

HIP HOP

DANCE ALMANAC VOL.1

Edited by
Ian Abbott

FEATURING:

Gemma Connell

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GEMMA CONNELL

IA: Hello Gemma. My first question is around the idea of the crew and the company and how they act as alternate kinships and support structures.

GC: In the original Hip Hop sense of the crew it's been a while since I was part of one; I was part of various crews when I was at Warwick University and it's exactly the way you describe it - an alternative family. Albeit a bit of a dysfunctional one and there are support structures there. The particular crew I was part of there was a lot of rivalry within the crew, and between certain crews at university - which wasn't healthy. I enjoyed being part of that structure and as I've gone 'pro' that structure hasn't been available to me in the places where I've been working. The Artifact, (the company I run), is mainly me on a daily basis so it can get a little lonely. Though sometimes me and the board feels like a crew which is nice. Which is where I think collaboration is important; I have been trying to work with different artists from different art forms across the four years The Artifact has been going. I think that is part of trying to replicate the feeling I had originally.

IA: What was that? You said you enjoyed it but...?

GC: It's a family, but it's a family you choose. I think with a crew you choose your own version of that family and it's people who understand you because you have shared interests and to a certain extent a shared story that your biological family may not have or understand. There is a feeling of acceptance, which was new to me, that I hadn't necessarily felt before and I had an amazing feeling of camaraderie as you're doing performances, and everyone's in it together. It's a feeling that doesn't come from just a friendship group it's more than that.

IA: What was the strongest memory from your crew at that time?

GC: Which crew? There's a question...we used to do competitions and we used to battle, but it was never the formal part of the competition that was the best part, it was the party later. Different crews would clear the floor when certain songs would come on and it was like...ROUTINE. Those were always the best moments. It was never planned, it was just everybody in the moment working in synchrony. Those were our best performances as well to be honest, when it was like 'Right everybody move out of the way.'

IA: In the creation of your company, you're trying to replicate some of that feeling, can you talk about that?

GC: When you start out in this industry a lot of dance artists end up creating solos because it's more financially viable when you're starting out, but it's quite a lonely process. What we do is we create work to tour and deliver education/ outreach work which is really important. A couple of years ago I was creating a solo piece and it was quite a lonely process so I was searching for different ways to counter that. We've done a lot with Dundee Women's Aid for example and teamed up with other dance artists and games designers to deliver these really interesting programmes particularly for young people who were using Women's Aid's services. I've created a solo Somewhere North of Here which was very much a process of me doing it, and me being in it. The other piece that sits alongside that was called Lies My Parents Told Me and I wanted a different process with that because I didn't want it to be so lonely. I'd developed a new process through our outreach work which I called 'The Remix' a process inspired by the Hip Hop DJ. If you boil down really simply what a Hip Hop DJ does, they'll take one thing from one track, another

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thing from another and they'll mix the two things together, creating a remix and entirely new work. I started to do that in my work and get people who didn't necessarily know much about dance or Hip Hop or spoken word which is what we work with a lot of the time rather than music. I get people to move things

"I could have conversations with the artists and we could bounce ideas off each other. That feeling of isolation making a solo piece started to disappear."

around to create a remix. That seemed to work really well and give those participants a sense of agency and control over a performance they were creating and at the same time they didn't feel the pressure if they weren't a dancer or spoken word artist. So, I wondered whether this process could translate into creating work, and build myself a team around creating *Lies My Parents Told Me*. The piece is live spoken word - performed by me - and dance, but the script went through many different iterations. The words were generated via interviews with different people, writing I'd done myself and then all of the words were handed to another artist who created a remix of the script, who handed it to another artist and so on and so on. There were lots of people involved in making the words and that felt really nice; I could have conversations with the artists and we could bounce ideas off each other. That feeling of isolation making a solo piece started to disappear.

The script I received after the final artist had 'remixed' it was really exciting. For them to go, 'Oh hang on that wasn't in the script I read.' We all started having conversations around how it had resolved. It was a really interesting process to go through and it did bring me a crew and it made sense with what I was making. Although I

might have started in a crew, that's not what The Artifact does, so it had to be a balance between the two.

IA: I'm interested in how people create the right environment for themselves to flourish in? What's your environment?

GC: I'm still figuring that out, I think everyone is. As humans we change. So what was the right environment for me two years ago, isn't necessarily the right environment for me now. I think there is something about surrounding myself with people I know I can trust, that I can bounce ideas off, and people who I know are going to tell me when it's shit. As an artist I don't think it's beneficial to have your ego stroked and I'm very lucky to have a group of people around me who will tell me when it's not working and tell me why. An artist can figure out how to fix it. Something I am still struggling with is the kinds of places I work best in...

IA: Which are?

GC: Non-carpeted spaces that are big enough to move around in. It's not much to ask but given the state of the industry at the moment they are not necessarily easily available to everybody. Or they come with a hefty price tag that half of us can't afford. My work is being made in church halls or tiny studios that are used for photography or my living room. I am still working on, and we as an industry are still working on making sure Hip Hop artists have the right space. I know that dance artists struggle for space, but people have said to me before 'Oh you guys are alright because you're street artists you're used to dancing anywhere.' This is a misconception. The misconception that Hip Hop, or Street Dance as it is sometimes called still takes place on the street.

IA: What's the best mental environment for you to create work?

GC: I make my best work when I'm angry...I've definitely realised that over the last couple of years. I make things about things I really care about. So Somewhere North of Here is about Brexit, and my feelings on all of the political propaganda around the vote, and lies that are continuing to occur. *Lies My Parents Told Me* is inspired by similar things, conversations I had with my mum about Brexit, and got a bit bigger and gender issues got involved. It's about stories we tell our children, and particularly mothers to their daughters. I think it's helpful, and at the same time some of the most dangerous lessons in the world which are no longer relevant. It's perpetuating

stereotypes and putting young girls in questionable situations. Situations I've found myself in. As a subject it makes me incredibly angry but I can channel that into making work. In a way it becomes my therapy to work through these things. I use therapy in terms of what it means to me, I know it's a very loaded term.

IA: The foundations of Hip Hop came from societal oppression and anger. Is there a similarity in your thinking? How would you describe what you do?

GC: Elevator pitch time...so at The Artifact, we describe ourselves as a Post Hip Hop dance company. Various people have opinions on what Post Hip Hop means, but what that means to me is that we take the original pillars of Hip Hop DJing graffiti, breaking and rap/spoken word and the contested fifth element, knowledge; we take all that and use pillars in their evolved forms to create work that is about social justice and is trying to change the world for the better. That may be in a very small way or in an ambitious way. We create choreographic work which is very political, work that is dance and spoken word, which is remixed, so we're using some of the pillars. In 2017 Somewhere North of Here and Lies My Parents Told Me formed a double bill called The Past is a Foreign Country which premiered at Duncan and Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Dundee with an accompanying exhibition that was in part inspired by graffiti. I mentioned our outreach programme, where we use the remix to create miniature performances with various marginalised groups, which again fits with Hip Hop and its origins. We work a lot with

Women's Aid and Women's Rape and Sexual Abuse centre, survivors of gender violence; they may be adult survivors of gender violence, they may be child survivors of gender violence who find themselves in domestic abuse settings. We have also worked with stroke survivors, using The Remix, using dance and spoken word to help them with their speech which can sometimes be lost and regain control over their body. We've worked with young people with additional support needs, older people and youth dance companies from working class communities. It's about expressing their feelings on what they have been through for people who might think Hip Hop is not for them, or who have never experienced something like that before. Because of the barriers people face in society each person involved in those projects regains some sense of agency over their life, their emotions and their body.

IA: Some of those groups you mentioned demand a sensitivity and empathy to work with. What's that like for you?

GC: I think the process we offer is a good fit. You hear stories and there are always these warnings of what different people are going to be like, so the trend for looking at mental health and the way mental health is portrayed in the media scares people who don't have mental health issues away from working with those people. The process we use is about listening. When I say that I mean not just hearing what someone's saying but really listening and taking what they've said on board. Asking, for example, a survivor of gender violence to

go through this spoken word poem line by line, asking them which movement options fit as we say this line sounds like a really simple exercise, actually it's a really huge thing. The women we work with who are survivors of gender violence who have told me that no one has ever cared what their opinion was. No one cared what they thought. So although it seems like a minor thing, asking someone what dance move I should do to a line of spoken word, is a massive question to be asked. It means that someone cares what they think and I think that's why it's worked so well; you've proved that you've listened and they can see it physically happen in front of them. They see the dance take form. And then if there's a discussion amongst the group over how we can change this bit or that bit, then their suggestions are taken into account. That's what's made those programmes so successful. I find it scary because what that says about the world is that nobody is listening to each other and can we take a moment to listen to one another? The programmes haven't been completely smooth sailing, people have got upset when they've been talking about their feelings, and that's OK. It's being prepared for that happening. Having the support of the organisations we work with and having staff on hand who know the participants better is really helpful. If I was going to give advice to anyone who is going to embark on something like this, the best thing to do is, if someone gets upset, don't freak out. It's completely normal for someone to get upset when someone speaks about these things. The best thing to do is to carry on and

say that these feelings are completely normal.

IA: Does working with those groups take additional preparation and decompression in terms of self-care. Can you talk about your strategies for self-care and decompression?

GC: I'm not sure there is anything specific I do to prepare. Everybody's experience is going to be different. I've worked for a long time with young people who have additional support needs, who are on the autistic spectrum and I have an in-depth knowledge of what can happen in a studio environment. I know that some people on the autistic spectrum don't like sudden loud noises. There's a fabulous woman Amanda Lawson, who is Community Health and Wellbeing Associate at Dundee Rep. She said this to me and it hits the nail on the head, 'If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism.' I think you can expand that to every mental health condition. You have to get to know people, understand people and how they work best in an environment. It's a slow process and it should be. We should be investing into programmes that allow facilitators to get the most out of people; part of my preparation is reminding myself that it's going to take time. In terms of decompression I've always written journals, and that is really important. After a session my feelings have somewhere to go. I'm lucky that I've always had the support of the organisation I'm working with; staff are happy to talk because they are in a similar situation and

dealing with issues every day. Journaling really helps me.

IA: Writing is an important part of your practice. You've written a number of books talking about the different pillars of Hip Hop. Can you talk about their relationship to your practice?

GC: Those came from a similar place to how you described the Hip Hop Dance Almanac. I got really frustrated that people weren't writing anything down. There are a couple of books out there that are really scary in my opinion. A couple of historians who have written about Hip Hop and viewed it through a particular frame and that's how we look at all art, through frames and we bring to it our own experiences and use that to interpret it. But the way this particular book was written was as if it was the truth...and that's a dangerous thing. I'm doing a PhD at the minute, that's my frame. I got worried if that was someone's first engagement with Hip Hop they were going to believe that was the way it was. It made me think, why are we in that situation? Are we waiting for historians to come to us and ask us questions? Is it not more beneficial to...if you want something doing, do it yourself. People working in Hip Hop today are best placed to say 'This is what we're doing now.' We can write our corner of the jigsaw, and that helps the historical puzzle. That's what I did. The series of books are called The Remix, everything we do focuses around that idea. Each of them focuses on a pillar of Hip Hop, but there are six of them because in my opinion, there is a sixth pillar we haven't talked about - community. The people. The books are both an archive of what we do at The Artifact,

what has worked and what hasn't. They are a resource, because our processes are described in them. If anyone reads it and wants to have a go at things themselves, then they can do. It was important because what we do has lots of elements to it and it was a great exercise for me to write it all down.

IA: Hip Hop culture, in my opinion, is split between those who want to preserve the original forms and those who want it to evolve whilst being respectful to the foundations and their original intentions. What's your position?

GC: I completely agree that the split exists but I sit very much in the evolutionist camp. I can understand the want to preserve and think it's important that original forms are taught; it's also important that when evolved forms are taught there's a link back to the original. We have a finite amount of things we can do with our bodies, so it all comes from a similar place. I really understand and advocate for the importance of teaching the foundation and understanding where it began. The reason I'm an advocate for the evolution of Hip Hop is that Hip Hop evolved from other things. If you take breaking for example, there are elements of lindy hop and tap, people have linked breaking to elements of capoeira. If breaking is a form that has evolved from other forms anyway, to stop its evolution now is a moot point. I personally believe that evolution is the whole point of Hip Hop, particularly when it comes to dance. The originators of Hip Hop did what they could with what was around them, that's what Hip Hop has always done. That's

what people who are evolving it today are doing; there are people taking elements from contemporary dance and using it in Hip Hop dance theatre, taking other forms from the African diaspora and I see it as a similar thing from what was being done originally...taking things that were around at the time. The world is more open now and more elements are being brought in, I think it's important that all art evolves. We need to honour the beginnings and talk about the beginnings, that doesn't mean we stop evolving.

IA: What are some things that are troubling you in your practice?

GC: Funding applications? Does that count as my practice? I have a lot of ambition to do different things, and I have a lot of different ideas. Funding is an issue for a lot of us. I am wondering whether one of the reasons Hip Hop is the least funded of the dance forms is because it is misunderstood by the funders; I think maybe a gentle education is needed there. I've had conversations with Hip Hop artists who have felt they have needed to reword what they do in order to get funding; in some funding applications they will use Hip Hop and other 'urban forms' in order to get the money to do it. I think at a funding level there's a misunderstanding of what Hip Hop is and what it means. It's not just a way of getting young people involved. I worry that we become a diversity tick box. There are venues and festivals out there who have a quota for the amount of Hip Hop or more diverse dance forms, and once that quota is full they won't take any more suggestions from those

genres. If we're talking about the funded British dance scene, it's not representative of what is happening in Britain.

IA: I'm going to challenge you a bit on that. So at Arts Council England they've just taken as portfolio clients Avant Garde Dance and Boy Blue Entertainment. With Zoo Nation co-producing at the Old Vic there are things in there that are shaking up the funding world...

GC: There are things in there, but it's been a long time coming. You think about Hip Hop theatre, Hip Hop dance theatre, whichever term you subscribe to, it's been happening since the early 90s, it's now 2018. Things are happening, things are changing in certain areas and it's been a long time coming. There's still more to be done. We can't say just because there are a couple of organisations in the portfolio, that the job is done. It's great for Avant Garde, Boy Blue and Zoo Nation but there's more to be done. That's where Artists4Artists come in advocating for Hip Hop as well advocating for different kinds of artists within Hip Hop. Artists4Artists are doing really well to showcase that there is a diversity within Hip Hop; yes, we've got these companies in the portfolios, but we can move forward to bigger and better things.

IA: For you who are the three people who you value and offer that space for you?

GC: I suppose it depends what area of the work we're talking about. If we're talking about the outreach stuff, we have a really great relationship with Dundee Women's Aid and Newport Women's Aid, Wales - they're

incredibly supportive of the work we do. They really get it and they understand what the benefit of the work we do and the impact for the survivors. In terms of support for more choreographic touring work. I think Artists4Artists are the people, Lee has been a great support for me, even to have a conversation about Hip Hop as another woman in Hip Hop. A third one? I'm gonna say my board. They are incredibly supportive and figure out where we're best placed; they're a great bunch of people who understand what we're doing, but have a little bit of distance, which I sometimes don't have. I'm very, very close to the work, it's my every day.

IA: You mentioned that you're doing a PhD at the minute, can you talk about the focus of that?

GC: I'm doing a PhD at the University of Surrey. The working title is semi-autobiographical representations of gender violence in British Hip Hop dance theatre. That's changed and evolved, and it might evolve some more because that's what PhDs do. I'm nine months in and it's a lot more theoretical than I originally thought. It's very much from a lot of the work I've done; creating Lies My Parents Told Me and talking about how some of the stories passed on put young girls in very difficult situations. Working with Women's Aid and survivors of gender violence has inspired this too. Looking at my peers I realised there are a lot of women beginning to create work along this subject. There's a trend appearing and I don't think that it's solely about #MeToo and #TimesUp; there's more

to it than that. What I find interesting is that Hip Hop choreographers are using it to flip established gender norms, and that's what Hip Hop has a real power to do. By flipping those gender norms to talk about gender violence it starts a conversation.

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norms, and that's what Hip Hop has a real power to do. By flipping those gender norms to talk about gender violence it starts a conversation about how we've got here and how ridiculous gender norms are. I'm hoping that the PhD will help me to work with survivors of gender violence better and it's about understanding my choreographic processes better too.

IA: As a teacher and choreographer, how do you transmit what is in your head to others?

GC: You can't assume that one method is going to work for everybody. For example, the choreographic work doesn't just appear in a theatre then disappear. I've done a lot of work with university students where they see a piece then create a remix of it; I did some work with the Scottish School of Contemporary Dance, Dundee with their HND students and we used this technique to figure out again their opinions. Using that technique started up a conversation, it's not just

about them creating spoken word and learning about this as a Hip Hop process; what's important to me is that it's

about talking about other kinds of knowledge and what Hip Hop can do is unlock different kinds of knowledge in different ways. It feels much more accessible to certain people; those students who might not have thought they had much to say on Brexit before but after using the remix we got a discussion going. That's one way. The books sit alongside that; they are a transfer of knowledge. In the teachings, it's about how you frame it. Sometimes the word dance can scare the pants off people; if you go into a school or a college and say you're here to run a dance class there will be someone who goes 'I can't point my toe.' The amount of times I've said I'm here to teach dance and they go 'I can't do ballet.' I go 'Well neither can I. I've not mentioned ballet.' There are certain assumptions and misconceptions around the word dance, it scares people. The way I teach is about leading people through a story. When I was leading a flash mob at Dundee Rep for an event at the V&A in Dundee, the group was made up of a lot of

people over 60. Some of them were up for doing anything, others were wary when the words Hip Hop were used. It's about taking them through a process and explaining that what we're doing is using Hip Hop techniques but you don't have to spin on your head. I explain about where it's come from, about the pillars and about our process and why that's Hip Hop. I use concepts that have come from Hip Hop. 'No biting.' Which is when you don't copy anybody else's move. So if you're going to head spin, you work out how it works best on your body. You adapt it to fit your body and make it your own. With a group of over 60s who are not be able to perform dances in the way a 25 year old probably would, I emphasise the point of Hip Hop is that everybody in this room looks like themselves, a celebration of individuality. They are learning about Hip Hop, learning Hip Hop moves but aren't overly self-conscious and frightened about whether they are gonna perform it "correctly."

IA: That has echoes of how education is a transfer of knowledge. Like Chris Emdin does with Hip Hop science; education through a Hip Hop process. What you do may not look like Hip Hop but it uses the form.

GC: Absolutely. I love Chris Emdin's work. Chris, Ian Levy and Edmund Adjapong have done a lot about the Hip Hop cypher. I use the Hip Hop cypher in our workshops; whatever people bring into the cypher, a move or spoken word, it is fully supported by everybody in it. There is no wrong answer in a cypher and that is incredibly powerful to those people in the groups. That and no biting. When I

was working with the stroke group, it was very much articulated in my mind how well these concepts would work for these groups. There is a fundamental difference in saying 'It's OK if you get this move wrong.' to 'Everybody is supposed to look different.' The first is excusing someone for making a mistake, the second is saying there are no mistakes. That's what Hip Hop does. It says everybody will do this differently, and that is what is amazing about people.

IA: Where does race and class sit in your work?

GC: Hmm. (pause) I'm a White woman. I'm a White working-class woman who grew up with Hip Hop. My brothers listened to it and I come from a very multi-cultural part of UK, Manchester. Hip Hop was always there and has always been around. I think that's why it meant a lot to me at the time. I was being quite heavily bullied at the time I got into Hip Hop dance, and Hip Hop said to me you be who you wanna be. Hip Hop felt like validation. I think when you're that young and you get involved in Hip Hop - I was 10 years old - you don't understand the intersections in terms of race and class; I was not aware of my race and class at 10 years old...that wasn't a discussion that was had in my family. Getting older and becoming more involved in the scene I started to realise some of these stories, the origin story and how important that is to Hip Hop. Looking back at the history of Hip Hop and how it has gone global - yes it started in a very particular community in the South Bronx - and all those people saw something in it and really related to it. You can see that in how Hip Hop has developed

around the world, not just how it has spread, but how it is different in different places. So French Hip Hop is very different to Hip Hop in the U.S. I see a community of people who saw what was going on in the U.S. and had that feeling of 'Yeah I feel you.' But our situation is slightly different. So French Hip Hop evolved slightly differently. In Eastern Europe and the Balkans where Hip Hop has become a method of resistance for those communities, just like it was in the Bronx, but they are resisting something different. They are grateful to the power of Hip Hop for giving them the means, but it looks different and that evolution is beautiful.

IA: Where is it in your work? That's a context about other places. Where is race and class in your work?

GC: I think you'll have to be a bit more specific. I'm not sure what you mean.

IA: How does race and class inform, or contribute to your thinking and your practice?

GC: I make choreographic work about the world around me. I can't escape my identity. Somewhere North of Here, because of the subject matter, came from a very working class perspective and I was conscious of that. Issues of race are discussed in it because of the increase in hate crime after the Brexit vote; I try to discuss them from different perspectives. I see Brexit as not just an isolated event, but as things happening around, before and after that event. I made a version of that piece, thought it was finished and then four days later the bombing of the Manchester arena happened. Because a lot of Manchester was in that

piece I had to respond to it, I couldn't just leave it. There was a new section inserted with an interview from a Scottish guy who had moved to Manchester, lived there for 17 years, this was an interview on the BBC which I'd taken the audio from, and he's talking about how welcoming and diverse Manchester is. There's another section from a taxi driver who is a member of the Sikh community in Manchester who were amazing that night; they turned their meters off and drove people home that night for free. Celebrating the diverse community that I grew up in and how it relates to the society that I find myself in now, which I find really scary, because growing up in Manchester everybody was accepted. I don't think about it as 'I'm going to talk about race or class now.' I respond to the world around me.

IA: Is there anything we haven't spoken about that you want recording and putting down?

GC: I think we've covered a lot of it.

IA: OK. What is your strongest memory of Hip Hop and dance?

GC: That's a hard one because I don't think one is stronger than the other. There was a guy who came to see Lies My Parents Told Me and I was talking to him before the show; we were in the exhibition space and there was an area that had books about Hip Hop in it. He was what you'd describe as a 'macho man' saying 'Yeah I used to break dance, I used to break dance.' That's all he wanted to tell me and kept repeating it. I was like 'You should come see the show..it's starting

in 20 minutes.' He was with a woman (who I assume was his mum but I'm not sure) and she said 'OK we'll be there.' I was just about to close the door to the performance space thinking everybody was in and they ran and took the last two seats. Lies My Parents Told is an angry piece - I shout a lot in it and it's quite confrontational. It's performed in the round and I interact with the audience; it was about seven minutes in and I turned to the seat where this man was sat, and I hadn't looked at him yet. At that moment I yelled something really loud, I can't for the life of me remember what the line was, and I realised he was crying his eyes out. It took me

be; it can make someone connect with emotions they're not usually comfortable expressing. I'll never know if that's what he was thinking but it'll stay with me.

IA: Final question. Music. The importance of music in Hip Hop and your practice. What is your relationship to music?

GC: In the touring work we use words instead of music, but we keep music at the heart. In terms of teaching, what I find important is to teach people how to listen to the music and what they're looking out for. You sometimes see young B-Boys and B-Girls who have

to tune in and listen. It's not about putting your arm in the right place. It's got to have a relationship to the music. Even when we're working with words, we talk about how you relate the movement to the words and where things happen. Words that have a hard 't' that 'tttt' it sounds like a high hat. I talk to people as they're creating performances if you've got the word 'stop' does the movement end with the p, or is it at the start of the word? The relationship between the sounds and movements is what makes Hip Hop really special.

"That is a really strong memory that proves how powerful Hip Hop can be; it can make someone connect with emotions they're not usually comfortable expressing."

by surprise. I remember doing the rest of the performance trying to work out what had made him cry. I mean, it's a piece that has made a lot of women cry. At the end I invited people to come and chat to me if they had any questions and he held onto the programme notes, clinging onto them, looked at me, looked away, looked at me, looked away and quickly removed himself from the room. I kept thinking 'Have you got a daughter, is that what this is about? Have you realised you say those things to her and that maybe you shouldn't?' That is a really strong memory that proves how powerful Hip Hop can

potential, but aren't listening to the music. Musicality is really important to me and one of the reasons I got involved in Hip Hop to begin with because I loved how you'd hit certain moves on certain beats. It was visually and sonically interesting. When I'm teaching Hip Hop classes with university and college students, we spend a lot of time listening to the track and breaking down the music. Where's the high hat? Where's the bass? What's the melody? So that students understand each element. I am usually teaching them choreography that moves between each of those layers, so they have

