

**In this episode, we are in conversation with Asja Mahgoub and Arkadi Zaides, both of whom led workshops at the Biennale this year. Asja Mahgoub is a theatre maker, performance artist and mediator who led a workshop for the Masters programme students on approaches to facilitating exchange and feedback in artistic processes. Asja also led a joint session for all students, teachers and participants on conflict, mediation and diversity. Arkadi Zaides is a choreographer and visual artist whose work engages with political observations, social commentaries and human rights issues. He led a workshop on Documentary Choreography at the 8<sup>th</sup> Tanzausbildung Biennale Stuttgart 2022. In this conversation, among other themes we do a deep dive into the role of conflict in performance and in society.**

[1:37 – 3:43] – Asja shares that she is struck by the openness and the awareness of the students. During the performance by ZTZ Köln, the very first school to perform, she realized by the intimacy of the piece how powerful this must be for students to perform for peers after emerging from the COVID19 pandemic. She also shares about the Communication workshop she led along with Zuzana Žabková for all participants on the first day of the Biennale.

[3:45 – 7:47] Arkadi comments about the challenge in such introductions where one is asked to situate oneself which becomes all the more complex as a migrant. As a choreographer, he is “specifically interested in how choreography can be any tool to interrogate social and political contexts specifically... where choreography is actually interrogating existing documents and trying to intervene or give a new light to what these documents portray somehow or give testify”. He is also trying to articulate this through his doctoral studies. Commenting on a moment that struck him he tells Asja, that he found her communication workshop very useful, suggesting simple and effective steps to work with conflict. In his past work addressing Israel-Palestine, Arkadi has proposed projects that gave the opportunities to needle and embrace conflict.

[7:52 – 11:25] We then played a simple game with the duo to arrive at some prompts that they could respond to. The first prompt for Arkadi was: *Behind my mask I am*, to which Arkadi said he is “struggling to breathe”. The next prompt to: *Upon entering the studio from the street, I shed...* to which Asja replied “shoes”.

[11:30 – 14:50] Asja shares an anecdote from her department in Gießen in relation to bringing shoes and other materials on the dance floor. She relates the story of a performance art work which caused humour, conflict and urgent action on everyone’s part to save the dance floor. She notes that she herself was not present in this performance but heard various accounts and perspectives about it.

[14:50 -18:02] Riding on the point of heard accounts of events, Parvathi asks Arkadi if his work in documentary choreography finds a difference in the value of material considered more solid like something in print versus felt experience. Arkadi responds that there is a certain hidden quality to the type of documents he is trying to bring attention to that he thinks crucial to discuss collectively, particularly when we are at a time when facts are constantly questioned. He adds “Here comes a bit perhaps the embodied practice that tried to embody these documents and kind of make them into a linked experience and not into only the documents which is somehow archived somewhere but actually unleash how this document can be revalidated or revisited through the body, through the medium of the material.”

[18:06 – 21:38] Asja reflects that as someone who grew up in Germany, learning white history in school, she sensed that there was so much hidden or destroyed history that represented marginalized positions, speaking about race for instance. She asks how to relate this fundamental

aspect of society that one is part of, to one's body. Asja says, "I often get to the point where I'm thinking when it's lost, there's so much that is just lost, because it was not canonized, and then the same time I feel it's not enough to just say, well, there has been so much loss. Just to know the loss itself is something that kind of not completely satisfied me." Arkadi responds that beyond lost, there is an active erasure, marginalization in pockets of history.

[21: 40 – 26:30] Parvathi wonders if there is a cyclical tendency that erasure from the absence of any one of the two – either documentary framework like a transcript, legal framework, a constitution, a law or written or dialogue. Even a dialogue may fizzle out or a document may be manipulated. So both are needed.

Asja responds, that the way the past or present is documented relies so much on what is considered as valid proof especially now with more tools such as cameras and microphones, how much oral tradition is taken into account, is it considered to be a fact or not. She also feels this applies about the different positions regarding COVID19. She speaks about the Hadith in Islam, and the many versions of it, ultimately the one canonized is based on who witnessed who say it, who heard it from whom. Importantly - there was a time when proofing of these things was based on checking each person if they were good people. "what kind of history is kind of being reported? If we talk about power, and the history comes from, from someone who has, like taken power over other people, we see this as a success story of the Empire or something. But do we take into account what kind of society this this kind of history is made on?"

[26:32 – 30:21] – Nicola shares about their ongoing research of the Imperial boom between 1870 to 1910 particularly in the African continent. While this work written by Black African scholars was published in the 1960s, titled *The General History of Africa*, Nicola notes that they were only able to find it now, indicating how discourse is allowed to circulate in truncated ways. Nicola mentions that with their background as a White South African, they have a Eurocentric schooling, and were encountering narratives of the European powers. "I've been understanding this period of time, through the lens of attack, of taking over. And now, for the first time, I'm looking at this period of time, and all the different contexts through resistance, and defence. And just this. Slight shift changes the whole perspective." Nicola notes that these narratives of resistance also have so much more continuity, and these were not lost, but actively erased. Law and constant meticulous archival administration that prunes the sources are part of the strategy of maintaining the Empire.

[30:22 – 32:15] Arkadi acknowledges that the critical approach to the influence of the colonialism is in focus nowadays, citing the example of restitution of museum artefacts. He points that the museum space itself was stock these artefacts. The artefacts themselves can be perceived as documents. For the longest time, they weren't seen as documents but rather as a craft of tribes, but actually they are they are the documents of this act of erasure.

[32:20 -32:40] Nicola lays out a thought, "I feel like I can hear a voice from the Biennale saying, 'but what has this got to do with dancing?" and amidst laughter we agree that this does have a strong correlation.

[32:43 – 33:50] Arkadi agrees that he was surprised to be invited to lead this workshop. Especially in his recent projects, there is no dance. But the concept of choreography is more kind of observed as a tool to acknowledge movement to acknowledge prevention of movement, control of movement. Watching many dance performances, he finds himself asking the opposite question, "what does this have to do with what is happening around us?"

[33:50 – 39:23] Without wanting to speak for dance, Asja observes that the question hasn't gone to so much about how these museum artefacts got here "but about humans, human history, and accessibility to it". When this is brought to discussion in society, specifically theatre and performance also offers the tool of play which brings breadth and space in the conversation. Arkadi shares a discussion he had at his workshop at the Biennale about the ancient Greek theatre which served citizens to gather and question our values. The way it excluded certain people from this discussion, theatre today also continues to function in exclusivity. Stage dance also is a symbol of certain class in society. But when we bring it back to the body in relation to mobility and in relation to other bodies, without even a shared concept, we can deconstruct and bring it to something basic. Arkadi feels we can start talking from that basic place, because we all have our bodies and most of us can move.

[39:24 – 50:30] Parvathi points to the shared relevance of Asja and Arkadi's work to bodies and the expression of their voices, and asks whose duty it may be to bring out voices. Co-relating it to anti-caste politics in India and the need for privileged person's role in making space for lesser heard voices, she asks how one can find the right degree and role in a space of conflict. Asja agrees that she understand the fatigue of marginalized positions coming from trying to constantly engage, explain and resist. On the other hand, privileged positions may also feel that they are not allowed to talk because they are not marginalized since it may be assumed to be the woke thing to do. So there could be a tendency to back out of the discomfort of conversation. Asja that rather than self-restriction, it could be framed as supporting someone to be part of the space.

Arkadi refers to the idea of withdrawal that can still be a string intervention, giving the example of two protests which were performative acts placing the body squarely at a site – i) The standing man at Taksim Square and ii) when a Black man placed himself on a pedestal at the Guggenheim. Prevention of movement is a strong statement to the rest who are able to move. Nicola adds that, also in relation to where we are, we seem to be talking about power, Citing the example of the 2015 student protest in South Africa, they relate how white students would make a barrier circle around the protest groups in the face of police brutality because the police would not harm the white bodies. So it is about understanding the inherent power dynamics in the room and seeing what kind of choreography can work with that.

[50:33 – 55:27] Parvathi asks the room if conflict is a beautiful opportunity? Asja thinks conflict is important. "I would hope for society where conflict is something that is not so stigmatized" and one is not seen as a troublemaker for introducing it in the space. But calling it beautiful brings it into the aesthetic realm which brings up many connected questions. What conflict creates can be beautiful as well. Arkadi points to aestheticized conflict and how aesthetics is deployed to wield power through photography and even Renaissance era paintings. There is theatre in the midst of this tension. Citing the example of Israeli Palestinian conflict, he constantly feels that one was not talking about the aesthetics and in that process, masking it.

[55:28 – 57:05] The question comes up: if we need conflict to move forward?

Asja feels that conflict can teach us to observe our position, rearticulate and learn to accept different positions. Nicola adds that engaging with conflict is also a practice, doing conflict well is a skill.

[57:15 – 01:07:00] In another round of playing a game of prompts. The first one was: *I witnessed a change in how they moved after...* to which Arkadi responded "It is wishful thinking." Arkadi shares that the word change and change-making are themes he finds tricky. He reflects in particular with two examples – one in the case of his own work and the others with the construction of check points in Israel. Even someone who is concerned with certain socio-political issues and is trying to make

improvement and changes, can end up fuelling it in the opposite direction. Asja relates this mouldability of change to the effect of Non-Violent Communication that we had learnt and applied at her Communication workshop on Day 1. The leftist critique against NVC states that while addressing inter-personal conflict, it limits bigger organized action.