

HIP HOP

DANCE ALMANAC VOL.1

Edited by
Ian Abbott

FEATURING:
Ella Mesma

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ELLA MESMA

IA: Hi Ella. You document yourself well, so I won't go over old ground. First question, I'm interested in Hip Hop as alternate kinship/family and would like to hear your thoughts and experiences of that.

EM: Sure, so, it's a big question isn't it? I guess for me, the biggest family I've had in Hip Hop. Actually, I'm already like 'no that wasn't' one of the biggest was through meeting Renegade (Kevin) and training in London. In the London B-Boy scene I also became a partner of one of the boys on that scene, so you know it very much became my world. The younger generations like Terra and Eddie were at our house every weekend getting ready for battles. My B-Girl community, (the B-Girls were Emma Houston, Rox, Lisa, Jenn, Joey, Nefeli). There was a big group of us who also trained with Kev and were working in London. I guess that was my biggest family.

IA: What time are we talking?

EM: 2009 to 2015. And you know we're still close now. But things have changed, people have grown up, people have moved out - I've moved out of London so that's one of my big families. I'd say I have two other big families, Rokafella and Kwikstep in New York. But yeah, it's been across the

oceans training and keeping in contact. But those are my big families. There's also the bigger community, which is more like the diaspora dance community. Marv said something the other day, do you know Marv Radio? He is a beatboxer. He said something during a show we were performing in (Roots of Rumba, London) about that wider family also being Hip Hop you know how everyone on that scene is Hip Hop because 'The ultimate message of Hip Hop is about love, it's about healing and it's about family.' You know all the work that was being performed at that event was about those things, and all of that made me think about this extended family of diaspora dance theatre and the love that is there. And also this supporting of different generations. Can I add one more? Family number four is Artists4Artists. For sure. We have a WhatsApp group and it's about constantly sharing, constantly looking out for each other and supporting each other's shows and knowing what's going on. I would say it is more in London than in the UK, but in the UK nonetheless.

IA: Can you talk about each of those families and what they offer you? And what do you offer them in return?

EM: Sure, sure. I think in the

breaking scene now I consider myself, I still break, I mean now I'm moving to Leeds, there still are breakers, the Leeds breakers - Raw Gina and all them - that's who I will train with while I'm up there. My personal attitude is that I'm not about battles, I just realised that battling was a phase in my life (laughs). I realised, when I was really in that scene I was being mentored, more so than me giving back. And I'm now in the place where I'm giving back. And being able to see. So, for example in the show I'm making now there is a B-Boy/salsa dancer from East Grinstead a house dancer from France, a house dancer/capoeirista from Portugal and a Hip Hop dancer from London. We had our full audition on the weekend. So, I suppose now it's about giving back, doing shows, making tours around the UK. I love linking up because I'm a bit of a gypsy/nomad. I've also got my other families around the UK, like Newcastle Robbie and all the B-Boys there (where we came from before Liverpool). Because I worked for Robbie in 2013. So yeah I've got all these different communities. Because I love connecting people. And it feels like such a family of love. It's just beautiful being around all those amazing people and supporting them.

IA: And what about Kwikstep and New York?

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EM: Still going, I mean I'm not there, but they just did a show last week on Broadway and they're at Red Bull BC1 now. But now that I've changed my attitude towards breaking, I train for my love, but I'm a choreographer, that happens to love breaking. So I think when I next go to New York my training attitude will be different. And there's so many layers to training on the breaking scene. And realising a lot of the things I was doing was to do with my own ego, and proving to other people that I was training hard enough. So there's all this stuff of stepping off and all that shit - sorry can I swear?

IA: Yes...

EM: Cool. So there's all that stuff about stepping off and

“Two of the things I used to get a lot when I was battling was like ‘Stop being like a girl.’ Which was my biggest pet hate, and ‘Stop smiling.’”

just questioning why I'm doing things and it's about love and its really beautiful. Terra and Eddie called me yesterday and I'm going to go and see them in Wolverhampton. But it's just to hang out and see what they're doing, because it's a genuine love.

IA: When did that shift come about for you and your place in the battle scene?

EM: I think it's always been there because deep down I'm not a competitive person. Though I think we all say that and deep down we are, you know what I mean? But I always found it really hard

to battle, and the only ones I really enjoyed were the ones where they were playing Latin music and I was having fun. So eventually I was like I'm doing this to challenge myself to get better and I'm not enjoying that journey any more. So that was one reason. The other was breaking up with someone on the scene and going actually this is really complex and do I wanna be there right now? Probably not. And there was probably this maturity of growing up and going I'm not in my ego as much as I was in my 20s. And so, I'm not so bothered about proving myself anymore.

IA: So, what's the ego in Ella and what is she having to prove?

EM: I mean it's one of the

hard to wipe the smile off my face and be serious. What was your question? I've forgotten.

IA: It was about why you stepped off and...

EM: Oh yeah. Why I stepped off. For me the true essence of Hip Hop is about love. And it's about nurture and it's about using art as a political tool, and helping other people enlighten themselves and be better human beings. So, breaking aligns with me, but battling doesn't align with what I have to say and the things I want to put out in the world anymore.

IA: In terms of breaking as a language, how does that align with your body, and what you have to say. Why that form?

EM: Sure. I think for me the first thing is always music. That's always the way it's been you know. First of all, the music is dope. And I am talking about the old school, it's all about the breaks. So yeah the music. But also, I love, and I've been really thinking about this this week, making this piece of work. I love dance that moves in circles.

IA: As a structure?

EM: Yeah I love things that flow and continue. And obviously you can break and not have flow and continuation. And actually, my ex-boyfriend used to say 'Follow your flow.' I think that's something really nice about breaking, you can use the power of your legs, the power of the spin down to keep on going and keep on doing. And that's the same in Latin dance as well, in terms of salsa, they're really connected. What else? Can you repeat the question?

IA: What was it about breaking as a form, that affected both head and body?

EM: It's free. That was a big thing for me. It really comes out - that was another thing I really struggled with - in competitions, people would say to me 'You need to do sets. Don't do you, learn a set.' And often when that happened I would stop listening to the music, I would be like a mouse that was really scared. But if you're just following your flow, it's a beautiful cycle of life.

IA: As a choreographer who likes breaking and who uses breaking, how are you using it as a form, and as a theatrical...

EM: I think it's that way actually. Because it lends itself to 'Following your flow.' It's not that I go 'Oh we're putting in breaking here.' It's what works to express the story, and so generally I would never say there's pure...whilst for me, the dancers I use will be really well versed in the kind of speciality that I'm employing them for, but I will not, I'm not a purist. I'm a lover of the pure form, and I love to train to the point I know what the pure form is but I'm not a purist in terms of the way I like to use them. I keep coming back to this thing, as a person of mixed heritage, I'm mixed. Why would I be so militant about keeping pure to one form. So, in terms of the breaking it's whatever helps me to tell the story. In terms of this story, I'm telling at the moment it's a lot about the sea, and waves and circles. And that's why there's a lot of flow. And then the piece before was very angry and pissed off, and it was about the #MeToo campaign and rocking really worked because

it was all about fighting back. And attack. Yeah.

IA: Can you talk about your works Foreign Bodies and Ladylike? You don't often see rocking in a theatrical context. How have people have responded?

EM: I'm not sure how people have responded. I think well? I mean it's such early days in terms of seeing these forms on stage. There's a little bit of, it sounds like I'm blowing my own trumpet, but there's a little bit of paving the way. Traditionally you see Hip Hop theatre and it's one form, and so this pisses some people off. And that's OK. But, it's been a really long night, so you might have to repeat the question.

IA: The use of rocking in Ladylike, and how it was constructed.

EM: I like working with forms that are connected. It's really easy for me to talk about Foreign Bodies (my new project) because we just finished it, or just finished the structure yesterday. I have a really intuitive way of working, in terms of the piece: I might not really understand why I do something, and then later on in the process, I clarify the why. So with Ladylike it was rocking and Afro-Latin. And specifically rumba. There are many forms of rumba, but one form, columbia, is like a fight between men. And so, there was something about connecting an old dance (columbia) and a newer dance, (rocking...which is still an old dance). For me there was something obvious that they connected: and the amount of Afro-Cuban people in New York as refugees, it's not surprising they have a similarity. In terms

of rocking they say it was African Americans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans who made it, it was those communities doing this dance. When I was in New York training with Miguel Panzardi, (Mighty Mike from Mastermind Rockers). He would say that yes, there's a direct link to salsa. So, for me there was a meeting point. I suppose they felt like the right things to use to tell this story. It was like this stripping back. There's breaking in Ladylike too but simplifying it down to those two forms made it clearer. And it was also easier to teach those two forms to the dancers. In the piece there is one other girl who rocks, and two other girls who are more contemporary. That's another moral issue I had - is that OK to teach people who are not rockers? So in the end I taught them shapes from it that are not rocking. There's something about Hip Hop that it's a folkloric dance, it's a street dance and there's a different level of valuing and respecting it than, say, from contemporary in terms of its history, and the people and the oppression of the people who made these dances. And I think it's really important to think about these things when you're making and working with these dances.

IA: To imitate could be considered disrespectful if you aren't part of that culture or understanding it. But Hip Hop in terms of folkloric dance. Could you expand on that?

EM: I'm interested in folk dances because they were the first dances I loved and relate to. You know, with other dancers on those scenes, we don't have dances on the stage. And those are the dances that make sense to

us. They're how we express ourselves in the club. And it really makes sense to me to be using those dances. And working with these dancers (who have a background in folkloric dances) in this process means that at the moment I can say do this and we have a shared language. You can just refer to steps and people know what you're talking about and it's such a beautiful thing and such a way of expressing yourself and that you're heard and understood. I love to see work that uses these dance forms because they're what I love to see. It's the music I love to hear, the way I love to move, the things I love to watch.

IA: Is it about representation?

EM: Yes it is.

IA: Why is it important?

EM: I think it goes back to so many things. I think in terms of all the superhero stories that we see growing up and seeing someone that you feel like you are like them. It's just the same as we want to see ourselves represented and want to see someone that we could be one day. It's the same thing. I guess our generation are now putting out work where we're doing that for the next generation down you know?

IA: You talk a bit about heroines.

EM: I do, I love heroines.

IA: Where has that come from? Why is that important for you?

EM: I think it started in 2004 when I did a project in Brazil with a circus group, where I was introduced to the Orisha which are like gods or deities

which link back to Nigeria. And I'm really interested in archetypes when I work and the hero's journey as a story. So of course, superheroes make sense. And there's that whole thing of watching martial arts films, watching anime and I think the breaking scene was a way of getting into anime and superhero's.

IA: Because you like anime?

EM: I do like anime. And I like watching Marvel films. I discovered anime via the breaking scene as well.

IA: They talk a lot about Bruce Lee and martial arts, it's an echo.

EM: For me that links back to those dances that I first learnt, the Brazilian forms, and the Orishas because they're still archetypes and they're still using dances to tell their stories. Superheroes are the bigger form of life, but they usually have their different colours and their capes and that. I've ended up realising that I do this thing in my work where I'm always looking for what the archetype is in the story, and how that links to the story, and how to tell that story. Usually that links to an Orisha, a super hero.

IA: So, with Ladylike how did the heroine emerge?

EM: It was to do with being told I needed to be lady like as a kid (I didn't like that) and knowing there weren't that many women superheroes and wanting to put that right. Ladylike is very much a putting right in my eyes. A shouting at the world, saying no these things aren't OK and I want to put this woman as a superhero instead of not hearing her voice.

IA: How did the heroine emerge?

EM: It's so hard to explain my work, because it is layered. But I knew I wanted to work with the chicken as an image. There are so many references to women as 'chick' and all these references to different animals. I knew I wanted to work with that. And I knew it was the chicken, and the chicken and the egg. And because in rumba there's so many movements of the shoulder and it kind of reminded me of the chicken, and many more references: for example sacrifices of hens. Then I had this feeling it was about superheroines. And so, in my head it was like maybe there's a last scene where there's capes and every woman is on her heroes journey and you kind of see a visual representation of when she's got to her heroine place. But then it got to a place where, where the capes weren't working [Laughs] to the point we never even made the capes. There's always the things you want to represent, and how you can do that through dance. And how you can visually, without words, say that thing. With the heroines, it was more about getting to know what each heroine was. For this we used Oya, Oshun, Oba and Shango. These are all Orishas. Traditionally they all can be played by any gender actually.

IA: In terms of gender you told four women to play those genderless roles.

EM: I always start with titles, and I knew the title of it was Ladylike. And I did originally want to try a version of it with a man. Later on, once I've made the piece I wanted to see what would happen if you put one

character into it who was a man but very feminine. It didn't work out in the end. Ladylike was a putting right of all the things that were in the media

should look - I cut my hair off at the beginning of Ladylike, and it was all gone. That was a big deal. It was a massive deal to get rid of my long curly hair

“I was working with five guys. And I was saying yesterday I always felt like, to survive in that all male environment, I felt like I had to become less woman, to become in some ways invisible. So, the guys could have their bloke conversations. Or that I had to be more woman.”

at that time and were going wrong in the world. So, it felt like it had to be women.

too.

IA: Was that a reaction to...?

IA: There was an interview at the time where you were called 'unladylike' and that interested me in how that has crossed your theatrical world, and your B-Girl persona.

EM: One thing we have been talking about this week is that my work is very sensual and there is this sexual quality. I think that might be because I have a background in Latin dance, which is really sensual. I have this memory of when I was about four, and someone told me I was unladylike and so this was a chance to turn that on its head and reclaim that word. Then it was also a reaction to comments in the breaking scene 'Stop being like a girl.' So it was in part a reaction to that, but also I learned so much about the things that were holding me back in society. The should and should not's: how a woman

EM: Stuff in my personal life as well. Because they all say you cut your hair off when you're going a little bit crazy. But I'm glad I did it. I'm growing my hair now, but I'm really glad I went on that journey. It's been like finding a different type of femininity to myself. When I was with Southpaw, Robbie Graham's company, I was working with five guys. And I was saying yesterday I always felt like, to survive in that all male environment, I felt like I had to become less woman, to become in some ways invisible. So, the guys could have their bloke conversations. Or that I had to be more woman. But in this process (making Foreign Bodies) it's been nice to be with an all-male cast and never have to justify or not be myself. That's been really special. I think that's because I got to go on that journey with Ladylike, to undo all that conditioning

that I went through as a woman. Even last night (in the club we went to to celebrate our last night) I was looking at all these women with their very straight hair and loads of make-up and sitting very still and looking very serious. And I was like, I am very glad I don't have to do that anymore (we were just on the dance floor being ridiculous). It's so nice not to care what you look like - or not care as much what you look like. I still think there's something about just enjoying being vain sometimes which has been really nice too.

IA: What does being a girl in a battle mean?

EM: I instantly think of Terra and Eddie, because they don't care. They just break. They step out of gender, and I think that's one of the things I found hard at first. As a naturally feminine person, and a small person (I'm a slight person), a lot of breaking moves I had to work hard to get, and I couldn't do the, blagging that male energy thing. That's something I was going to say about Ladylike; there was something about stepping into that angry energy which I had not been allowing myself before. So I'm not hanging onto that statement anymore. I can rep even though I'm small. I used to hate that in the breaking scene though, when it would become about your gender. Disses about your gender. Or dicks got out (not literally). But you know what I mean. Terra and Eddie are just about dancing. And respecting. And saying thank you. And respecting the judges decision. Yeah. They really understand all those things and go out there and do what they love.

IA: You're in the early stages

of making Foreign Bodies. How would you describe what it is now?

EM: It is, an hour long piece using a vocabulary of contemporary dance, along with or with influences of house, kizomba, kuduro and baile funk, which is quite unusual but it's about putting these dance forms on the stage. It's quite new.

IA: What's that last form?

EM: It's a folkloric dance from Brazil, from Rio. It's still very young, very early days. I suppose it is quite sexual in many ways. It's got, well you can see the influences from all over the world in it. You can see the samba in it, the African influence in it. It's already beautiful in itself. Kuduro is more a stand up dance. It reminds me of toprock. Kizomba is a partner dance from Angola. It's all initiated from the pelvis, which is also where I like to do a lot of my work to initiate movement in my dance company.

IA: Starting point or...?

EM: Always initiating in the feet and the pelvis. That's something I got from learning graham in contemporary. And yoga, and also it's in everything in Hip Hop in my opinion and in Afro-Cuban. It's our bounce, our base. Everything is coming from there.

IA: So they're the styles...

EM: And the piece, it's kind of hard to describe, you've kinda got to see it. In an abstract way it's kind of about five jellyfish and it's narrated by an actor (Milton Lopes) that we've based his character on Richard Attenborough and he's from Cape Verde.

But it's about healing and history. And all those things from Hip Hop history that we have talked about. It is talking about migration. And so, one of the first scenes is talking about in the UK, how mixed the population is, but that you can't even get a plaster that matches your dark skin. So, you know little things. And bits of political discourse and race. Using the story of jellyfish as a metaphor to look at colonisation and power. It's exciting.

IA: When will it be finished?

EM: Next year. We've got two weeks now to figure out the rest of the cast. We've got three of the cast members with us now and we're gonna do some auditioning in London. And then we'll do two weeks in London, just on putting together the whole show, I can't wait. I look forward to getting Milton back in the studio. Because we had him join us yesterday in Liverpool for the first time. And then my hope, my plan is, in September next year we will go into production, and make this amazing set for the audience to make votes. It's all based on the British citizenship test. Yeah it's been really fun to make.

IA: I'm always interested in the origin of ideas. How long has this been in there?

EM: It was during Ladylike. I'd say during the first year. It was a slow process because of funding that, but also because I was in the piece it was slower to make. I've now realised I'm never going to be in the piece again, unless it's a solo. I'll do a solo piece. But it was so much easier this time, being able to step out and go 'I can see the whole story.' In the first year, I

got the title of Foreign Bodies I realised how political the title is and how many meanings there are to foreign bodies. It also came out of a conversation with my mum about my dad. My White father's grandfather was talking about if he married my mum who is of mixed heritage Caribbean and British how there would be a contamination of the generations, so it was a bubbling of the enormity of that sentence. Then everything in the news, the 'lovely' Theresa May, and so Foreign Bodies at this moment in time is a really powerful title. After that I started talking to doctor friends about what foreign bodies mean in the body, which was blowing my mind...just so fascinating. Then I met a lovely dancer, and Artists4Artists gave me a little bit of encouragement and actually Dance City gave me a little bit of money and so I worked with him and we made a three-minute dance solo and that was the start of the piece. And then at Trinity, in Bristol I made another five minutes. So I had nine minutes and I was like OK...it's got 'tentacles.'

IA: One of the things Hip Hop doesn't deal well with is how Hip Hop affects mental health, and the individual, and how the community behaves towards each other. I'm interested to hear your perspective, how you practice self-care and how you see it in the community.

EM: I know it's really important for me, and that was part of leaving London and following the opportunities of what do I really want. I started looking at my own mental health and my own journey. I genuinely think that the more we know about ourselves, the truth, not the ego and the bravado, the more

we can get closer to what and who we are authentically. All the Ladylike stuff of what we should and shouldn't do for example, what my parents told me to do, all that stuff we learn. I've been on a real journey in terms of that. I think that Hip Hop, in terms of lyrics, there's so many powerful lyrics in terms of enlightenment understanding yourself, understanding the situations of the world, and how they play a part in our self-esteem. But I totally agree that it's really, really important and I'm glad you said that because that's what the real underlying message of Foreign Bodies is, it's about mental health. Making this piece has made me understand that's what I want to talk about in the world, because it links to love and it links to self, and helping other people in the world and the world becoming a better place. I think it's also a problem within the scene, because I feel the generations before had less access to or less understanding around mental health.

IA: What some of the OG's or...?

EM: Yeah or in the 90s, I'm thinking back. Like how available that kind of discourse is now about understanding yourself compared to before now it's all about from the inside out. Oh except I just got that line from Lauryn Hill, is it 'Who you gonna...something if you ain't right within?' What's that line?

IA: How you gonna win, when you ain't right within?

EM: Exactly. So it was all there. I had an experience recently with an older generation person. I think a lot of the stuff going on was their own mental

health stuff. And then I realised you can't mentor someone if you're not OK (you can't help someone else win if you're not right within).

IA: Could you recognise in that person that they're not whole?

EM: I don't know maybe I was wrong. I don't know what their experience is. But it was good to realise 'OK that's your stuff, that's not my stuff.' I guess it really made me think. I really want to help people find their journeys, but you can't do the work for someone. They've got to want to do it. And it is hard...life is hard. I think, in terms of my parents and me; they struggled a lot more. There's also something about that and this younger generation. They're much more open and much more aware. Some people. Maybe that's because there's this thing about ancestry and we're always wanting the next generation to do better. I don't know. There was less of a culture of helping before, and I think that's not that far away, you know five years ago. I think there's a culture around this community. You know Artists4Artists, as a group that are genuinely wanting to cultivate and help people to grow. Where I would say the generation above that there was a culture of, help you when you're emerging, the very seedlings of emerging, and then that's the end. So there was this sort of...

IA: Was that around the idea that you might be a potential threat?

EM: I don't know, I think it was just, onto the next thing. That's great, but there's something about how you keep your relationships. If this

is genuinely family you want to look out for your family. Even if it's 'Sorry it's not for you right now.' There's something about keeping people in touch, as human beings. Communications.

IA: What's the dominant discourse in Hip Hop at the moment? What's got the most currency?

EM: The gender debate but I always feel really frustrated with it because it goes around in circles. Sometimes I feel like there's an agenda when we have those discussions. And it's not broad enough in terms of voice. I feel like there's an agenda from the people who are setting up the panels. So I think that's one. And I think the thing of history and getting things written down. That's maybe the biggest thing. And about the dilution and respecting the generations before. Whether purist or not purist. Hmm. Maybe something about level? Maybe I'm thinking more about the contemporary scene, something about making sure the level is high?

IA: What's the level?

EM: In terms of training. Where people are getting their training, if they're looking after their pioneers which I feel is really important. Or you know using YouTube and...hmm have I missed something?

IA: You mention foundations. Can you talk about your relationship to foundations? Some want to preserve them in formaldehyde, others want to acknowledge and move forward.

EM: I guess I'm a bit of both? I think there's something about preserving, respecting,

valuing. Making sure things are valued. I also think it can be toxic to not be allowed to change. It's really not my political philosophy so why would it be my dancing philosophy. In terms of the philosophy of Hip Hop music, I think the more we can get back to what it was about back in the day the better... but I do think at the same time it's gonna change. We all make mistakes when we're young - big time [laughs]. Because it's a young people's dance as well you know, you've always got to assess why you're bitter at something and if it's for the

Hop?' I totally understand all of those debates. I think it's really, really important as a maker to think about them to the point where I'm ready to make my work. I always work with elephants in the room. I always go on about this. If there's a question that's underlying, you need to ask that question. You need to face those questions yourself before anyone else is asking them. If you're OK with the answers, then I don't think you should have to answer to somebody else. It comes back to that thing of, we don't evolve unless we try. I like to see people trying.

“I think there's something about preserving, respecting, valuing. Making sure things are valued. I also think it can be toxic to not be allowed to change.”

right reasons?

IA: Have you experienced toxicity?

EM: I would say the UK is a bit more open to Hip Hop theatre, and it being more acceptable to try different things. I think there's still a little bit of a thing around women. Women. Do I want to say this in your interview? Argh!

IA: Yes!

EM: I think women are less valued in Hip Hop and given less value as dancers, choreographers, as makers, as change makers. That's frustrating. Then there's always the bigger debate 'What is Hip Hop?' That is a huge sack. 'What is Hip Hop? Who has the right to make Hip

So sometimes failing. I think maybe, sometimes out of failure comes great things. Sometimes I find getting involved in those debates... well I'd rather be creating the next opportunities and the love...

IA: How do you feel you are perceived in the Hip Hop community?

EM: I suppose probably as a bit of an outsider. Both in terms of not being in London. In terms of because I'm blending styles. In terms of where I got on the breaking, on the battle scene. Hmm. In terms of being a woman.

IA: Let's go into that woman thing.

EM: Sure let's open the can.

IA: You've said that women are less valued.

EM: I just think it's a very masculine world. I've never felt you know, I've never felt...what I was saying about training with Southpaw, it's always been like, training is very male heavy, but it's never been I'm the odd one out or I'm not welcome or anything. But I know if you think about the set-up of a training session, very often you do have the girl is being shown how to do things by the guy. You know there's a dynamic, about masculine energy and I think perhaps because I made that piece that was shouting, I probably ruffled some feathers.

IA: Are you making feminist statements through your work?

EM: Yes. But I am also just making art. And that piece was all women. Now this next piece is mostly men with some women in it. It's just the right thing at the right time. It's always evolving. For me now it's onto the next piece. I also made another piece in between Ladylike and Foreign Bodies. That all began that time in Bournemouth at PDSW. I finished it. It's a 30-minute piece. With silks. Papyllon

IA: Does that have a relationship to Hip Hop?

EM: Definitely. Definitely. I was so surprised. Because people were all like 'Yes B-Girl' when I came off stage and I was surprised because I'm using the breaking form but I didn't realise it was recognisable. The opening scene is all breaking, all floor work, but it's all on this big piece of white fabric. Which is a silk from circus. It's all to really subtle music and a poet (she's not a spoken word

artist), that's very important to her. But yeah I was very surprised, when people in the audience were like 'Yes B-Girl.' I was getting props but I didn't realise, because it was just me moving, a genuine blend of my styles. People said it's definitely breaking and I didn't realise that it would be seen like that because then I get up on the silks after that and the last section I tied the last silk around my waist and I danced, so I guess I felt like I saw more capoeira and contemporary in that scene.

IA: But people read...B-Girl.

EM: Yeah it was really nice.

IA: You've interviewed lots of B-Girls and documented lots of stories. Can you talk about that?

EM: Yeah, it was really cool actually. It was mostly in the UK and the US and it was interesting that some people hadn't had those questions asked before. They hadn't had those conversations before. It was really surprising but also empowering to have those same questions across continents. The answers were so broad and different. Like from a B-Girl from the US called Bree. Her answers were always turning things back on their head, empowering and positive and then there were some people who by voicing those things, realised that things about the scene they hadn't really thought about before but have been affected by. There is something about being in a scene where you are kind of genderless compared to the rest of the real world. You are expressing yourself, and you're not expressing your gender when you're dancing. Obviously for some people this is all different in

different interviews. But that was probably the thing that was most inspiring: realising that so many women get into breaking for the same reason to escape gender roles, or to express an anger or a character that they're not able to express as a woman in the world because there's a lot of that should and shouldn't stuff. A lot about suppressing being angry. And in breaking you can be pissed off if you want to.

IA: Why did you interview these women?

EM: Before I started the Ladylike project, I had a lot of questions around this 'dancing like a girl' thing. Feeling like I was half this B-Girl who would always be wearing like baggy clothes. And like I said when I was dancing with Southpaw, desexualising myself in a space. But then the salsa dancer part of me that was super, hyper expressive and danced very sexy...there was one time 'somebody' said to 'somebody' else that they should 'save that for the bedroom' when a B-Girl wound her hips in the cypher. It made me think about these different spaces, and why can't we be ourselves in every space or can you be yourself in every space? When I decided to take a break from the breaking scene, it was because I felt like I wasn't able to be all of myself, or authentically all of me in different social spaces.

IA: What is troubling you at the moment, in the scene or in a wider context?

EM: Learning who drags my energy. Learning who drags my energy and whose energy I take. I'm really fascinated by the stuff we do to get attention. And what other

people do to get attention I'm fascinated by it. Brexit. Trump. The situation of the world. All the xenophobia. I know that there's two sides to every story, and I know there's a lot of people who are completely the opposite, but how do we have that person, that orange man in power? I suppose because I'm working on this project, how do I take care of people? How do I help them to better themselves and hold the space. And you're kind of a manager. You're a psychologist and a therapist at times, and how to hold that space without damaging or hurting myself or them. You know that stuff we were talking about in terms of mental health, there's an excavating and we can grow stronger in learning about ourselves. But it's got to be OK. Looking after the scene underneath us and making sure they're OK. What else? I dunno if anything is in terms of the scene. I'm happy to observe it for a while rather than impose and want to force anything to change. And I am happy training my way. I'm looking forward to going to Leeds and training with those guys. Maybe exploring other forms I haven't trained in, just for the love. But because I'm not so bothered about being seen or battling it's cool.

IA: And on the flip of that, what is giving you energy?

EM: I love seeing all these amazing new dance forms. These new merges of dance and music. Seeing the next generation and seeing what they do. People like Marv Radio or Akeim Toussaint, Ffion Campbell Davies. People who are a little bit younger than me, making dope work that is truly diaspora dance theatre, Hip Hop dance theatre. I find that really inspiring. Music, the

people making music. I think how technology has enabled people to have a voice in a very different way. That makes me feel...old I think...how do you make a track all by yourself? I find that very inspiring.

IA: This isn't the end of the questions, but is there anything we haven't spoken about that you'd like to speak about?

EM: I guess the unheard voices. Sorry I'm jumping about but one of the reasons I did that interview is because there aren't that many platforms for B-Girls. One of the things I wanna do is I wanna make a video of this particular song, that's all the women in the UK. For example Robert Hylton, I felt for a long time he was sort of this unheard person and Kwesi Johnson. People who might not have made it big in that older world. Benji Reid even. He is still making amazing work and I still want to see him more. I would like for everything to not always be in London, as I too am an outsider to London now. I would like to see more conversations between the generations. I think that to a certain point we need to just have them ourselves. It's easy to say 'they' but ultimately you're responsible for the things you do yourself. So that's why I try not to moan and just do the things I would like to see happen myself. But yeah, I suppose that and I don't want to lose contact with the scene because it's been a real family to me. As we're all moving on to do cool things on our own, it would be cool to keep that sense of family there.

IA: Do you remember your first battle?

EM: Yes.

IA: Can you talk about that? Who were the judges?

EM: I'm thinking about my first, first, first battle and it was actually in class in London, so, I can't remember the judges, I can remember who I battled. He actually lives in Bristol now, but I won! It probably doesn't count though, because I wasn't as scared, because it was a safe space. It wasn't a real space it was class context. It was Sunanda's class. The first real one I can't remember probably because I used to get flight or fight mode and blank it out. Oh it probably wasn't my first one, but I can remember a really big one. I have forgotten what battle it was. The place in Angel. You go to the arcade, and to the right and over there. I was really, really scared about everything.

IA: Had you signed up?

EM: Yeah I had my partner with me.

IA: So was it a two vs two?

EM: Yeah with Joey. She was quite often my battle partner. We've got some nice little videos of those times (and some that are really shit!). I can't remember what battle it was but I was really scared.

IA: Why's that?

EM: Because I'm actually really shy. Especially in that context, where you're repping. You're proving you're the best. If you have a little bit of doubt, you're battling to make sure you're the best when you're not really quite sure yet. Yeah. Good times.

IA: If Ella is in a constellation, who are

her three brightest stars?

EM: Definitely Rokafella. She's been a really important mentor for me. I'm gonna go for a DJ from the North called DJ Lubi he's been like my musical education, I used to sit in his living room and just do records. Renegade is important too. Some of my first teachers. How many am I allowed?

IA: That's three! What is it about Rokafella and Renegade specifically?

EM: Renegade was drills drills drills. Shouting at you over and over again. Building up that thick skin that you need when you have a coach, a true coach, like a sensei. Rokafella was more balanced. She is interesting. Someone said once 'The figures you seek out in your life, are replicating your family life.' Rokafella and Kwikstep...they really care. There's a balance in how they train people. For me Rokafella...it was so important to have a female figure in the breaking scene. In a world of many, many men. But also a strong female who was unapologetic who would tell you what she thinks. If she hates something you know (she's quite a purist). She was really inspiring. I mean there's so many people that I'm sorry I didn't mention because I'm still thinking of you all. But I'm only allowed three. And I have been thinking about this recently myself as well.

IA: Where are you finding inspiration at the minute?

EM: One of the things is just trusting myself. I worked this week with an amazing dramaturg called Luke Pell. I love that he just listened, and let me be me...I'm the kind of

person who has a lot of ideas. Umm. What was I saying?

IA: Luke as a listener.

EM: I have a million ideas. But what I've realised is they eventually do make sense. This time it was OK because there was someone there going 'It's OK to have a million ideas.' Someone giving me the confidence to say OK, I trust myself.

IA: Where does class sit in your world? How present is it? How present do other people make it?

EM: I think it's very present. I think because my work tends to be about voices of the unheard, and class is always involved in that. In terms of my situation and my family and the things they've given me I think I'm really really lucky because these artforms are about class. It's all about the political in what I understand is the true sense of the word. Not the stuff on television, but oppression. And oppression is class. It's maybe the most important thing. I feel like my next piece might go there. Because it's the next elephant in the room and I might dig in...I have to do it with my work. That's how I make sense of things.

IA: Class has a connection to privilege. What is your connection to that?

EM: So class and privilege and how it features in Hip Hop and how it's important in Hip Hop?

IA: Yeah.

EM: I was thinking about that. What are the different parts of privilege? There's language, education and money which affects education which

affects language. There's so many levels to it in the UK scene and privilege. It's so hard, it's such a big topic. I don't think I have the answers. Maybe I don't even have the opinions. It's a scene from New York. From the Bronx, from Brooklyn, from really deprived areas. It's so global now. I think it's still the main voice of the unheard wherever it may be. At the same time it's for everyone and anyone. How do you measure it? It's too big a question. No, but I'm gonna try. I was just thinking about Korea and the amazing B-Boys who have come out of Korea and that scene and that level. I have no insight into that...maybe that's one of the things that is unexplored? Then it's the question of how much people want to share their private lives? That's the thing about Hip Hop, it's like the alter ego of a person, on every level. So...I think it's really important. I don't know what the answer is. I'm gonna carry on thinking about that.

IA: What is your strongest memory of Hip Hop?

EM: [pause] God I'm having a million things going through my head.

IA: What was the first thing?

EM: It was just a battle, a random battle in the summertime in the UK. Feeling happy and in a beautiful world, in a beautiful place with beautiful people. That opportunity to throw down and express yourself in a way that you might not express yourself in everyday life.

IA: Do you think that's the strongest? Or the first?

EM: Might have been the first? The first time I went to

New York. I got a Lisa Ullman Scholarship and I went to New York. Just seeing it there was really different to seeing it in the UK. I feel like the privilege thing you see there is different to here. Really, really understanding where it's from and talking about that. Maybe the way it's taught in the UK it's more like training moves. In the US I felt more like it was going to these iconic places, it's very different when you're in the heart of it, and you're understanding how it came about...

IA: So what shifted for you that first trip to New York?

EM: I think I connected more to the heart about what the work was about. That it's not so much about the moves, that I was training over and over, and the drills. I mean I think the UK's got an amazing scene. I mean the Southbank in terms of when I was last in London was where a lot of training was happening. But I think it's very different in terms of the class scene where you pay and you go to class. As you can tell I'm more on the breaking scene where that doesn't happen so much. But I did start with classes and I think that's not really where Hip Hop was born and was grown. It was the same when I met Renegade and I'd start training his drills. We'd go to his house and there'd just be a few people and you'd throw down there. But it's different to...Rokafella's training was in youth centres, it was just very genuinely people you could tell had very few opportunities, breaking was their lives in a very different way to what I saw in the UK. I don't know if that's just the places and the people I met in the UK to the places and people who I saw there, but I saw how Hip Hop

was really doing the work of empowering people without a voice there. So that's sort of my privilege answer.

IA: Is there a moment for you

“It was the same when I met Renegade and I'd start training his drills. We'd go to his house and there'd just be a few people and you'd throw down there. But it's different.” to...Rokafella's training was in youth centres, it was just very genuinely people you could tell had very few opportunities, “

in your personal archive that you want to talk about that hasn't been documented?

EM: No! [laughs] But I might have in a few days! I never thought of it like that. Even with Roots of Rumba, that last one of the tour this year and people were saying you're doing something that's going to change the course of this scene. It wasn't like that. I was just thinking this isn't happening so I'm going to make it happen. So I'm not that bothered if people remember me. [laughs]

IA: What is your perception of the scene across the UK?

EM: I feel like it's really separate. I feel like it's really important for me to say I'm commenting on the breaking scene. I feel like it's really separate. I feel like it's such a shame. I've been this like chameleon person. Because I lived in

Leeds before I lived in London. And I seem to have a history of going out with B-Boys (laughs). So my partner up in Leeds was a B-Boy so I knew all that scene. And then in

2009 when I became a B-Girl I got this job in Turkey, working with all the Leeds crew. I have such a love for the Leeds scene. I think it's such a shame that there is some dislike there for Soul Mavericks and the whole London lot. I feel like I'm getting political now and it's not nice to comment on all them lot. There's stuff and because I'm not about the battle I'm like 'Guys can we not love each other more?' That's been hard in terms of this film I'm trying to make. It's one of my missions as I move around the country is to just speak to everyone personally and explain why it's important that everyone is showcased in the same place. Then it doesn't have to be 'Oh well they're not in my crew so...' Maybe then there's something in that about 'How important are you on this scene to make this film?' Well what if I'm not even in this thing? Showing all the dope people who are around

the UK. I suppose we've all got our shit to deal with, we all bring our stuff to the table. There's such an amazing collective of B-People. There's some amazing B's. I guess that's something I miss about the battling scene, when everyone's there in the room and all this testosterone or oestrogen and you're about to do this thing. Maybe I just miss it. Maybe it's not so much that something needs to change. More conversations across different places.

IA: You've spoken about your own heritage. You've spoken about gender and class. I'm interested to hear how you frame or talk about race in your work. How do you see it in relation to the wider Hip Hop scene?

EM: God you're asking all of the big questions!! Obviously just to clarify, I'm a mixed heritage person who is White-passing most of the time. Although I get asked every day 'So where are you really from?' Last night going out in a new city I found myself assessing, in our group, are these 'our people' enough that we'll stay here or there won't be drama, or we won't be made to feel unwelcome. That's interesting, with my own stuff, and who I'm comfortable with. So that's me and that links to privilege. As a White-passing person, how important is our history and our heritage to us? This is all my stuff, all my drama, but my sister is much darker than me and this was always a thing for me growing up. Wanting to look more like both of my parents. I was a bit jealous of my sister who didn't have this question of 'Is this really your mum?' Drama. So that's my stuff that I bring. In terms of the narrator I've chosen, Milton, is darker skin than

me and I was saying to David one of the dancers, can you help me understand why I've chosen him as a narrator? He said because he represents you in a way, in terms of your life and your experiences. Maybe more obviously in terms of the way he looks. So that was interesting. Who knows. Maybe it's true. So that's me. The next question, can you rephrase it?

IA: The influence in your work?

EM: Yeah, and then there was another one?

IA: And in the scene.

EM: Right. So in terms of my work, because I'm working with diaspora dancers, it's really important to me that there's always a representation of the diaspora in all of my work. Even going back to my first dances, they were Latin dances, and I used to book a lot of gigs of salsa and samba shows and it was always important to me not to have an all-White cast dancing a Brazilian dance show, that just doesn't feel right to me. At the same time if someone's an amazing dancer, they're an amazing dancer. In that dance company there would be a White, blonde haired girl with freckles dancing samba as well. Because I don't believe anyone can or can't because of their background or heritage. But I do think it's really important that there's representation. Going back to the stories and who we see in the stories. It's important you see everyone as the hero. There was a time when I was a kid, I've been thinking about this a lot recently, and a friend of my sister's was around, and we were watching Beauty and the Beast. We were talking

about the beautiful dress that Beauty was wearing and the girl said to my sister 'But you can't wear that dress because you're Brown.' Yes. So. You know. It's really important to me that the heroes are not always White. Maybe that's something I have an opportunity to use my White passing privilege for, for making statements and also an opportunity to change. New heroes and heroines on stage that's really important to me. This piece about race has been really important to me, but also really scary to me because of my White privilege to be making a piece about race. It has led to me asking questions to myself, about do I have the right to make this piece of work? I found out through making it that I do and that I have a voice. I think there's something about always, always questioning. I think it's important in the world, your privilege and questioning what right you have. Generally I think that question might have something to do with some more bullshit that we make up, that's why I was saying I don't like spending too much time talking about other people and how good they are. You make the things you're gonna make, and if they're shit you're gonna know, and if they offend people you're gonna know. Just be prepared for whatever, whatever you take on be prepared for the responses. Scary as that maybe we have to accept responsibility. We're grown-ups. And then in the bigger scene? I guess again it links to my thing of maybe I can only speak for myself.

IA: That's all we can speak for...

EM: But I know that's why I love this scene. It is very 'representational', it's very

diverse and it's about having a voice. Ultimately it's about people and...it's about realising where all these dances have come from. That they come from Africa and that the work can be an opportunity to talk about colonisation and talking about that and talking about privilege and contributing to undoing history. HIS-story. I think that someone said to me the other day that history is the White man's story.

IA: 100%. Where is music in these discussions?

EM: Everywhere. In the heart of it. I still, I always say, I was a musician, but just never learned to play music. I just danced with my body. That's what I love about salsa and breaking, and all these folkloric dances. There's rhythm and there's drum. And there's getting lost in the music and feeling it in your heart and in the bounce. It's absolutely the central point. But it's also the political voice. Because the lyrics are also a way to say things that wouldn't be allowed in the newspapers and in the central scene. Hip Hop has always been for me a way to say things that are not published. They're not featured in HIS-Story. That's quite helpful I'm starting to understand all your questions now!

IA: This is Ella in 2018. What is Ella in 2023?

EM: Sure. So interestingly, I know I want to continue to make work, but I want to do it slowly. Taking two years to do Foreign Bodies, but taking periods of break. Not that I'll be on a break. I've just joined a gym because I realised I'm getting older and I need to keep up with my body. Because I've been choreographing

more than dancing, apart from the fact I just did a 30-minute silk show, so that's not true. I will carry on breaking but in this chilled out way. I'm getting really, really into yoga, and I really, really think it links to breaking. Ashtanga is the yoga I really truly love, and it's made for 14-year-old boys. So was breaking and I love it and I don't have a 14 year old's body but I'm noticing a lot of B-Boys of my generation going into yoga and there's definitely a connection. The amazing shapes and I love the balance. I also love the soul journey it's taken me on. I want to do some more teaching and do some more training and go off in that direction more. I'm also realising there's so much struggle being self-employed, so that's part of the reason I've decided to do things slowly. Maybe it's to do with being a woman, maybe it's not. But I am realising I don't always have to struggle. I've taken a part time job in Leeds, still connected with dance, so I can fund myself and be less stressed and bitter, when I don't get the projects I want. That feels really nice. I am also asking myself do I want to live in this world - not 'Live in this world...' I do want to live in this world I promise! But do I want to live in this country if we Brexit or do I want to live somewhere Latin. Do I want to go to New York? I'm really just trying to ask myself more of what I want. And the same in my work, I am just cutting through the bullshit I guess I've stopped caring so much. I just want to get on making my shit in my chilled way, enjoying my life, enjoying my pupils, earning some money. Hopefully enough so I can buy a second-hand car. Just chilling out a bit, getting old.

IA: Is there anything else that

you have filtered out...

EM: I've basically talked about New York and the UK a lot, but what about Europe? And the rest of the world? Because I've got my communities in Paris and in Lisbon now. I recognise it is a privilege I've been able to go to those countries and experience those people. It's mad all these connections, like the people I met in New York, because I went quite a few times after that first time there's been like jobs there and lots of stuff. A lot of people from New York are now living in France and Lisbon. Paris and Lisbon to be specific. They've really opened my world to what's out there. We get so stuck on the UK scene, and sometimes I'm bored of it...we have so much to moan about and I'm like what about opening up to what is out there? Anything else I haven't said? Thank you to all the pioneers for teaching us all these dances, creating all these platforms. Thank you to Jonzi for that very first time the chance to make that solo. All the people on that journey and the people who make that journey. Artists4Artists. I think that the more we can work on ourselves and all that stuff and the more we recognise Hip Hop as a tool for that, the more this scene will nurture and give people a voice. I guess there's something as well about the community level of things. In all these different scenes, in Leeds, in Bristol I think the most important thing is the next generation, who is teaching them, who is handing down, and what is passing through to them. Perhaps the most important things are the classes and the training sessions. What those spaces are, and the people who are passing those things on in that way: it is important that

they are doing it for the right reasons. I'm sure there's loads of really important things I can say but...we went out till really late last night!

