



# Black women in dance, then, now and sideways with Zinzi Minott and Greta Mendez

*(automated transcript)*

## **SPEAKERS**

Zinzi Minott, Greta Mendez, Siobhan Davies, Heni Hale

*(Introduction: Renée Bellamy speaking in 2021 over spare guitar chords)*

Welcome to Independent Dance. This talk is part of our digital library, which houses an extensive collection of material to read, watch and listen to, drawn from ID's programme over the past decades. This talk is part of the Crossing Borders series, which ran between 2008 and 2019 and featured dance artists in conversation with people from other fields, including philosophers, scientists, geographers, and architects. The entire library is free to access at [independentdance.co.uk/library](http://independentdance.co.uk/library).

*This is a field recording of variable quality with a live audience at Siobhan Davies Studios.*

*(2019 audio or video file begins)*

## **Heni Hale**

I would like to welcome and say thank you very much to Zinzi Minott and Greta Mendez for being here, they're going to be in conversation about their practice. And it's sort of through the lens of black women in dance then and now.

## **Greta Mendez**

Yeah, yeah, let's go. Yeah. So you'll be seeing the odd picture of me on the background slides.

## **Zinzi Minott**

She says she says, um, so when I sat down to write about Greta Mendez, I think I actually became a little bit stuck, because I know her in two very different ways. One, which I think is much closer to familiar almost at this point. And the other is like this mammoth, heavyweight, you know, when you know someone who's like that, and you have these to have the public image of them, and then you know, I was singing somebody to love on the way up here holding hands. So I realised there were like two separate things that connects. For those of you who don't know who Greta Mendez is, she is a dance Titan. She is a technician of huge proportion. She's a powerful dancer, and activist and advocator of dance in the whole, but also independent dance. She fought for and created black dancing spaces. And she was, in many ways a first, the first black woman in Scottish National Ballet. She was one of the first black women to enter London contemporary dance school. And for her work and labour, the very building we sit in, in today, and what we understand as Independent Dance, and a hole might not be here for her but for her advocacy of her and her peers. But to me, she was someone who I knew existed but wasn't told about. And the first time we met we both cried. I cried because meeting her was evidence that my dance education was lacklustre, inept and inaccurate, and I'd come to understand that was true. And that the complete whiteness of the dance faculty at Laban was a choice and not a necessity, as I was often told, and that women like me have been dancing in the UK for years, decades. I was told the opposite on my BA in dance. I was never told about MAAS Movers, or any other parts of black British dance history, and it's canon. I cried and Greta cried that day. Yeah, and you said as much as that day as well. After all the hard work I've done, I remember you saying to me, that you don't know me. And I was it was hard. And it was a harsh moment to realise what happens to the work of black women, ultimately it is used but we are often forgotten. I think since 2013, when we met like I said, we've become friends, but also you've mentored me. And you've looked after me, I think you're committed to making sure that your work and my work are not forgotten. And or remembered, and I think I am the same too. We talk about dance, we talk about my career, your hopes, and mine. We agree and disagree. And you tell me off and correct me on most things. But I understand from you that you have a great deal of love

and care for me, and a great deal of love and care for dance and our industry. I see that you're deeply passionate about the arts and its power and blackness the same. I want to read a bit about you from a book called *Black Dance* by Edward Thorp. This is one of the few books that I've ever seen anything written about Greta in actually tell you the truth, it's the only book and when I was at lab and I was constantly asking my dance history teacher about black dance in the UK. And she repeatedly told me that was none. And I spent a lot of time in the library looking at books and books, that were useful, but were very Americanized like and so I was learning a lot but I just wasn't learning anything about my history or, or like any canon that I was about to join or was already part of. So I was really frustrated. I actually got this book two years ago was a birthday present. So it was actually also a coincidence outside of the fact that I have great friends and one of my friends as she sees anything about black dance will just pick it up for me so this is how I ended up with a book. And this is the only book I have heard talk to the things that we talk about and your career and where my career sits so I'm going to read from it So like Asadata Dafora in America Berto Pasuka car had been a decade or two before his time, 14 years after Pasuka's death the Arts Council and the Greater London Arts Association were providing limited sums in support of other black dance ventures. MAAS movers, the title derived from Minority Arts Advisory Service, under whose auspices the company was formed in March 1977. By which time of course, there were comparatively large black population in several major British cities. Indeed, there was a generation of already growing to maturity from whom Britain was homeland. MAAS movers was formed by some 10 committed black dancers, who were aware that there was no existing black dance company to provide a focus for young blacks who wish to have a career in professional dance other than cabaret and commercial theatre. These 10 dancers started taking class regularly under the supervision of Ray Collins, an American dancer who had been a director of the junior company of the dance theatre, Harlem, and who had settled in Britain and was appearing in the musical *Bubbling Brown Sugar* taught ballet Everal Puckering from Trinidad taught jazz and Afro Caribbean styles and Greta Mendez, also from Trinidad and a graduate from London contemporary dance school, doesn't say school here you know, just saying. Taught Martha Graham technique. Mendez and Puckering were appointed Associate Directors and with Collins as Artistic Director. The first performance by MAAS movers was in the small Oval House Theatre in London in July 1977. The programme began with a lecture with a lecture demonstration conducted by colleagues using the six women and four men who at the time constituted the company. It was followed by five other pieces choreographed by Collins Puckering and Mendez. Collins created women in journey, which attempted a sense of progression implied by the title ranging from pas de six for the women alone to a pas de deux for the dancers Polly-Anne Smith with Collins' somewhat conventional, athletic coupling. Puckering contributed lament and confusion, a sequence of dances for six members of the company to music by Quincy Jones for the television series *Roots* and spirits are sort of black mass with much lighting of candles and burnings of incense and certain form of frenetic movement. Mendez performs, two solos a short piece entitled *Limbo*, and an acrobatic piece, *The Chair and Me* balancing on around and across the chair. The critics gave the company a cautious welcoming, realising that the premise should be encouraged but also that initially, the programmes had to be built around the limited technical abilities of some of the cast. After its short London season MAAS Movers went on tour of the regions particularly those cities where they were found largely black communities. From the beginning, the company was beset with problems it was desperately underfunded, which meant that it was difficult to find adequate administrative staff, let alone provide the dancers with the sort of salaries that they could expect in commercial theatre. And like several other small dance companies, it lacked a choreographer, director of outstanding talent. For its second London season at the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith, the company enlisted the help of a distinguished American dancer, William Luthor, who had been a leading member of the Martha Graham's company before settling in Britain and making guest appearances with London Contemporary Dance Theatre. For MAAS Movers he created a work called *Peace, Be Still* a half hour work which took its form and theme in a revivalist meeting. After Collins had resigned from the position of artistic director Luther was appointed the artistic director, but his work for the company. Inevitably mass movers disintegrated after a couple of years. Not only were there continual financial problems, but the dancers themselves who work together as a collective could not agree on the company's identity which they wished to create. Some had been trained in the Graham technique on wanting to concentrate on repertoire on modern works, avoiding being labelled as black dancers, other considered that their *raison d'être* and wanted to create works that drew from their inspiration of Afro-Caribbean heritage, the standard of dancing remained very uneven and as did the quality of work themselves, it proved difficult to find a black administrator or technician for the company. And altogether this lack of financial support and company choreographer capable of making of creating a really outstanding repertoire all contributed to the early demise of MAAS Movers. Greta Mendez, on the other hand, one of the one of the company's best dancers joined forces with another dancer who had appeared briefly in with mass movers, the American born Michael Quaintance to form *Nin Dance Company*. The title came from the ninth breather of emptiness, derived from the mystical novel *Quaintance* was writing at the time, some somewhat less esoterically, his avowed objective for the company was to choreograph work that had the same power and vibrancy as the streets of Chicago, the city in which he grew up in the company performed at the fringe of London for the season or for the season or two, with some success, and eventually joined MAAS Movers in oblivion. Now the reason I want you to read that info, I know it's lengthy, and probably unusual, is because that's it. That's what I've been able to find in my whole life. It's wild. That that's it, you know, and knowing you and speaking to you, and understanding, like actually who you are, like when I realised who you were, and

the fact that I didn't know you, I was so outraged. I was so fundamentally outraged, because I realised that you were being hidden from me. That's what had happened, because you're so much part of formative moments of dance history generally. But also, anytime something happened around black dance in the UK, you were present. So the idea that I was finding it so difficult to find your name bothered me. So in a way, I wanted to read this, because this is the only place you will find it. So it felt like actually, it's important for us to start with all of that. And I guess the only thing I'll say before I let you read your version of this about me, is I guess all of that is said is why I wanted to do this talk with Greta because I understand somewhat between intentionality, laziness and ineptness and structural racism and misogyny means that you weren't my ballet teacher. Like the idea that you weren't my ballet teacher at Laban or somebody's ballet teacher is wild to me. And it felt like there isn't really I'm about to embark on this massive project about archive, and there isn't anybody else to have that conversation with. So that's also that I guess all of that has been said is to give you the context of like, why we sit here.

**Greta Mendez (15 minutes),**

I've got there are some things in there that are actually kind of wrong. So that's why sometimes I was I was doing that. And my ego wants to say that I left the company before its demise. It didn't go down with me, it went down after I left, and also, of course, William actually took over directing it after I left. Yeah. So I directed it, on paper it looks like several people, it was me busting my ass. Okay, now one of the things that I got connected with, there are lots of things we could talk about that but I will probably filter it. With Zinzi for me, I, we both went to tears because there are articles about why there was a need for black dance groups. Yeah, there was an actual group was it was barren. The schools weren't even taking in black dancers because basically, there were no companies for them to go into. Yeah. So there was this need, and we had to address the need hence the reason MAAS Movers evolved, even John Percival remember John Percival wrote about it. He said, you can't quarrel over a black dance company, because it is absolutely vitally needed. And that's in a review on the newspapers there. And as most people independent dance was also suffering very, very badly at that point, because there was no funding for independent dance. So we were all over the country advocating meetings, you know, you finish rehearsals, but you go to a meeting and you go to meet this governor, you got to meet this one, you got to meet the head of the Arts Council to fight for funding for independent dance, which, of course black dance was in there, because they didn't use to fund independent dance, you got the odd project funding and stuff like that it was no revenue. And the reason I went into pain, tragedy, actually when I met Zinzi, because the work that was done is a lot of independent dancers, but understand this, you teach to earn the money. So you can then go to choreograph and run the company. Yeah, you don't have rehearsal space. So you rehearse it in some church yard in the afternoon, then you rehearse somewhere after 10 in some, so there was a lot, a lot, a lot of work that was done. And unfortunately for me, I didn't have a family here. So I began to neglect myself to actually build and show because we used to pack out audiences. We packed out the crucible, every time I see the snooker there I go, we pack that shit out. We proved by going everywhere, we opened up the corridors for dance. Please know the work we were doing was for dance. Yeah, we packed that out. And we opened up those avenues, we opened up the thing, that dance in itself independent sounds like that needed to be funded, right. So after that, I got burnt out. And I seriously got burnt out. I left for other reasons besides being burnt out. But you thought this would have started the mushrooming of many more companies? Yeah, the schools started to accept more black dancers. But you thought my gosh, yeah, because I met the Phoenix boys who absolutely sublime to see those guys dancing. And so that Phoenix, but then it died a death where other companies when I met, dancers of the quality and the ability of Zinzi and Temi and Gerrard and all these people are still having not by choice. But by necessity, there are not companies there that will take them in. Because again, we still have a kind of in our head spaces or psychic spaces, someone dimensional view of what dance is. Yeah, and we define the term don't fit it. And so these amazing dancers haven't got to make the choices. Okay, I'm going to go into this black led company that's the same profile as Phoenix, same profile is Royal Opera House, same profile as Rambert. I can choose, I need to know that there is a black director directing these companies, we owned buildings, we should have owned some building by now. After all the work we have done. Yeah, let's get real. All of contemporary and independent dance is black aesthetic. It is black. The release of that spine. When I first started the dance, whoa, hold your spine, hold your pelvis and then we come and we start to do it. You know Hofesh doing it now, you're gonna, excuse me, when we were doing that shit you were telling us oh my god, that spine is too fluid, those hips hold them hold them. Now everybody has learned them. And somehow we are put out of it. It's our dance. And so therefore when you get so I cry because basically, she should have had the choice to decide to go into a company or I become an independent dancer, but those choices still do not exist. Yeah. The other reason I got hooked on Zinzi, which is, besides the fact that she's quite beautiful looking, is the fact that she has a political head sensibility like mine. Very, very political head. Part of me wishes that all of us would have gone past that. But it was so necessary for us to keep doing political work. Yeah, as we have James in the room, and not real work of just pure imagination, where we can just be an ingénue on stage, and just be there for beauty. You know, we don't have to work up a sweat. We and that has not yet been afforded to us. Yeah. Um, so as much as I love Zinzi's politics, all her work is you know, um, you know, how we attack, you know, the rage, the default, the anger, the years of oppression and suppression. And so when she's dancing, it's the whole being, the vibrancy, yeah, and then I see that and then I go, oh, I wonder what she was thinking. What she was feeling. She just is. And we need to do

more work like that. And there shouldn't be the pressure on us always to be doing hard edge political work. And, you know, our work is always must be, quote, unquote, black. I don't know what that is. I'm still kind of lost. Because all of the answers and all of music is a cacophony of souls and spirits that have walked is black, red, right, blue, tangerine, Asian, Indian, Tupac I, that's my Trini coming out there. So that, because after looking at her, and I'm going, my gosh, she gives us so much her passion, her intensity, she's speaking for her ancestors. She's speaking for the generations going coming. And then I see that and I go, I want to see more of her in that. I want to see and smell and taste more. So before I go into tears now

### **Zinzi Minott**

Oh, my God every time.

### **Greta Mendez**

So that's Zinzi and I kind of, yeah. So those are some pictures of me that were being done. Let's let's get it going. What happened is, I'm not such a technical not nothing. I had a slight thing. And of course, it's not working. Oh, the back there is her Angela. One of the things which people aren't aware of is that we unlike DV8 Lloyd Newson, Lloyd Newson and us in Nin Dance company because when I left MAAS I went to Nin, well we created Nin, when we used to do what you call really dark. So when people thinking they're doing sexually violent work, work that they didn't used to want to fund us because the work was too dark. Right? The whole sexual violence man and woman violence woman and woman violence. Yeah. And all of that. Oh, yeah. Those are mean, believe it or not. One of the things I want to throw you back to. Because I was technically I can say that now, you know, dancers never agree that they are technically good. But at that point, now I look back I go, yeah, and you know, and I did this thing for the first launch of MAAS. And the chairs were not balanced at all, it wasn't held down. And it was an Adagio with me and the chair. There was no sound anything. So all the music came out over the creeks and one of the things I gave myself two things once I get on I must never touch the floor and because I had to use a lot, obviously counterbalancing and all of that. And that piece explored total sack silence and also showing off my amazing body at that time and technique. Okay, which I did do. Now this one is actually from the piece I was talking about Ray Collins talked about woman and journey. And this was amazing in 1977 to open up the Sunday Times, I don't know how old you all are. But the Sunday Times to open up the Sunday Times, and I got a call from my friend in Manchester. Greta, your feet! Oh, my god you're on the Sunday Times! You know, and that was kind of revolutionary at that point in time to make the Sunday Times. That's it tell you how old I am. Now, this is important. If you could look at the date, as people who are doing dance. If you could find the date, it's somewhere there. I don't know. This is an image of my PTS, but it's actually dealing with Sue would know about, a very important article about how independent dance is on it's last feet. Because if it didn't get funding, you wouldn't be sitting here. The fight and the struggle says a whole big article inside of there about the need to give independent like Mayday Dupré, Tamara McLeod, the names gone off my head now. But a whole set of us who were really pushing and creating forms, right. And inside of that, that is what that is not at that my feet look like that. Really. I mean, it wasn't bruised and damaged. But I don't bandage it up again to get the kind of stuff. But if you're studying, if you could find that article, it will tell you about the history of independent dance and how it came. We're not the history what was happening at that point and the absolute struggle to get funding and stuff like that. Yeah. And it's my feet. I should have signed it. Okay, continue. That is interesting, because again, and I was met at the airport, Luton Airport, that was an inside of Cosmopolitan, that jump. I met somebody because I went to Greece, to open on the first contemporary dance school they ever had in Greece. And I was there for about three months teaching and stuff like that. And I met somebody in Luton Airport, quite recently. And they said, Greta, the work that was done then has changed dance in Greece contemporary dance. So sometimes you got the beginning of stuff but that was pivotal in the kind of evolution of stuff. Okay, next. Now when we were talking about, and I always wish I had money, William Luther, to me was one of the greatest dancers and choreographers. I mean, really and this is from that piece, Zinzi read out Peace, Be Still and the reviewers didn't like it at all. And that's because Malcolm X suddenly decided to tell the bad protesters don't sing, don't make a noise. Just move in silence. If you move in silence, nobody can do you anything. Use the power of silence. And there was this guy who was very badly beaten up in a prison. And he wanted to see them, he went to the governor, whatever they didn't want. And he talked to people and this man said, This policeman said it was the scariest thing. He opened the police thing, and then outside walk 1000s of black people, he didn't hear them come. He didn't know where they came from. And it was, well scary. Nobody was moving is this power of silence. And then, so then they allowed somebody to go in and see him. And he said, when he came out, they had disappeared. They didn't know where they'd gone. So William was exploring, so the piece talks as he said in the book, with all the chanting, but then when we de-robe. Yeah, and all the clothes are taken. And the piece gets quieter and quieter and my solo is talking about the rage we feel in that so yeah. Okay. Now I want to answer Zinzi, we have spoken, anybody has a question? Okay, fine. Just keep it running. Yeah. I want to ask Zinzi about her. I want you to do something. I was born and bred in Trinidad in the tiniest little village qualifies for that. It was oil rich. It still is oil rich. It fed London. It fed England. The oil from Trinidad was taken, not a cent was paid for it, by the way. And people were paid little or no money. And then of course, we had a revolution. But I come from my little village. And I just well somebody picked me up

to dance and said, this little girl looks like she can dance. I wouldn't go back into my childhood. I was all of 10. And I found my voice. So dance lives in my soul in a way that is the only thing. I loved it because the stage was my safe space. It still is my safe space. It's a place where nobody could do anything to me. But one thing I did not know is a thing called Black dance. We danced. We just danced. The only time I heard this thing that's why I still don't understand it. I'm going what's that? We danced. And I think the colonial memory of how we oppress people is by segregating the white and the black and so much of the white is just seen as dance. And ours is seen as some and yet everything you do, I am sorry. You don't like it. It comes from us. We learn from you. You learn from us this wonderful. We're all cross fertilising like this. And so why should it be seen as less than, there's a kind of marginalism in the psyche? That needs to be wiped out. If it doesn't go in this generation, it should at least in the next generation, because the reality is, spins dropped for spin. You know, when I came to this country, my body was moving in the Indian way with a flex foot, folded foot or whatever and you don't and then you go paaah and it stretches. It's all very natural, I don't go and now I'm doing an Indian move. Now I'm doing a ballet move. No. And I come from that culture. We are too small and we are too new. So when I come to a country with for me it's apartheid. That's black and that's white. What the fuck is that? So I have to work with it. Because gradually and you know, I realised it was a lack of incredible talent. Naseem Khan, you all know Naseem Khan? And because she wrote the book that Britain ignores, which helped change the whole thing for dance and everything anyway. And why did I go into Naseem? I don't know, we need to actually break this up. And we also have to pay say thank you. Because before we came here, and America, please remember a lot of Caribbean people go to America, the dance of America and the dance of Martha Graham is not, it's from us. It's from us.

### **Zinzi Minott (30 minutes)**

I think that's why I don't school was so confusing for me, actually, is because, you know, I was one of three black women on my course on a very small group of people of colour. I just remember, like, stepping into this studio. And seeing genuinely, for the first time in my life, a white man behind the djembe drum. I remember being like, oh, you know, that's what you're doing. Yeah. And, you know, like, I'm the only person and I think also for me, because my technique was good. I was strong. And so I ended up being in the top contemporary group, which was the whitest group, because they kept most of the people of colour in the bottom group. So then I was also in this weird position where it was like, oh, they don't usually dance as good as you. You know. So this there was this weird thing happening. And so I'm in this room with this white guy behind the djembe drum. And then we start doing Graham and we hit this contraction and I'm like, that's not right, I know that feeling. This isn't new. I've done this before and it really like blew my mind that no, like in all the explaining about how we got from ballet to Graham, I'm like that journey right like Dunham and all of these people, nobody talks about race. A blimp was like how did you get from that to Graham? Nobody talks about how much time Martha Graham spent in various African countries. They don't talk about that, they don't talk about Pearl Primus, right? They just talk about it, like it just happened. And then all of a sudden, like, hundreds of white dancers wen boof by themselves. And the thing is, like, we laugh about it now, but when you're like, a kid in a school, and they're telling you that, you are being gaslit. Yeah, that's actually what's happening to you like, it's fundamentally violent and abusive, to be in that situation, because you're being lied to. And when you're questioning, you are screamed out and shouted out, like my dance history teacher, the way that woman used to talk to me. And now as an adult, I look back at that. And you know, at times like I teach in institutions and stuff, or like after do safeguarding training or whatever, and I understand that I have actually, either I do have a responsibility of pastoral care, or I'm told very explicitly that I don't, and that's a different teacher or a different person. And I realised that these people are part of their job was to care for me. It wasn't like, are they good people or bad people, it's like, they are being paid to care for me. And they were actually like, lying and being abusive, and still taking full on salary. And that to me is so I mean, okay, it's fundamentally wrong. And it's also a miss truth. But, but also, I don't think they can, like grapple with the amount of pain and damage they cause. And actually what that does to so many black dancers, I mean, the dropout of black dancers at Laban is phenomenal it's the biggest dropout rate of all the schools like black dancers do not stay. And for those of us who graduate, which I did not achieve by myself, of any stretch of the imagination, I was exceptionally lucky to have a great group of friends. That's how I got through Laban like, I was lucky to be at Laban when a lot of my friends, were at like various art schools, and we were meeting together weekly, and being like, Oh, I would have dropped out otherwise, I know I would have. But then for those of us who actually do graduate, most of us don't dance again. So like I do, like, I think this, this like, whitewashing I guess, of all of this history is also what is stopping and preventing anything taking hold. And I don't think you should have to have a spectacular group of like, black queer friends at various art schools going through the same thing. And then whoever you are as a person, to have a career, because the end of the day, it's a degree, and you pay, like it's product, it's education, but it's also product, and they sell it to you. Right, I don't think education should be a product. But that is actually what they say. And they, you know, if your fees are late, you ain't going back. They talk to you about like, what it is as a product that they sell you and then it actually has no relationship to reality. And then when you graduate you spend, you know, I mean, I met Greta because of a conference that was being put on by two white academics who have essentially made their money into studying in black dance. And I found the conference and then I walked into this room was a massive circle. And half of the circle was all of these, like, black people who were older than me. I remember walking in

and being like, who are these people at this conference? Like, you know, and not like, I feel like when you walk into a conference space, you can spot the academics, and I knew they weren't academics. And they were all sat and they knew each other and they were talking, I was like who are all these people? It was only a half of bloody black dance history, and I didn't know any of them. I mean, can you imagine walking into a room and seeing like, Sue, Martha Graham, Rosemary Butcher and just not knowing who any of them were? Like, it's almost hard to imagine what that would be to not recognise those people. And the amount of actual pain that came from like us not recognising each other. I'll never forget that day.

**Greta Mendez**

I still do have a lot of pain about it because again, as I said, and have a family here and the amount of work it took to fight for independent dance and for black dance, one got burnt out totally burnt out. So my ability to do what I could do. I was falling down on the floor and stuff and nobody asked you, what's the matter? So when I entered that room, I know, I remember meeting somebody from the Arts Council at Sadler's Wells, I'll never forget that. And she said, Greta, you are a pioneer, and pioneers very, very rarely reap any of the benefits of the work you've done.

**Zinzi Minott**

That's exactly the same thing people say to me. And I'm like, no, no, no, no, no, it's actually been done. Yes. And I know her. Yes. And that's the thing. This is what I'm talking about, like, what happens with black women? That's why I wanted to have these conversations. They keep talking to us all like, we're all the first and I'm like what am I supposed to burn out to? Yeah. And like, I'm so lucky that I know you and you say, Zinzi, go and rest, have you eaten? When's the last time you took class? Yes. But like, I'm not like, I could not have that. And like people, I don't know if people are trying to like make me feel good about myself or like, or they don't know their dance history. But to do that, to keep repeatedly doing that to people. Like people say to me, why don't you start a black companies Zinzi?

**Greta Mende**

Nah, too much pressure!

**Zinzi Minott**

But you're probably one of the only people who will say that as a response.

**Greta Mendez**

No, don't do that.

**Zinzi Minott**

Everyone's like you would be a great leader?

**Greta Mendez**

I've been there and I've done that and I don't want anybody else to burn out. But one of the things that really saddened me at that conference, because these are the people who are saying this is how the history of dance is that when you know what you have done, and your name is not even anywhere there, and then we sat down and the academic the head of the thing is saying and of course you have never been any black dance at dance umbrella. Yeah. And I go excuse me, MAAS Movers was one of the actually at the very first dance umbrella, MAAS Movers did two seasons there. What are you saying? You know, and you're teaching, you're an academic who are teaching people, and you're giving them the wrong information.

**Zinzi Minott**

But also, and this is like a very common way in which academia functions, but it's also like, people outside communities making money from studying us, that's what was also so frustrating, it's like, this isn't a small thing. If your study of me and my culture can pay for your mortgage, but me doing my culture cannot get me a mortgage. We really have to have a conversation, you know, like, and I think like watching, you know, probably two very talented academics like nevertheless, but like the amount of currency that is in our culture and our cultural work and our outcomes as black women, but just not for us. Is dumbfounding like, and I don't know if I wasn't lucky enough to have like these kind of very stretched threads of support in my life. What would have happened after I graduated Laban? And do you know what I mean?

**Greta Mendez**

As you say, too many have to fall by the wayside. Because basically, if you don't have family support, you don't have all of that kind of support, but because I remember when I went to The Place and if anybody knows me growing up, I know that I was so passionate about my dance. I mean, I was like nothing else in the world on the planet when I come home. Yeah, have you done your dishes and all of that I was like a little Cinderella. And when I hit The Place going back on what Zinzi is

saying you were like this is an odd thing. It's a little odd, walking in with red leotards and hair all over the place, and push you back down at this and that and the other and get your hips square Hold, hold it, hold it. And you know, you come from a culture where you go, oh, and you know.

### **Zinzi Minott**

they used to tell me to leave it outside

### **Greta Mendez**

Anyway, and then I stopped going to classes. And this is the thing about care in schools because if anybody had known me, they would call me in because I was absolutely committed, it still is. Nobody called me but one person saved me. I'll never forget it. I walked into a class that William Luther was teaching, god you I don't know dance. And William Luther was just demonstrating. And Williams. I mean, it was orgasmic, he was like a prather, in the jungle, the way every bit, every muscle, everything is and I'm going that's why I dance. I never wanted to be a dancer. I always until today want to enter dance, to enter the dance. To want to be a dancer still. And William Luther gave that back to me. And then of course I had to go and the other person I remembered, and you all don't know this because I witnessed it. I can't remember the name of the piece now but I witnessed this was Sue Davies and I can't remember name of the piece with this deck chair. And the comedy of dance, the comedy. what was the name of the piece again?

### **Siobhan Davies (45 minutes)**

The waterless methods of swimming instructions.

### **Greta Mendez**

I still wanted to ask you what's sugar, you know? She did a piece on sugar. Yes. This comedy that was going on with the deck chair and a go, yeah, it can be hysterically funny. It was like Mr. Bean, you know, and she could not get this deck chair right. And, I mean, I think it took the whole piece for her to sit on the deck. And so her comedy you know, as well as being a serious dancer, but she could play the comedy as well and played so well. Yes, I did. Okay, tell me why that piece on sugar.

### **Zinzi Minott**

I guess yeah, I mean, you like spoke about, like, my politics and stuff. I think I started to realise pretty quickly, that. Like, I knew that people didn't like the way I was speaking, I knew that people didn't like me speaking. I knew that people didn't like me speaking, like, and I knew that beyond that being personal, to me, there was also a real tension about dancers talking, and dancers having opinions. Like, that was something that I was confronted with. And I guess, even though I decided to speak and still dance, I always knew that the more strands that you have for having a conversation, the more chances that it is that the conversation could be had. Right? And I think like, sugar and coffee are two and the see which I guess always come up in my work, right? But sugar is undeniable, it's undeniable, like the power of this substance is undeniable. The craving for this substance, like literally made the West build ships, sail for years, pick up millions of people, drive them somewhere else, kill all these other people plant this crop, so that you could have sugar in your tea. Like it blows my mind that the power and the craving of this is one of the pivotal pillars in slavery. And that, you know, like, if you look on the packaging of Tate and Lyle, it says, sweetening the world since 1864. On every packet of fucking sugar, everything single one. And so I just thought, well, I'm just gonna fill the room with sugar. And I'm just gonna dance in the sugar. Like, I think the and the legacy of how sugar functions with blackness is like, type two diabetes, right? Like, like, that's the irony of how this functions is that not only did my ancestors pick and boil the sugar and turn it into just a product for the West, we now are like, endlessly linked to this product, because of our appetite for being given a product as food, like as payment, or payment but like so now like the when you look at our like palette of cooking, the amount of sugar that we use. So now we're riddled with type two diabetes. Do you know what I mean? Like it's just it's like this endless torture with this product. I think there is there is no way like people don't have conversations about race and it's really real on post racism and that is it that deep like all of this kind of stuff, but like, people can't argue what happened with sugar. And in some ways, it's a sadness because, you know, like, slavery in the black body built the modern world, the first thing to ever float on the stock trade was a black body like that the beginning of capitalism is a black body being floated for sale, but people still want to argue,

### **Greta Mendez**

but also, a lot of people walk around the buildings here not realising that, it is that what built the so-called empire. It is why the buildings that we have, the roads you have all of that comes out of that level of exploitation of a human being who just like you and I, let's get real of they will like you and I sitting down having their drinking and dancing or whatever. And they will certainly they were picked up and separated. And the trauma of that has never been dealt. But that's what built America.

And it built a lot of the buildings, you walk around the wealth you have, you know, from the oil and all of that, and that sugar, but that gave me my dance.

**Zinzi Minott**

But that's the thing.

**Greta Mendez**

And he takes that molasses that byproduct of that thing. And say you call me a devil? And he dove his body in it. We talked about Performance Art, now and minimalism and stick a tail there. And you have a fork and he's black with a byproduct of what has been enslaving him. And he make his own tune and you have a biscuit tin and he go ahead and he pay the devil and I'll give you your money, and everything is like that. The staccato, the intensity, when you look at carnival of mass, these people have lost the ship, because that is the fundamental heartbeat of it. Is that some person? Yeah, is that rare, but at the same time, have a smile with you. Yes.

**Zinzi Minott**

I'm gonna, like,

**Greta Mendez**

Now I'm not done now. I'm not done. Because in the in the box. So I don't have any pictures of this piece whatever you're just gonna have to imagine it. But it's like it's a Dutch pot, which is what I'm not sure. So it's a Dutch pot. And I made I made I made molasses. And it's an I made it in these Dutch pots and the Dutch pots are like in these perspex boxes. I wanted them to look like artefacts so I tried to house them like in these really like clinical boxes that would accept on a plinth in my imagination at some point. But what's really nice about them and then we really will go into questions like don't Okay now we go into questions. I had to bring sugar into the room yeah,

**Zinzi Minott**

like so they kind of like sit like this the pot and they're really like round sits like this and the lids on top. But the sugar that I made is still crystallising. So every time I open them they're there's something different happening. So like the what the sugar is alive because it's crystallising. So from this molasses it's kind of like growing in the box. And I imagine I mean, it's one of them's in the cupboard at my house. And sometimes I imagine that it's just gonna go like, like out because I don't know, it's not going to stop like I have to stop it. I don't know how to in a way. That's interesting. Yeah, but it's

**Greta Mendez**

You should have a camera on it and phasing and building on it photographing it at each phase, you should try to take pictures.

**Zinzi Minott**

I take a picture once a year, I can't commit to more than once a year.

**Greta Mendez**

Send it to my house. I'll do it. Questions. Questions.

**Audience**

I don't have a question at the moment but I just wanted to say that in the reading that you did beginning Oval house is mentioned and I just found that today that they're moving to Brixton and that building is closing and I think that is particularly something.

**Greta Mendez**

But the Oval house is actually was very, very pivotal. And very phenomenal in the burgeoning of so many potential careers. It had that very open house policy. It was very enabling, encouraging. We rehearse there for no money. I mean, when I say we didn't pay them, they put and they had a nose for newness and an enabling and yes, it's going down to somewhere else now. And I think that's gonna be the last Yeah,

**Zinzi Minott**

Yeah they're gonna put it in Brixton, which I think you know, 20 years ago would be a different thing. But putting that fear moving that fear into Brixton now, and what they're knocking down to where to put it is I was really sad. When I found out that plans been going for like about, I want to say five years at least maybe I've known that they were doing that but they

were like some you know, like calls like for local artists to like do their little things to make like the smoothing of the gentrification and that they will come in about five years ago. Yeah.

**Heni Hale**

A lot to do with they couldn't develop that building though, for some reason, I think they tried to make inaccessible and it was never able to be accessible. Yeah. And there was issues.

**Zinzi Minott**

Yeah, I'm sure. I mean, it's not like two things can be true at the same time, right. Usually they are like, I think it is not. I mean, Brixton is Brixton. I don't need to explain to anyone what Brixton is, but also Brixton is being cleansed. And I mean that like as in literally cleaned and in the heaviness of being cleansed. And the arts is one way to do that. And that that's what hurts right? Like, and when you're like a black artist from Brixton, and you have no access to that space, and you're not being asked about it coming in, and you've been priced out of your you're like I went to school in Brixton, I can't afford to live there. I don't think that agenda is there got anything to do with me, or someone from Brixton, who also works in the arts? And then that's why it's icky. Not because, yeah, not, but I'm sure but also like, Rich Mix, for example, like, I think your overall house is my Rich Mix, right? Like I think Rich Mix also have like a really great nose. And they try and support as much as they can. More than they can. In fact, they go above and beyond like, a lot of us wouldn't be working if they didn't stage some of the first iterations of our work, right. But they've always also almost been shut down, like or had difficult situations for sure, over the years. Any other questions or thoughts? Comment?

**Audience**

So if we're not going to start the dance company, what what are we going to do?

**Greta Mendez**

Oh, you're, you're including us in it. You could start one darling.

**Audience**

That's what I mean. Like Zinzi was saying, since he was like, you know, people don't exhaust yourself. Yeah. And I'm 23

**Greta Mendez**

Aw you're good?

**Audience**

Well, I'm just, I'm just, I think I don't know how to answer. I don't know what

**Zinzi Minott (1 hour)**

I think the reason why I don't want to start a company is because I realised and I think, you know, you've probably heard me say this before. But for everyone else, I realised I was only being encouraged while I was being encouraged to everything other than dance. That was that's more what it's about people up great artistic director, you'd be a great choreographer, you'd be a great lighting tech, you'd be anything. But nobody was telling me to work hard at the craft that I was doing at that moment, on the BA that was bankrupting me with the technique that I actually had. No one was encouraging me to do that job. And it's a company to, like, look at any artistic director, right? There's a moment when they when they compromise and they stopped dancing. And that's what I am not ready to start the company I wanted to dance for. Right? Like there was I only recently stopped looking for that company. You know, if I'm honest, like, I was always looking, I love dancing for people. And I'm good at it. You know, like, I'm a good dancer, I give a lot. I can take a lot. My technique is great. Like, I'm good. But actually the person that I wanted to dance for was so few and far between, or the people that I did want to dance for. Like for me, probably the best person I've ever danced for is Alesandra Seutin. Right. Like, but like she wasn't being funded through the nose when I met her, you know. So it's all there's also this tension. So it was more about a decision of wanting to dance once I made that decision about I want to dance, I knew that it might not be possible for me to provide space for other people. And I think you have to you have to make that decision generously and say, I'm going to build a house for other people to live in. And that's not for me, that's not a like undertaking. You got to know that that's like really serious. Also, do I think the UK would have a black contemporary company? No, no, I don't think I don't think the money would flow there. I think they're quite happy with ballet black, and that situation. I think in a way ballet Black would be used as a way to not have a black contemporary company. Sadly, I think it would be used to be like there is a space being taken up by blackness and dance. I don't I but also, it's not my fight. Maybe it will be but it's not my fight right now. If it's somebody else's fight right now I would fundamentally be behind it. 100% Because I don't mind if emails I get from dancers right now. Dropping out asking me what to do. Like the dance institution should be ashamed. Like I should not be writing back to these mostly black like

women, I don't know if that's also because I'm a woman or because I don't know why it's that way, but mostly black women, like, at the edge of themselves in an email, like, I'm like, I'm freelance, I have no support structure for hearing that shit. You know, like, No, I mean, in a real way I don't have, you know, any any resources to help me give pastoral care, you know, like so I'm doing it because I don't want them to be alone and I wish to fuck I had somebody to email when they were treating me how they were treating me at Laban and Lewisham college. But I didn't, you know, like I was very, I was lucky that like, basically Wayne McGregor and people from random dance came into Lewisham and was like, you have something, and they just put me under their arm. And every half term summer, I was dancing with them. And if it wasn't for them, I think at that time, I might have not even gotten to Laban because the way I was being treated, and Lewisham College was breaking me. And watching those rehearsal directors defend me to my head of year, they had given me a two and a half minute solo in a 30 minute piece. And they were pissed. My school were pissed. And I watched the rehearsal director go head to head with the head of the school at the time and defend wise, you've given me that solo, that kind of shit will mess you up. When your head of year doesn't want you to dance. And you've got this outside company coming in and being like, she's your best technician what's your problem? And I will not like, I don't want to pretend that this everyone is black in this situation. That was a white woman who came in and was just like, but she's a good dancer, what's your problem? You know, so that's what I was dealing with. And it didn't really get any better at Laban, but I was lucky to have them. And they did give me a lot of support. But then I suddenly realised I don't want to be an ape in your company. That was really my difficulties. I want to dance about something. I want to I want to dance for something like like, and that wasn't possible at random. You know,

### **Greta Mendez**

I believe if you want to dance, find every avenue to dance. You can't take on the the burden of a company. Because that was is my constant rage and my constant pain because I didn't reach to fly. Because I got burnt out. Yeah. burnt out much too soon. Because you're managing this entire company that was not funded. Yeah. If you want to dance, fine, even if it's the pavements of London, and you just go and dance. Yeah. If you want to create a company, but don't really want to dance. That's a different ballgame. Yeah. Because the rage that lives inside of my body from not ever going to the peaks that I could have gone to. Yeah. And then when I went like Zinzi, I was falling down. I was dragging on the street and people say, well, oh, my god, preacher, when you're going to form another company. I was invisible. And I don't have a family. I think I had a British family. And you get on you walk in like this guarantee, of course that helped John Boyega. My breaking down help John Boyega and Femi Oguns who is now millionaire. Because I went into theatre. And they're there because of me teaching them. I suppose that's my saving grace. Yeah. And because of I went into theatre I met so you know, you have nice young black people now who are doing great things in Hollywood and stuff. And it's because I inspired a young man called Femi Oguns, who took everything I taught him, built a studio, and I told him, but in the end, as I said to you, I still want to end Oh, and we could talk for agism. Oh, my god it's ageist. I mean, once you get a belly they don't want you on the stage at all and unlike films, and unlike everything else, they don't bring in the older bodies. Yeah, so the young people now came into a period when there was some money or they can get money or whatever, but it's throw those old people off and go excuse me, we don't really want to see all your with your fat cells now. But so there's a lot of ageism within the dance sector where you wouldn't see it in film, Judy Dench can still act. The thing with tennis when tennis is on the tennis brings out all the oldies. They're not hiding those oldies, football because they need to know that the roots are deep. That's how you build and if you if in her generation, she doesn't know anything about me. Cathy Lewis, Cathy Lewis is very, very important. Cathy Lewis has choreographed dances for London contemporary, she also choreographed one of the things you see passing by that these people are not spoken about. If you don't know your root adapter of it, you are easy to be blown out. So you know I mean, that's the other problem. Any other questions?

### **Audience**

I mean apart from someone was 23 whether or not they start a company. What else? I mean, you know, obviously, since you're making your work, you're moulding the stuff in the work, which I know is a huge burden. I guess. Yeah. I mean, what else needs to happen? Like, what are the other one of the urgent actions?

### **Zinzi Minott**

I mean, I think for me like. I Yeah, I'm just I'm thinking a little bit about, I'm thinking about a text that is in a show that I have, which speaks very differently to black creatives. And anybody else that's listening to the text. And one of the things that it says to the black creatives is do your work. Just busy yourself with your work and recommit to your form, like it is your form that saves your life. Like for me, that is dance, I know that I have friends, I look at them, like film saved your life, wherever is committed to your form, and do your work. That's what I want to busy myself with. For anybody else who is not in that situation where they're fighting to even hold a commitment to their work, fuck it up and redistribute the power. But I can't do I can't hold both. And every time you try and hold both, you almost die, you just do. So you have to, like, I even having a relationship with my work, or having a relationship with my form is under attack all the time. You know, I can't freely walk into a dance studio and dance, not just because of money, but like, because of the looks because of the touching because of the

stares and the lack of expectation, like the expectation of me, of people that don't know me is here. And then when they see me, they're like, oh, you're good. You know, like, that's, I'm living with that on a daily basis. I don't have time to like, in like a linear way. But also like a broader than that to I don't even have enough power. Like the only power I have in this world is social currency. And British Gas don't take that. They don't take like, I don't have any power in. I don't have any shares in the things that are making me powerless. So the people who have shares and the things that are making me powerless need to power out and stop to be frank stop asking us because also we've said you've said it's been said is over what isn't recorded or isn't written down. Some people were there. Right? Like I don't I don't think it's actually about me, given any more information. I think it's about people really addressing if they want change. And being honest about that, like, because change generally requires at least redistribution, but basically loss. And I always give this example of being invited to an institution to talk about diversity and change. The department was 10 people. They were all white. Nine of them were women. One was a man, they all went to the same university all studied art history. And they said talking to me about diversity. And so I said to them, is anybody here willing to leave? They say no. Say, I said, Are you creating new jobs? Because I'm not I'm not gonna jump down your throat straightaway. I'm not maybe you're creating new roles. No. So what the fuck am I doing here? In a real way? Why am I actually here? You're playing lip service. You're using your diversity money from the Arts Council to have a conversation and even if you throw me £180 from it, or £250 or £360 you're wasting my time. And I will die earlier than my white counterparts. I'm not here for it. I'm not like that's how I feel like who don't like it don't come to my shows, I don't care. Like it's that simple. Like and I'm tired of us being pigeon holed into situations where we can't be that honest, because that's really what's going on with us. Our life expectancy is literally less than our white counterparts. So why would we be busy doing that work? I'm trying to fall in love with dance again. Before I die. I'd love that. You know, I'd love the opportunity to like re-feel some of the feelings that I've had in my short life of dance. If I could get them twice I'm good. You know.

### **Audience**

So when you take away the idea of going up against the funding bodies that are funding is it enough to create space for dancers, but especially black dancers just to do their work and let that speak for itself?

### **Zinzi Minott**

That would be amazing. I think space. I mean, I'll keep it short, but I think space. Like you said, we should have something by now we should have something. So I think if that did exist, yeah, I mean, I think Yinka Shonibare with guest projects, for example, he for those of you who don't know him is a visual artist, he bought a warehouse half of its a studio, half of it is like a rotating space. Many of us, including me have had residencies there. I mean, Yinka, I experience as someone who has a lot of politics, and a lot of integrity, but also he's just doing it with his actions. He has this space, he does 12 residencies a year that we're all a month is accessible, it is doing what it needs to do. But it's not dance ready. You know, it's an art space, it's concrete floor. You know, that's where I started really doing installation work, and I filled the space with coffee. So it definitely explored my practice, and allowed me to think about installation and how I use my body or didn't use my body, I think a space that was thinking in that way about dance would be incredible, you know,

### **Greta Mendez**

but the thing about it is going back on something Zinzi said, because, I mean, this is a really seriously old conversation. And if and I'm really serious, because up and down the country, I know, I went to the meetings, fighting for funding for dance. And inherently within that black dance, we have the beneficiaries of that hasn't been? Yeah, so how much more until you enter a room and you're willing to give up that space? Why do we have in the conversation? Yeah, and because then that will always be dictated by somebody with another vision. So we have done it, my generation, I did not sit down. That's why I have burned out. Because besides the rehearsals, besides the teaching, we were up and down there at meetings, talking to the director of Arts Council at that time, everybody, we leave then and then the next generation, but who were the beneficiaries? Who has yeah, so it's not for us, I'm Tony Morrison, I want to stop talking about racism, it's not my problem. Because you know, my, I love any kind of thing, you drop any kind of dance in front of me, I'm interested, you know, I recorded my own. So therefore, it is not my problem. And I think the problem is the those who have created this for the hierarchical structures, and who in some way keep maintaining that quite recently, I had to dance what I didn't have to I didn't need to agree. Because I don't like the word black at all. I rage against it. I rage against colour, I'm a culture. I'm culture. When you see me as culture, I am multifaceted. When you see me as a culture, I'm more dimensional, anyway, and I was doing this piece about, you know, whatever. And I got a little payment for it. But guess what? All the payment went on the rehearsal room because it's so expensive. I still end up like when I said as way back then I end up with no money for me. Because the spaces now have become so expensive. To get into, long ago, you could get into a church hall, or when there was my mother's name in Stockwell Mack Makoto use a big company, Mark his daughter. And we used to go in after 10 o'clock at night to rehearse because there's classes will finish. And they would let us in now health and safety, you can't do it

anymore. So, you know, so there's a whole lot of blocks have been put up, which is therefore good. But of course, it's chopping us off at the legs and the other.

### **Zinzi Minott**

I think also, like just going back to this point about the company and like these two things coming together, like and maybe maybe this, this and this coming together, like because it's been done already. Like that's why it's really important that you're present. And I do think on some level, the you not being present is intentional, because then it makes me think I'm a pioneer, I have to do it. First time I burn up, they don't talk about me. So then you can go and do the same thing. But like, like looking at like, you know, like and this is what this is why, like, I as you know, as often as anytime I've had a residency, I call Greta. Because I'm like, look, we got we got like set this record needs to be set straight. So even if you do make that choice, you know, you can ground yourself, you can go to the Arts Council and say, you know, like I have some friends who are doing research on the Greater London Council right and how they funded black art. I have done a bunch of research with LADA about why it was at one moment that funding blackout was so famous which is great. Popular which is basically the Greater London Council labour and kind of falling off the back of this and then like continuing to benefit from factories and being like, we don't want anything to do if you look after yourself, right, and that is how so much black art got money at a certain point, when that stopped, they stopped funding us, and all our companies disappeared. So for me, like even thinking about funding, like thinking about what you're saying, I also am thinking about funding strategies. Like I spent a year researching possible ways of funding black art. But what I realised the outcome of that funding was essentially, if you fund black art, you still have to contend with racism and actually what's happening is we're burning out and we're going crazy, and we can't feed ourselves and we can't house ourselves because we're not Black artists in isolation, we're black people in the world and so the likelihoods of the things that are happening to us that are difficult are so high that I realised that she is not a black art fund that we need. We need an end to racism, which is so logical right? But like it took me a year to realise I can't spend my time creating this fund but not care about the fact that we ain't got no housing that's basically what happened, I was stuck, I was stuck. Yeah.

### **Greta Mendez (1 hour 15 minutes)**

No more questions. Stand up. Stand up. Just shake it out. Shake it out. shake and shake that maximise your feet man and throw your arms in the air. Shaking shaking. Shake it shake it shake it. You know, you need to do at least five times a day and the arms above the head because it opens up that rib. The tapping of the feet 70,000 nerves in your feet 20,000 going down there you know they're there for a reason. Okay, could you turn to somebody and introduce yourself? Wait, wait, wait, tell them what is your favourite chocolate, white or dark and tell them why When you're talking about chocolate put it in your mouth, imagine it going down your throat and let your body start to move in a different way. Come on. Yes imagine so when that's I see all, I wanted to make you like white or dark chocolate. It says a lot what your personality depends on the type of chocolate You don't like chocolate? The Trinidad chocolate is a second best in the world. Second best in the world. Anyway, so next time I see you, I will tell you if you don't know what it says about your personality. Thank you so very much for coming you found some nourishment for your soul.

*(Outro: Renée Bellamy speaking in 2021)*

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