you get a couple people in wheelchairs or whatever.. whatever was going on in the room, you work collaboratively, because you have to! Because it's the best way forward.. something like that

BA – Yeah

JB - But what about you?

BA - well exactly!

JB - Have you got have you gotten there yet, you know.. No I

BA – I like sort of

JB - I think it's too.. I think it's so open that it's violent, the term.

BA – The term is violent because it's so nebular? So

JB- Yeah I think.. I think the reality is you're gonna get.. you're gonna get a couple of token people from XY population, but the reality is the huge bulk of.. the huge majority is going to be 'quote; Normative regular non-disabled dancers' anyway

BA – I mean in terms of this subject we were having a conversation over lunchtime prior to this, kind of touching on some of this subject a bit, but I think what I'm feeling.. what I feel in relation to what you're saying, which is really good, is that.. I think you said something earlier about 'Does it mean enough' or something like that maybe.. my sense is.. but something that you said sort of suggested.. because it's so open, that it can it can kind of be interpreted sort of to suit different kinds of perspectives in many ways and then maybe like, if it means like just enough then it sort of ticks a box for that kind of particular point of view that might not be true for everyone's experience. And I guess it's very difficult to get to that in any in any context about like

JB - yeah

BA - you know to please everybody all times is really difficult

JB - yeah

BA - where's the emphasis..

JB - yeah

BA – Ok so.. ok. So the last thing

JB - yeah

BA – Was the other sort of proposition which was.. I think I asked you - which I've asked of everybody - if you imagine yourself in a situation of having an interview or chat with somebody and the interviewer asks you a question, or opens the door for you to speak about something and you really felt like YES!! This is.. this is right perfect right now actually because I'd really like this topic and I'd really like to speak to it because this is what I'd like to say. And I'm curious about like what came up for you as a response to that.. or if you didn't do it

JB - I did.. I did think about that and I felt that.. earlier when.. when I was talking about my wheelie video, and you said 'oh I really like that language of going up and going down' I was like YES! Like.. like a.. a question from an interviewer that speaks to the nuance of.. of a wheelie! So yeah you did it..

I think.. I think being.. being interrogated on deeper levels of nuance is quite cool. The large questions like the Inclusive question

BA - yeah

JB - that's exhausting and boring

BA - yeah

JB - I mean, don't feel bad about asking

BA – No, I don't, but I'm glad to hear you say it

JB – yeah

BA – I respect that

JB – Yeah..

Yeah.. I think I used to fantasise about being a songwriter and.. and being interviewed by somebody famous and.. the fantasy is like them interrogating specific lines.. they're really listening to my song, I can really tell because they really want to interrogate this line.. this lyric.. so there's.. there's definitely I think this fantasy of how I would want to be interviewed is something around.. like, being understood.. like, you know when you feel like validated?

And.. and it's not a big issue it's like a small thing

BA - Yeah I really get that, I mean.. thank you

Yeah that's just reminding me like.. sort of tangentially maybe about partly how I'm curious to explore this as a process in terms of interviewing but like.. how is it to really somehow meet you, to understand something WITH you, through which you can feel like YEAH! Because you know, I like that! It's also, I mean, I think, like anecdotally, you know, in the past I was in America actually and we were on a job and I.. I mean I love being in different cultures because I love to try and.. I do really like meeting people! And sort of.. because that foundation is somewhat.. kind of like.. pretty similar wherever we come from

JB - Yeah Yeah

BA - I love this way that you can sort of know not much about what's going on, but yeah like.. really kind of forge a connection. And I think I used to get a little bit overexcited! (laughter) And I did have a brown satchel at that point in time, but I like to kind of meet people.. often it would be like a taxi driver and I would just get into really good chat with them, and my girlfriend Rachel would be like 'Oh it's Ben Ash from the BBC!' (Laughter)

JB - You're good! You could do it...

BA - I enjoy it!

JB – Yeah! (laughter)

BA – So... Joel Brown, thank you so much!

JB - Thank you Ben Ash

BA - I say it with my brown satchel on.. for agreeing to take part in exploring this with me today. Yeah, cheers!

JB - Thank you.