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As told to Ambrose Mary Gallagher, 2846 words.

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On listening to that voice inside of you

Dancer and choreographer Solène Weinachter on working as a freelance dancer, why the body has its own time, dancing away from the mirror, and establishing boundaries when working in a physically intimate art form.

Can you give me some framework for how you decided to pursue dance professionally?

It's the thing I never stopped doing, and I just could never consider not dancing. When I was 14, I ended up going to the Conservatoire, in France. That was Monday to Friday. I discovered contemporary dance, and I discovered improvisation, and composition, and a way to be in your body that doesn't have to do with... essentially, you could say, the patriarchy. Ballet—that's what I was doing until then—has this vision of [woman having to be pretty in a particular way], so it was liberating.

My parents wanted me to go to university. I was in contemporary dance [at London Contemporary Dance School]. That also was a great education for me, because they put the emphasis on what you want to do, and who you want to become.

I have huge faith in the power of dance. I think it can take many different shapes in people's life, but its essence, I feel, is deeply powerful for transformation, whether you want to teach it, whether you want to perform it, whether you want to create it. I felt really empowered by that, so that's how I ended up, let's say, qualifying as a dancer.

But I think it's more like a journey of a lifetime, because as soon as I finished school, I got into a wonderful company as an apprentice. It felt like I was starting again. It was a company called Scottish Dance Theatre, and that's how I ended up in Scotland. It's based in Dundee, and it was led by this director called Janet Smith.

Through that company in Scotland I really was super-nurtured. You dance [work by] choreographers from all over the world, and they support you in finding your way of doing it. I became more and more self-confident. It's not about arrogance, but finding yourself, knowing what you love doing, and it ends up often being what you're also good at. I left Scottish Dance Theatre at the same time that that director left. That was six years and a half ago, and I'm freelancing.

When you transitioned from Scottish Dance Theatre to freelancing, how did your day-to-day life and artistic practice change?

It's very different. It was hard, that first two years between always being in an institution, school for I don't know how many years, and then straight into a company. By the age of 27, I didn't know how to provide for myself. I left, but I was pretty lost for a while.

The difference is, it's very hard to be a dancer for a company, but it's all provided for you. You turn up in the morning, they give you practice, often amazing teachers. Then you carry on with your day. They bring the choreographers, you go to bed. It's the same things, day in day out. You have to sustain a level of physicality all through the year that's absolutely exhausting, but you have the support structure for it.

When you [start] freelancing, it goes all away. If you were used to that level of physicality at first, it's super-hard, because you just drop, and you need this level of adrenaline still. I must say the Glasgow scene wasn't so good. It's getting better, now, but back then, six years ago, there wasn't much around, so I ended up swimming. I ended up doing everything I could do, like swimming most days, going to

Aikido.

With Jer [Reid]—so he was this amazing musician—we started Collective Endeavours, before I left Scottish Dance Theatre, and that really sustained me for my freelance years. It's just all become DIY. You find a space, you find people you want to train with, but because it's so self-generated, it's pretty hard to find sustainability.

Are you seeing a push right now towards more political statements in the dance community?

You know, I think there is something radical about the body. It's like the body—someone else said it, I don't know if it's Rosaline Crisp, Kirstie Simson, who are two amazing teachers—but the body has its own time. You can't change the time of the body. It needs time to get into something, and it will do things at its own pace. That in itself is a radical statement in the world we live in, where everything's changing at an insane pace. Even what humans do to the planet, to change its rhythm, radically. So to always come back to that time of the body, I think is a political statement. I can feel this is in our practice every day at the studio, and how that leads to the work that's being made, and to how people want to make work.

For somebody who is not a trained dancer but still wants to tap into that connection, where would be a good place to look for resources?

I mean, dancing on the dance floor is already really cool, like partying. Any [kind of] dance, I love. Folk dances [have always] been there, that's really fun. You know, Scotland's got those ceilidhs, and they're rough. You have to give people room when you're dancing in the bar.

Dancing is really powerful, away from the mirror. Even in your kitchen, in your living room, anything can be dancing from the moment you put your consciousness into it. You basically just—you do it with intention.

Why do you say that dancing away from the mirror is important?

I'm 34, so I just missed this phone generation thing, where everything is a representation of yourself. But I was pretty obsessed with the mirror when I was younger. When I started contemporary dance, my teacher was making us dance away from [the mirror]. Then you realize, it was all about my feelings within what I do, that is the key answer to dancing, and not what I look like.

Also, when you're facing a mirror, you're not aligned properly, your head's doing something that it's not supposed to do. There is something about not thinking about what it is that you look like, but about really being you from the inside, that's really formidable. Really, form and shape, it's part of dance, but it's just part of it.

I know that now as a freelancer you meet other dancers and have to pretty quickly put together a performance. What does that collaboration look like?

There are a few things for me that describe the dance community—it's such a powerful community, but also a very vulnerable community. [Firstly] mainly something around intimacy. You know, you get to know each other so intensely, in a very short amount of time, because you're working with the body. The stuff you work with, you unearth that from you and also from what's important to you, so you see a side of people that's kind of rough—I mean, that's the downside.

You have to take really good care of each other because of those things. When you work with someone who doesn't understand how precious that is, or just wants to use [your] stuff and don't want to give back... someone somewhere has just hasn't done their part in the exchange, you know? Getting paid for dancing does not justify all kinds of behaviors from the choreographer. The money is part of the exchange, but in reality it's much more like an energetic exchange also, no?

This notion of care, because of the intimacy, and also knowing how to give space, how to hold someone but also how to let them be what they want to be, is all stuff you juggle with in the studio. You juggle with your own insecurity all the time. Judging yourself, like feeling you're not enough or you're too much, or you're annoying, or you are not legitimate to be in this space. Why should everyone be looking at me right now doing this? Really, am I that interesting? You want to listen to my stories? That's the other stuff you deal with. It's funny—I can have that love for someone else, but I also have to find the strength [to give] that love for myself.

Do you have any strategies that you've picked up, on how to center yourself around that love for yourself, or getting over that imposter syndrome?

There is a lot of energy in doing yoga, in meditation. I do that most days. If I don't do it, I can feel it immediately [Also], I don't do enough of it, but I started Qi Gong. For me, Qi Gong is a really powerful thing. Really helps.

What is that?

Qi Gong, it's a Chinese practice. It really works with the energy, the yin, the chi. Chi means energy, you know? It's a meditative and a movement practice, and it prepares you for other practices like kung fu, like Tai chi. Those things are essential, to find some grounding in yourself.

I have someone to talk to. That's nice you asked me this. It sounds a bit like, because you know we never know how much money we're going to make as freelancers, is it really worth it for me to put that money into talking to somebody. I have this woman I speak with for five years, and that's completely changed my life, really. Someone who is a dancer as well, actually.

Feeding myself with other art, other shows, going to see stuff, getting food from other sources. I know that music in Glasgow has been a huge thing for me. It's not a really big dance scene in Glasgow, so I found a lot of inspiration in the music scene, and I found how they do it, all DIY. I [co-created] Collective Endeavours [with musician Jer Reid], and we ended up really taking dance to places where people don't see dance. It was more exciting to bring it to folks who don't get to see it, so we did it in more music venues, or outside. [We performed in] all kinds of stuff, from a stage made of cow poo and straw in a music festival to an empty swimming pool.

When you put a lot of energy out into dancing, you need to find other energy sources to go in.

Time off. Time off is really important... That's another thing we really don't know how to do. I don't fucking know how to do it. I wish I could tell you how, but I know it's really important. We are obsessed, dancers, with our bodies, and we're like, "I can't stop. I'm going to lose my muscles," but I've done so much better since I dance less, basically. You don't have this constant tension in your body—it's great.

Do you treat your freelance dancing like a small business? I'm curious about how you balance the creative side with the logistical end.

We're expected to do everything... I need a lot of time to dream, and I'm not a really good organizer. However, I would do that for others much better than I would do for myself, so that's why the collective was great for me, because writing the application, getting the money organized, paying everybody, getting the gigs organized, that's not a problem. I'm really motivated by the responsibility of groups. I should really use that, apply it to myself. But yeah, it is a business.

I have to find work myself. A lot of people go to auditions. I'm a bit disillusioned with auditions. I've been quite forward—I've been phoning people I like. So like [in 2012, when she left Scottish Dance Theatre], I phoned someone I loved the work of, and I was like, "I think I want to quit my job in two hours. Do you have anything for me?" He was like, "Yeah, come round. I already found my dancers, but come..." I'm still working with him now on the show I do, called Juliet & Romeo. He's a brilliant choreographer.

I did that for other choreographers, too—just write them, tell them, "The reason why I love your work is this, this, and this." And I found choreographers like that. First, it's very nice when someone tells you I like you—it's a bit like the beginning of a good date. It's also good that I know what I want from this, why I love it. I think it's not easy for choreographers to meet folks who actually get their work. That's how I've been doing it, to write, to write to people directly. That works quite a few times.

You have to organize your own retirement system. In France it's like the government that does it for you, but in the UK, it's not going to work out that way, so you have to keep a head on your shoulder. That's kind of good. It grounds you, but it's also a balancing act between the business side, "Am I going to make enough money to live for this year?" and your health. You know, like I have a friend just now who turned down a huge amount of work, and I'm so inspired by what she did, because saying no is so hard. But she was like, "I'm starting to treat this like a job, and I just have to do this because I really think this show should exist, or I should be doing this." So it's also a balancing act, to keep these two things on a level.

Where do you see your creative path taking you in the next few years?

I was thinking, you know, I make these dream lists, right? I'm at this point where I need to make one, because I'm a bit like, "Okay, what's next now?" I'm 34, I already have a bunch of friends who have danced with me [who have changed careers]. A few folks [did that] around 30, it was like, "Okay. Let's start thinking of something else I can do, because this is a really hard lifestyle." But I carried on.

You see, I don't have a home, it's me and my suitcase. I don't have a partner. I don't have this stuff that some other friends went on building. So I am this stage where I'm thinking, "What does it mean to have a personal grounding, and also do this profession?" I feel like I've been able to do this because I've been extremely mobile and extremely flexible in my personal life.

It's not really what you asked, but there is something there—I need to start to understand what that is. I have a [show] in my heart, in my body, in my head, that needs to come out, that I've been thinking about. That means applying for funding, but I need to start getting this going. I'm touring, and I want to [squeeze all] the lemon juices out of it, because I think it's really important to live this through. I don't know what the next thing is, but I can feel there is time now for something new.

Any closing thoughts?

There is something from [my] experience that's for me important to talk about. When you do the stuff that you love—because I would guess people end up dancing because they love it—where do you make the decision when it becomes your life, the thing that's going to get you eating and having a roof over your head? It's important to keep in check with where you make decisions from. I understand sometimes you take a not-great job, but it's good that you know why you're doing it, not fooling yourself with the decision of why you're

doing what you do, and not doing something if you think it's not right.

It's important to listen to that voice inside you, because dancers are working with the body. They're working with intimacy. They're working with pushing themselves. We're used to pushing our boundaries, it's something that we've always been taught to do. So, know where your boundaries are, and if you want to go further, because it's important to you, go. But never for the wrong reason, which is often connected to someone else. I didn't get that information when I was training, and I really needed it. It would have helped me to know that.

Solène Weinachter Recommends:

1. Nina Simone at Montreux Jazz Festival singing "Feelings."
2. *Fleabag* (all of it! but particularly the first episode of Season 2)
3. This dance class with Daria Fain in New York blew my mind/body. It integrates Qi Gong into dancing. I never felt so moved from the inside.
4. I would swing by the Judson Church on a Monday night to see one of these.
5. When it comes to Pina Baush, it is hard to choose, but Viktor is one of my favorite pieces of hers.

Name

Solène Weinachter

Vocation

Dancer, choreographer

Fact

Nicole Guarino

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