

HIP HOP

DANCE ALMANAC VOL.1

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KENDRA J HORSBURGH

IA: Morning Kendra. First question is about self-care and how you take care of the self in this industry.

KH: This question is very interesting. Self-care comes in many levels, right? I have been on an interesting journey recently with sustainability and will delve deeper into the self-care when it comes to the future of my work. For artists there is a big focus on 'How can I get the funding to make my next project.' The thought 'How does my project make money?' is not the first question that comes to mind. It's always 'Who needs to fund this project? I might have to use my personal savings... Who do I need to write an application for? Where can I get money from?' I'm aware you need to start from somewhere and prove your work. However, on a financial level, there's already a lack of understanding that every single business starts with the question of how are we going to make money? How do we become sustainable long-term? I'm not saying that money should influence your art at all. Ultimately artists should be focused on what they're creating and the impact their work has on the greater society. It goes without saying that the arts council is vital to the cultural sector and the development of our artists today. However,

from the experience I have had from mentorship, the only option presented to me was the ACE application route. Personally, I feel, instead of constantly pushing artists to write funding applications we should be learning how to sell our ideas to the larger network of funding solutions and building better creative business development teams. For me it was the most daunting thing to write my first application, as I'm sure it is for everyone. When we get mentored on budgeting, what I was told was how to spend within the money you have raised. You're not told how you make money, or how to increase income from the projects. You can print a t-shirt and sell merchandise with a mark up to boost revenue with one of the tickets. I was always taught to stick within a budget I'm given and not encouraged to think beyond that. You're taught that YOU have to do it all. There's always this feeling that financial sustainability is not vital if you want to be a good artist...Mark Zuckerberg from Facebook was interested in what he was creating but also in making it grow. There is a strong argument for delegation and creating a network so that you can leave this to those that are good at writing funding applications. Currently there is an ingrained philosophy in the industry that you have to be

writing funding applications as an artist, instead of getting collaborations with people who do that already and do that well, or with companies and corporates who need to get a write off on their tax bills. I'm very much trying to continue my career with the right relationships and the right connections to a wider network. I'm not always so focused on having that creative mentor in the room as I am inspired by a wealth of great creative mentors around me, I more focus on 'How can I have a mentor in there that can take this work further?' It's important we don't just perform to friends, family and people in the industry. Of course, that's the love, the bubble and the place you get your support from...but we need to think beyond that now. We need to get people who would never usually go to the theatre to come and see our work...you never know what conversations they're going to have with people; I think we've been so focused on existing in ACE that we've forgotten the outside world that needs to see the work outside our bubble. We often only really promote to our friends and family. Most Hip Hop platforms, most Hip Hop theatre sharing's that I've been to I see the same friends and family there. Even the major players such as Breakin' Convention's Back

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to the Lab, Open Art Surgery at Sadler's Wells. These are amazing programmes for our sector, but it's often the same people there. What we need are more audiences who have never been to the theatre

find ourselves creating one hit wonders, almost like fast food, show it once and then it's never seen again. As BirdGang we have a whole book of shows that we've done, but only a few industry people

behaviour. What relates to people and what doesn't? There's so much in there. We shouldn't think that we have to write applications to make what we make.

"As artists we need to look after the longevity of our work, we don't just have to keep creating. Especially in Hip Hop theatre. We often find ourselves creating one hit wonders, almost like fast food, show it once and then it's never seen again."

before and people who might have money to invest in the theatre. You're absolutely right in terms of lack of information out there for people. I wasn't looking after my work and myself because I was very much in that little bubble and thinking I can't afford to do anything unless I beg for...beg for is the wrong word...unless I find people who need to give me money. I'm not interested in sitting around...obviously no one is sitting around...but you can't just stay so in love with your art that you forget what the rest of the world does. What corporates do to survive - we're sitting here in Starbucks - it's a huge multi-million pound business and it's just a coffee. This is what I mean at the moment when I think of financial self care...this has been a great eye opener for me because of what has happened to me the past couple of years. As artists we need to look after the longevity of our work, we don't just have to keep creating. Especially in Hip Hop theatre. We often

have seen them. Now we're really focusing on how we can re-use this material. We need to teach our future dancers our repertoire and then it can continue and generate the impact and revenue needed to sustain future work. I wish I'd learned this five or six years ago. I think that's what it is: coming out of your bubble and really respecting your work as a product. People don't owe you money to sustain you as an artist. Give yourself the respect you deserve as an artist and plan for the future. Use all the things that you have gathered and learned, we have skills beyond belief. This conflict inspired me to do an MBA. I realised that, being an artist, I am someone with very strong interpersonal skills, and all employers, industries are looking for those people. You can be the best mathematician but if you can't talk to anyone or work in teams it's difficult...artists do that every day. We manipulate bodies and we manipulate minds. Marketing. Consumer

IA: You said this shift happened a couple of years ago, was there a particular trigger? Was it the MBA?

KH: The MBA was triggered by the above experiences. I was creating a lot of new work, everyone was telling me to write funding applications. It always ended up me spending hours and hours writing and editing sections that were not using the right language. It would have been easier for me to find the right person to write it with me and add their fee for their time to the application sum. There is a lack of producers with time to work with creatives on these applications. It is frustrating that I was being told to spend so much time on writing the applications instead of creating the right connections between producers, fundraisers and venues. So, there I was...OK I'll try it. Didn't get it, didn't get it, didn't get it. OK I'm not wasting my time with this. All this time I've been trying; I could be in the studio creating new work and focusing on the content and future of the work. So ultimately, I sent my application to everyone I knew and got their opinion on it to then spend loads of time putting it together. I pulled strings from every corner and I'd had enough; then I finally got the funding for the first round of NOX. But this took up so much time where delegation would have been the key. When I met my partner, one of the first questions he asked me was 'You know when you studied dance, what business

course did you get alongside the training?' I had to explain to him that the institutions that train our artists do not offer business courses. They're now only just introducing a few courses...it's about helping artists understand their business, even just how to write your tax return or invoice for your work. I had nothing like that, and he was shocked, it got me thinking, why is there nothing like that?

IA: You're being taught how to make a thing but not being taught how to talk about it, or sell it or where you're meant to send it?

KH: What are you supposed to do? Especially in the Hip Hop sector. It seems that contemporary dance companies still get a bit more of a break. Ballet companies have been around for so many decades. There is more of an infrastructure. Within Hip Hop theatre, we're already fighting a stereotype, then we're battling the media and then we have these products that are vital to our communities - storytelling is real in Hip Hop theatre. However, audiences do not get exposed to or hear about them. We don't know what we're doing or where we're going with them. My frustration came out of that. I was adamant that the work I was to create from now on has a future. This was when my NOX journey started. I love technology when it works, when it works for us not when it works against us. With something like virtual reality, I can completely destroy gravity and time, the things as a choreographer that you're completely bound to. I decided to call up Lee Robinson who worked with me on a million pound budget commercial production that

was tech heavy (I can't name the show as I am under NDA). I picked up the phone and asked 'I know you don't really know me, we worked together on this project and I want to do a dance project with VR, AR or MR. Can we sit down and have a chat?' We had a chat and then the project grew into a full production. We were associates at the Young Vic and created a sharing, a prototype of the show. I managed to raise a small pot of money from ACE and I spent most of that budget on getting the right people in the room and getting them to see it. Our BirdGang company and a small tech company supported me in kind; most of the focus - and it split my focus if I'm honest - was getting the right people in the room to form the right connections and make the right noise. From industry people, to tech companies and corporates such as Sony. That was the first time I did that, but it meant the creative component was mostly in kind. I see it with some of the other work that my colleagues are making. They do a sharing, I turn up and nobody is in the room that can take the work further. No producers, no bookers, no corporates, no potential investors. It takes a good two to three months before the sharing to find and contact the right people and see if they're available. It takes ages. So, I partnered up with Raj (Pardesi) on that for the first time. Now my work's got future conversations. Even though there are also many venues I speak to now 'I want to book NOX as it sounds incredible, but I can't book it until I've experienced it, can you reproduce it?' 'Can I reproduce it? £50,000?' I can't even do it for that because people gave their help in kind.

I understand this approach if it's a solo, I can do it in your living room if you need to see it. But these productions with a team of 10 people to come down for three weeks to R&D... So that was the trigger and it triggered me to apply for an MBA. I was thrown in the air and I needed something to inspire and help me in that journey. I worked hard and managed to get a scholarship to become a student again. I know I've gone very financial here, but self-care runs through everything. The biggest one - looking from the other side - is I had BirdGang. I had a team. Ivan Blackstock, Simeon Qsyea and Ukweli Roach, that I met when I was in college who spoke the same language as me, who engulfed me in the UK Hip Hop scene, and who gave me tough love which strengthens you as an independent creative. If there was a gap in my career or I needed support, I had a 'home' to go to. This is another thing, the culture of Hip Hop theatre and Hip Hop in general in the UK. It used to be crews and groups, now you're pretty much just a lone soldier and you find the people you work well with. Who survived? You've got Boy Blue, Avant Garde, BirdGang, and a couple more, but who else? You've got dancers that come together as and when there is a show? But back in the day everyone was in a tight family, and everyone had a support system, you don't really have that network any more.

IA: What do you think has triggered that shift between the collective and the individual?

KH: I think it's YouTube and this whole class/fame mentality; people seem to...I don't know how this has come about

but people seem to think if you go to class dressed up, and you bang out kick ass choreography for that hour, and you get lots of views on YouTube then you've made it. It's difficult because you've made it for five seconds. Then it's 'Can you come and do it?' Then there's too many people, suddenly we're a crew now, but it doesn't last very long because there's too many egos in the group. Usually crews would have one main leader, but at BirdGang we never had one strong leader, we've always been a flock of birds, everyone leads everyone and it's a surprise we've managed that. It works for us and it has created strong individuals that work towards the same goal. We're people who've managed to let go and come together when we need to. We have now morphed into a company that provides strong creatives and dancers for the industry. Adding to the discussion of self-care, I believe BirdGang has really contributed to this for me. In terms of inspiring...I'm really lucky that some of my biggest inspirations are part of the company and the fact that everyone's their own boss is a big thing, although it comes with its challenges.

IA: There's a kind of kinship in the different crews and houses. I'm interested in how that has manifested over the years, and what that looks like for you?

KH: In terms of us specifically?

IA: Yeah because you are one of the survivors.

KH: It is really interesting. You're making me think about it as well. As a creative, everyone is a lone soldier. Everyone has their own mind

in their head, and worlds they want to create. Then you've got lots of people who are very talented but want to be guided. I think, talking to me you might get a different answer to someone working in Boy Blue for example, they've got a clear structure, and it is clear what they are instructed to do. In BirdGang Ltd what's kept us going is a mysterious identity. Having a voice...that voice not just being your voice but it being a collective voice. We've had so many members come in and out and although Ivan (Blackstock) has now left BirdGang, he's still a bird; he's still with us. There is a type of person that will always be a bird. We've managed to keep that going and the ultimate thing that we've put before us, is the name BirdGang Ltd. We're aware that we work very well independently but everything we do independently feeds into the pot and the prestige of the company. So, whoever is loyal to the company can feed off that. They can say 'I've been in BirdGang we've worked globally.' Even though they personally might have only worked in the UK. Technically they carry the reputation of the company. This has helped many dancers in building their careers. What I do is just a tiny piece of the puzzle. I think that's what's made us work. I have strengths they don't have, they have strengths I don't have, and we all complement each other. It really empowers us to have that network and if I can't do it, I know he can, and it's still in the family. You learn off each other, improve off each other and what's beautiful now is we have that next generation that we auditioned years and years ago. Now it's a new generation that does what we used to - teach the classes, train

newcomers and create great new work. We're busy trying to get productions going and build the infrastructure to support larger scale work. It grows and it's really nice to look back and share the knowledge you've gained. We've never been 'You have to stay in BirdGang.' We've never forced people to stay, but ultimately you know where your home is, and you know where your core is. It's an identity more than anything. For me dance was identity. When I was in school, I wasn't the most popular girl in school, I was bullied and was a lone soldier. But as soon as I got an identity 'Oh she's the dancer, she's the one who can do that.' I grew in confidence and my life changed. That's why I think it's crucial to young people having Hip Hop in their life. You don't have to take yourself too seriously, you can share it with any person, any culture and I think it's that identity and that space to mess around in that allows you to be safe.

IA: In a lot of the styles there are a lot of codified vocabularies. I'm interested in how you see Hip Hop. Is it a historical artefact? Should it evolve?

KH: The question 'What is Hip Hop?' Yeah. We as BirdGang have always had this philosophy that we're not interested in the world wars, and the box wars that everyone's involved in - if you do this, you're not that and dah dah dah. The whole point of Hip Hop was it came from the streets, helped gangs and people to stop selling drugs, have a community, speak out, find a voice, find a community, share passion and share love. That's ultimately the core and the place it came from - the passion to share something

organic. So why are we putting all these boxes on it? We decided as a company, forget all this, we're just going to call it 'Aehehop.' Everyone was like 'What's that?' We were like it's just what we do. We were always rooted in Hip Hop foundations. Breaking, popping, locking, house etc. All these different styles we've trained in. But I'm not going to

what a 'Bart Simpson' is or any of the 'foundations.' Even if you don't stick to a certain bible at least you should know what the culture is about. If someone challenges me, I'm OK to have them challenge me, we can talk about it. I'm not saying that Steve Martin is the Steve Martin and that's the only thing it is. Maybe there's someone from that

it was created for. But like anything it's evolving. 'You got to know where you come from, to know where you are going.' You have to be aware of the people before you. You have to know that industry; I came in 2005, which is quite late in the crew era. Look up all these jump-offs, who created what crew...it seems that everyone at some point went through Boy Blue. There are so many connections I didn't know about...but if I'm part of the community I should do my research on it. Pretty much every class that I walk into now - I'm asked a lot to teach house - the first question I ask 'What's house?' They don't have a clue, or they just haven't been told yet. You know they've just been given a quick competition routine and told 'That's the house section.'

Or they've done some jacks and there you go. I've made it a point to start every class I do with 'This is what it is.' Whether it bores you or not. Let's just talk about it and see what it is. I realised when I did my research, I'm not going to lie, I tried to teach some house classes and I tried to imitate what it was when I first started. I was young... and I tried a class and I was like 'Wait a minute. What is this that I'm doing?' When I finished college, I did a year degree by correspondence, I wrote my paper about house and Hip Hop; I went to New York and I researched. Then I came back, and it completely changed the way I moved. It's almost like you legitimise - not legitimise, it's a big word legitimise - but my farmers became more rooted because I was clearer that it was from an African based tribal step. Even down to locking and pointing. I was taught to point, but then you realise where the movement comes from.

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say everything I do is coined Hip Hop and we got tired of that. I was musical theatre trained as well...so I'm not going to sit there and say the only thing I do is Hip Hop. I'm a merge. I'm a lot of things. So is Simeon (Qsyea), so is Ivan and so are most dancers today. There is a thing in 'Good at many things specialise in nothing.' That's a shame that we're losing specialists who home in on specific things, but they are out there. The nature of being employable and trying to get work pushes you to versatility and so it pushes all these things together. Hip Hop theatre is just a space. Hip Hop breaks down those 'you are' and 'you are not' I could be immersed in a type of music and a culture that I was not born into. It was not unusual for me to hear 'You dance good for a White girl.' I grew up and I was surrounded in that culture and became accepted whilst educating myself. I don't think we can claim to be a Hip Hop dancer when you don't know

era that did the same step but different. I think there's an element of let your mind be open - you weren't there, no one was there apart from the people involved. It is this whole thing of 'This is...' and 'This isn't...' I'm fighting on the subject, because partly you don't want to lose originality, you don't want to lose what it was. But also, you don't want to stop what it's becoming you don't want to be a purist to the point you're blocking any creativity or originality. The entire existence of Hip Hop came out of creativity. If someone said you're not allowed to break the beats. There wouldn't be any Hip Hop and you're not allowed to go to the floor.

IA: It's a place where things evolved, why wouldn't it continue to do that?

KH: It must evolve. But like anything you don't want it to evolve negatively or to have the reverse impact on what

It changes your move and changes your gesture. The biggest thing for house, this is probably the best example to use, I was learning all these steps and variations, and then suddenly house is the place where all these styles came together. There's this big mix, there's the heartbeat called jack - they call it jack but you know it could be...so you find pas de bourrées, you find tap, but there's a house way of doing it, influences of breaking and many other dance styles. Just knowing that this is an amalgamation of lots of different vocabulary, opinions and creativity means I can do what I want! Once I've understood what it is, where it comes from and once, I've got that heartbeat, I can be myself. Each house dancer has a different style and a different vocabulary. It was the click of understanding my body and how to use all the tools I had gathered.

IA: That came from your period in New York?

KH: My house and Hip Hop exploration in Europe was the start. But New York was a huge learning curve and the icing on the cake. The birthplace of many of the foundational Hip Hop genres. Places like the Sullivan Room. These underground clubs where dancers go for hours and hours and everyone's cyphering. The experience was like no other for me...oh there's a waacker suddenly in the circle doing something, there's a Hip Hop dancer doing house. That was when it clicked for me. I found a place that was inclusive, celebratory and creative. One of the first reference of Hip Hop dance as a form was Juste Debout in Paris. I used to sneak out there...I'm from Luxembourg...

when my parents were away, and I went to these big events where Hip Hop was the language. This is where I 'met' house, well the international version of house as the dancers were from different places globally. I decided 'Let me try this...' Then realised there's more to this.

IA: You recognised an imitation, you were imitating or copying a move and not feeling it?

KH: I think we all are at some point, even when we're learning ballet for example. We're all imitating at first. We're learning and that's what teachers are for. Then you start understanding what teachers are really saying, why you have to clench your stomach muscles and your bum, why you should spot when you turn. You realise once you've been in that process. I don't blame anyone for trying new things and thinking that they do something right. No one ever really told me how to house, but I had a lot of friends in France that would encourage me to just dance. I was always a bit intimidated to do house with them because I thought they would judge me. They have a bit of an 'I don't care' attitude and I admired that. Their confrontational attitude was not negative it was just 'Let's see what you've got.' I had just been in a three-year college course where you are constantly tested...they challenged me, which upon reflection I am very grateful for. Hip Hop was the place where I realised, I wanted to be as a dancer, but my training and background were monumental in the discovery of my voice in Hip Hop. When I first moved to London, I felt very foreign, even the way I dressed, they will tell you...it

was hilarious! I'd done street dance classes in Luxembourg, I'd been brought up on Michael Jackson and watched music videos. I was part of the only street dance crew in Luxembourg...I had no idea of the magnitude of the scene. London was so much more developed, and I was learning musical theatre at the Urdang Academy, even though I'd never sang a song in my life. But then I saw the BirdGang boys, every Friday they would just cypher in a studio at college. I'd always look through the window and think 'One day I should go in there.' My class mates and teachers kept calling me 'The funky one' because I didn't come from a technical background. One day a class mate opened the door and pushed me in to the room. I stood there like 'Hi guys.' I remember Sim and Ivan saying 'Come on then.' I just danced, did whatever came out of me, and from then on, I kept going back. It was refreshing as I could use all the techniques I had learnt but express myself freely and respond to the music my way. An observation I have now as a teacher in these colleges is that the students have great technique - legs by ears and beautiful lines - but when I put the music on and ask them to dance, they feel stuck. No one wants to freestyle. There is a missing link that the block parties provided for Hip Hop where DJ's would play the tracks and people just danced. This is why I turned my Monday house classes into a block party with a live DJ. The vibe was surreal, and my students would have a blast learning foundation.

IA: The social dance scene has changed, and it feels like the new generation haven't experienced that or it's not

there for them to access. The technical skills are there, but the listening skills aren't.

KH: But they are there. Studio 68 and Base. All these college training spaces. The Place. That's where you can go deeper. I understand you need time to be a sponge first, if I hadn't understood and got that training...I wouldn't be who I am today. But you are right that we are not encouraged to find our own movement voices in the college systems as you are in Hip Hop culture. It is really who you have around you and the reasons why you are dancing. A big frustration comes with the commercialisation of it. There's a two-way battle here because without the mass publicity, no one will know about it, and with the mass publicity always comes bad press or a slight misinterpretation of an identity. The emergence of Diversity, the TV shows and the gangsta rap industry has changed the way street dance is portrayed, both good and bad. Although Diversity has been a great commercial step for street dance, putting it on arena stages and I think they are leaders in their own right, the commercial TV has made everyone, and their mum think you can be a superstar dancer and it waters it down the art form...it's the same with most art forms. Singing too. How many, Britain's Got Talent, X Factor, The Voice "stars" do we have? You're no longer going on a journey that Jessie J did, or Michael Jackson or whoever you want to name that worked their way to where they are now. They had a completely different journey. It's constantly evolving, and you can't stop it changing. I think Hip Hop theatre... there's Hip Hop and Hip Hop

theatre - that's a whole other conversation. Who is what? I don't care as long as the art form progresses. There are some really great people like Artists4Artists who are really nourishing Hip Hop creatives and giving them a space to source knowledge and a platform to work with. I think people like them, and Breakin' Convention are doing

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some great work on that. I think there's going to be a big surge of business in dance, an industry in dance.

IA: What do you mean? What would that look like?

KH: I think the dance industry is going through significant changes. One of the reasons I'm doing my MBA is so that I can speak the language needed to build a sustainable infrastructure for creatives and independent artists. For us to keep up with large players as mentioned above. We have to have a strategy to remain sustainable in the noise and work alongside commercial entertainment. Ultimately, I aim to help bridge that gap in the arts. We haven't got that many administrative, business strategists in the arts, and dare I say most producers were also ex dancers...which is helpful but there's a big gap in business language. Starting

small but even helping some of my colleagues to manage and build personal finances as well as think about longevity in the business. For some even knowing how to write an invoice and how to price yourself when they come out of college can help. I think it's really important that we have these foundations in place for everyone going

into this industry. There is a lot in the language we use to talk about our work. A major learning from the MBA was the importance of data and proven facts to back up what we are creating and why people should invest in the significant change the work offers. Where's the industry going? What impact does my work have? I really had to switch my way of thinking about how I speak about my ideas, dependent on who I was talking to without losing the essence of the artist and creative nature of the work. I would love to give artists and independents the information I'm able to gather now, basic business planning methods and help them build the networks in other industries that can support their growth. I don't want everyone to think it's impossible to live comfortably as an artist and have to struggle. It is really hard at times, but I don't want

every artist to think they need to do everything. I hope there's more focus on delegating and building connections that last. An artist needs a marketing person, finance person and a fundraiser around them. Give an artist that structure and let them do what they need to do. They only need to know the basics of what everyone else does so they can be clear on their visions. I haven't quite developed this thought fully yet, but I know there is more here; there's a couple courses that are trying to do this artist be business things and I don't disagree with it. I hope it's not all focused on 'Apply for funding, apply for funding, apply for funding.' Get the right people to do the right things for you. Go talk to James who works for Google and see if he's got a free five minutes to suggest someone to you to do your social media for you. You've got some people like Cindy (Claes) who's moving and doing great things with her work as an independent and I know she's got a business mentor.

IA: Technology. You have an interest in this and I'd like to hear where that came from, what sparked that, and some of the things you've encountered en route. I've experienced most AR/VR from people coming out of/in university contexts...they're making far more interesting work in comparison to anyone in the dance world.

KH: In terms of who books that type of work...I think I misunderstood our question.

IA: With universities they have the interactivity, games and technology, but you need someone else to look and say I could apply that in that choreographic or

theatrical context. Is that the kind of thing you're trying to do in your work?

KH: Yes, absolutely. I have a huge interest in how technology and art belong together. Technology is only as good as its content and how it enhances our lives, in my opinion. There's an overload of things where a tech evangelist has tried to be the content creator and the content creator has tried to be the technician. There are examples of dance and technology projects that universities have done where the students who have done one dance class a week are the participants representing the art form. They've not gone out and sourced professionals. Not even the people that have been in it for years who can help you create content. I am aware this is also a question of budget, but it is not giving both the tech and the art form an equal playing field. You're just using dance as a tool that you glue onto/ into the technology. The interesting place is where they seamlessly meet in the middle and it is not about using fancy technology to make the dance look good. Hip Hop theatre is a perfect place to play with this because of the need for storytelling and movement infused with fantasy and breaking stereotypes. I have been working on NOX for the past couple of years. A multi-sensory 'techxperience' that seamlessly combines VR (virtual reality), AR (augmented reality) and live dance theatre. NOX invites audiences to meet their 'digital shadow.' Your eternal online footprint, by merging data with all four senses, allowing for a deeply personal, life-changing experience. Accessible to all, you are guided by performers

to transition between the domains of the real and the virtual, blurring the distinction between what is real and what is NOX. Inspired by our daily relationship with our tech gadgets (mobile phones and social media) to prompt interaction with our theatres and cultural venues in order to broaden our demographics in theatre and dance performances. In my journey with NOX so far, the tech wasn't ready for us, and we weren't ready for the tech, which means there is development needed in both areas. It is interesting how some of the tech I wish I had to play with is now coming out. Even the idea of headsets being singular...theatre isn't singular. Who wants to be on their own the whole time? Gamers might be another story but they're interacting with others in that space. I was like how I can break that wall. How can we sync the headsets, but also hack the VR so that it brings you into the space, and then you're experiencing the same thing at the same time as 10 other people? That connection is like 'Oh OK I'm putting a headset on but I'm experiencing it with lots of people.' I've been fascinated by multiplying dancers in a space virtually. You try and do it with lighting, staging and all the different ways. But now there's actually a way of multiplying people, or making people think there's things in the space that actually aren't or maybe the opposite. Tech breaks down some of those limitations and also helps us in different ways. It's a silly example but if I couldn't get my head to my leg in the real world, in the tech world I can. BirdGang have this fascination with birds as well with costume, mask, disguise, seeing and not seeing, identity

and no identity and that kind of thing. This gives you another possibility to take away gravity and time for example...but I don't think that either tools should overpower each other. It's difficult for tech to not overpower the arts, but the challenge is to use it and not let it eat us up. We interact with our phones every day, 100s of times a day, why not somehow use that mentality or that behaviour, to bring people closer to a theatre, or bring theatre to them. I know that some people hear VR and will come to a piece. With NOX they might not know that by the end they've got no virtual reality, no tech around them and are immersed in a dance piece. 'Wow I've never done that before. That's cool, let me come back when there's a dance show on.' I don't like video games and I'm not a gamer. But I like what technology can do...so when I play games, I'm always thinking how I can use this to enhance experiences in the arts. Not to shoot people in car parks but to bring people back to the theatre. There's also the frustration that there is also so much investment and money in video games...and we're struggling to fill theatres. We need to use and manipulate this thinking. Pulling new people in to theatres using an already existing behaviour that is growing will entice people to the theatre. Purely out of frustration every single virtual reality or tech thing I see just disappoints, however commercially the marketing made it sound like 'It's going to be amazing...'

IA: Like Somnai?

KH: I've not been. I've bought a ticket. Is it not going to be what it's supposed to be? I thought they were getting close. I'll try

and go with an open mind.

IA: Did you see Whist?

KH: Where you look at an object and it goes to a video? I mean I understand that as a prototype to test the technology. But for me it made no sense. Why are the actors eating hearts, and then doing some random movement? What's that shape, the shapes not even related to what we're going to see?! I'm sorry, I don't mean to cuss here but it was a frustrating that the work had great technology but why were we using this technology? How did it relate to the rest? Great they are using technology but...

IA: Go on say it, say the word...

KH: Why are you using it? There was a major announcement by a large news brand, they announced that they collaborated on a major dance and technology project. You put a head set on, you see fluorescent bodies randomly moving around - superimposed on a virtual background space... they also showed the behind the scenes work. Basically, it was university students in leotards, doing mo-cap and being substituted for fluorescent figures. We saw a snippet of it but already I was like...OK great...and why? What is it adding to the dance or the technology? I really want to take this technology into a workshop environment and play with how the worlds combine. What I found with BirdGang...when we were doing this in our rehearsals, we realised there's lots of way of doing alternative stories, subplots, alternative worlds that link to the one we believe is real. An example was you are

in a restaurant, put on a head set and a person appears at your table. You have a conversation, thinking they are virtual. When you take the headset off the person is there or the whole restaurant is full of people...a journey bringing you back to the real. There's a lot of interesting spaces where the worlds could cross. That's when I realised, I don't just want to exist in a headset, or exist in the real world, I want to be in both with all these different storylines. Tech can support the arts, but I think the arts can improve tech too. There's so much they can learn from each other. Even down to CRMs and online software, collecting data...if we as creatives used it...I have no idea who has seen my shows... but if I knew the way Facebook knows their audience...we would have more power and support behind our work and the quantifiable impact it has.

IA: You might have millionaires who have seen it. Really love it but have no way to get in touch with you. Big business and venues controlling data. Tesco, Boots, Amazon they know your purchasing your habits.

KH: But we don't know who goes to what kind of shows. There is some research with DCMS bringing out their white paper on digital culture and in it they reference the site that does audience tracking. Tech was what brought a new life to my art and creative language. I saw the possibilities as a choreographer to play with. I know the world is turning tech and people are more and more interested in it. Although I have found that for all the VR festivals/awards we are still slightly ahead with NOX as there is no category for us to even apply for yet. The concept

is hard to grasp and needs a lot of education/introduction. We did a presentation of NOX in Luxembourg and one audience member couldn't really fathom what it was and

at what the small people are doing, sometimes you'll find gems in that. Look at Botis, no one knew of him and his company a few years ago. Now, world class work. But he

don't get the rush any more. Classes are all becoming about footage and who was in who's video...fame on YouTube. The movements keep repeating themselves this is eating up what I was in love with. The diversity of our dancers and creatives around me. Dancers can easily become depressed. They've spent their career becoming very good at banging out choreography, but they haven't had much exposure to productions, shows and tours. I know that not everyone can, because there's not space for everyone, but they fall out of love with it very quickly. So, there's an element of everyone's pumping these people into dance, they might end up getting to the top of their class and then they've got nowhere to go. Dare I say our agencies aren't helping that either? We're undercutting each other. As a dancer you're signed up to all these agencies and you go with the one that gets you the job...even though they might have completely slashed your prices. Whereas in America you can only get that dancer and you can only go to that agent and pay that price. I think that's making it quite difficult for people. I try and tell people, know your prices and know how to negotiate your worth. Exposure is not a payment and you cannot eat exposure.

"We're pumping people through street dance competitions because they're a huge money maker. It's a bit worrying. I'm mentoring a young girl whose got it; she understands it and she's gone through the competition cycle, but she still gets disheartened when she doesn't win."

how it worked.

IA: I don't have a box for that yet...

KH: Exactly. But people are saying Kendra we need something in VR, we need something soon. I know the National (Theatre) is doing loads of work in terms of plays and this is another frustration. Trying to get involved with the big boys. I've had a few meetings with DCMS, and I understand I'm a small fish in a big pond, but anything that is mentioned in the work that's being done, they're all big corporations, all big houses. We don't stand a chance. The noise that we make is irrelevant even when we go and present ourselves and say you haven't seen anything like that before. They admit they haven't seen anything like this before, if you're talking about the future about the art, look

was too small to have a voice for a long, long time. That's a small frustration hence why I would like to find someone that will collaborate with me in writing blogs and creating an information channel for tech and dance. Writing is not my background, I mean I can blag it but getting articles out there, getting out of the bubble I keep talking about is another thing.

IA: What is troubling you most at the moment?

KH: I'm quite excited about the industry at the moment, regardless of my frustrations. Possibly because of the journey I've been on recently. What is troubling me is this. Too many kids, I mean I've got some young protégés I'm training, have hit a high too quickly. They've become famous on YouTube, tried a few different projects and

IA: If you say it's affecting mental health, falling out the industry and depression - that's serious, life affecting stuff.

KH: I think it is...it's not happening everywhere, but I've seen it happen to a few. In Luxembourg they used to say they had the highest suicide rates because people

got to the highest rung of the income ladder quickly...then what do you do next? Drugs? It's not just in dance, but I think it's more prevalent than what I saw when I was younger. I said before there's no real crews or crew mentality any more. There are hardly any platforms too. We used to have a club night called Storm, we had Trocadero to go and train at and all sorts of platforms like Serious about Street Dance, Dancer's Delight, Jump Off... people have stopped the platforms because there's no crews any more to represent and most shows are starting to look all the same. We're pumping people through street dance competitions because they're a huge money maker. It's a bit worrying. I'm mentoring a young girl whose got it; she understands it and she's gone through the competition cycle, but she still gets disheartened when she doesn't win. But the win is not what it's about in your career and I'm constantly trying to remind her; any opportunity I see that has to do with the theatre or creating work I try and bring her in. You do not get every audition you go for, you must find your place and own it. Getting her in a space that's used to create art something, rather than having to pay to do these competitions and go home with a plastic trophy that 100 other kids got as well. Do it once or twice maybe but that can't be the focus of the industry.

IA: Hundreds of kids go through those doors...

KH: It's a huge money maker. Parents pay a fortune for their kids to go...and it's fine. I'm not saying it must stop, because there's something nice in it 'Let's go win a prize.' But it's getting to a point where it's a

career path for some people. That's shocking.

IA: What's your strongest memory of dance?

KH: Strongest memory...there are way too many to count. With all the ups and downs I wouldn't turn back a single day of my journey. The tours, I learned so much on the tours. Creating work with BirdGang in a tiny studio, sweating 24 hours a day. I think the strongest memory for me was when we did our first show as BirdGang. 2006. Breakin' Convention. No one had ever seen anything like that before; it was the birth of our company and the birth of our confidence. That was a huge thing. Working my way up from being a dancer on Blaze to be a run the entire show person...even down to casting. That tour and that show really put responsibility on my shoulders and taught me how to be a leader in many different cultural settings (from Italy to Russia and Taiwan). Boadicea helped me get in touch with my feminine side. I've always been surrounded by males. I grew up in a village in the middle of nowhere with just boys. Then I come to London and I meet the three guys I founded BirdGang with. I'm the only girl in a company where sex is irrelevant. When I started Boadicea with a group of girls. I had no interest in being in any other company other than BirdGang. But Boadicea wasn't like I was joining someone else's company, it was 12 of us and a space where we could be females. Bigger females, stronger females away from everything else. KRO (Crow) is my bird name, and the name is all about 'Don't judge a book by its cover.' Crows are loyal, crows are not just scavengers...they are, ha-ha...

but they are not just that. I will explain...I got something. The biggest game-changer for me was my solo Aviary.

IA: Why's that?

KH: It was the first time I stepped out as me. With my creative voice, away from the protection of everyone else. It was just me naked, in a cat suit, bare (literally). I couldn't hide. Exploring the personality of a crow...the whole bird human element I've been fascinated with. To add context to this fascination: as a kid I nurtured a crow back to health. Where I used to live, they used to poison crows in the park and there was one that could barely walk. I took him home, literally fed him worms and nurtured him back to health. Years later in BirdGang I was thinking, what's my bird name...I asked everyone close to me and one of my first dance teachers said you're a crow. 'Crow?' That's a scavenger and a sign of death. All the stereotypes associated with dark and death. She was like 'Look it up, really look it up.' So, I did and found that they are loving, family orientated birds, supposedly the most beautiful birds in flight...dance...that solo was me, stepping away from all the stereotypes, all the protection and all the things that I thought defined me at the time. I was going through a personal situation at the time as well and it suddenly became this thing that kept me going for about four years. It was me, this time, this story. That was one of the most defining times for me and it opened many doors thereafter.

IA: You mentioned earlier about the White girl in Hip Hop. Where does race and class sit in your work?

KH: It's a very difficult subject

for me because I've always lived a life where I've grown up with a belief that we are all the same. I don't care if I'm a woman, a man, White, Black or whatever I want to be; I've never had the race colour glasses on. But that comment

“People need to stop thinking that everyone owes them something – you need to know the right questions to ask and be proactive. I know someone who sits at home and waits for the phone to ring.”

goes hand in hand with ‘Oh what do you do? You're a dancer? Oh, you're a stripper.’ It's that stereotype. That's the frustration...the stereotypes that everyone is fixed on. ‘You dance well for a White girl.’ I understand you might have seen a lot of White people that don't dance, but now you've got this stereotype. For me it was never really about skin colour or class glasses at all. It was the stereotype. I never really thought about I'm a White girl doing Hip Hop...until people pointed it out to me. I came from Luxembourg and my closest friends; my bird boys are all Black and I was no different to them. They were very clear, and they had opinions on it. I'm not trying to act like racism doesn't exist, it's blatant and very...here...but it was never something made my reality. But again, I stress, I'm not saying like it doesn't exist or I'm acting like it doesn't exist. I'm aware of it. But then you can go into unconscious bias, unconscious behaviours and it's such a deep subject. Then when you go into it

regarding Hip Hop...are you legitimate if you don't have the skin colour? Come on. I thought the whole meaning of Hip Hop was it doesn't matter what your skin colour is. Don't be ignorant...just see what you can add to the world. Simeon

Qsyea has done a great work on this subject ‘What it means to be Hip Hop?’ Check it out.

IA: Where do you like to spend your energies?

KH: Is this in a specific context? Or as a human being?

IA: This is Kendra.

KH: I like to spend my energies in things that matter. To me and other people. I'm increasingly feeling like I want to contribute something to the world, leave a legacy and I'm constantly asking how. Some people might say you already are, some might say you're not. I'd like to spend my energy on things that make a positive change. Things that make me happy and make the people around me happy. One of my core things is I will spend every single second on something that is loyal and consistent. Whether that's relationships or projects. I'm someone that starts and finishes. Loyalty is a big thing for me. Where do I like to spend my energy?

(pause) In progression. If I look back, it's only to remind myself of good things. I'm very much a future seeker. Even down to arguments. I'd rather know how we can solve things, than what has happened. It's interesting because I thought I had my life planned. School finished, come to London be a professional dancer and then, when you get there the clear plan fades and you seek your next steps. You're like I've got to this place, what now. That was my whole The Aviary period. I've ticked my list; how do I get to the next place. Shit. I'm an adult and there's bills to pay and life to lead and kids and what do you want now and how do I get there?!

IA: Is there something that is important to you that we haven't spoken about that you want recording?

KH: There's lots of people that are important. I've mentioned quite a few of them in the conversation. A big thing I think is family. Support from family. I've been very privileged that my family let me go on my journey. It didn't come without tests. My family wouldn't have let me do it if I didn't have the grades or if I hadn't met some requirements; I was always, always, always in the studio. I showed them a certain type of commitment that allowed them to let me take a leap. I'm a big believer in always seeing both sides, but I believe that the importance of having a support system and a family, whoever it is, that can push you. What I hate but love about my parents is that they'll let you make your own mistakes. My dad's a tax consultant, but I had to beg him to help me how do you do tax. He was like you're an adult, you've chosen your path, make your mistakes. Even though I

could be like 'Why didn't you help me?' I'm also like 'Damn right.' I know not to do that again and I know how to help other people. My partner said 'People can only teach you what they know.' At the time you think your parents should know everything, but they're as human as you are. That's a big thing for me. None of them had a blueprint for me, none of them had done my journey before. I call myself a Luxembourg anomaly because usually people take a different path. I only think I have the network I have because I am the person I am. I've mentioned most of the big steps. Blaze and Boy Blue who gave me my first Hip Hop theatre contract. That was an incredible opportunity for me at the time, because they were looking for only one female. There was a whole room full of females and getting that contract at the end of the day was like 'I made it!' Ha-ha. Seeing that Kenrick received awards and an OBE, he and his team have done so much for the Hip Hop and East London community and he's created a home for a lot of kids. I've spoken about Breakin' Convention, they've also been a big support to BirdGang. Going on my tech journey having Pavilion Dance South West take me on board, mix me with an innovation tech hub. People need to stop thinking that everyone owes them something - you need to know the right questions to ask and be proactive. I know someone who sits at home and waits for the phone to ring. They train and keep themselves fit and healthy, makes themselves the best they can be. But they don't go out and look for the next step. Some people are lucky they can do that. But if the phone's not ringing, there's something

you aren't doing. There's that whole pro-active element to it and having the confidence and your own head on your shoulders as well. I think you finally got my whole life there!

IA: Final question. Music. What is your relationship to music?

KH: Very interesting one. I couldn't live without it for a very long time and it's a very good point actually. The reason I started dropping off from the industry is the type of music that's coming out. The one word tracks, and the same beat with different lyrics. It wrenches my soul. Every single class you're going to it's the same kind of sound/feel. Apart from the underground stuff, those juicy places where you can go and find good soul food. But they're hidden. In the commercial industry there was nothing. The music was dying, and you didn't have anything like...I grew up on Michael Jackson, Destiny's Child, Lauryn Hill. That kind of sound just wasn't coming out any more. Sometimes I go a week without listening to music. I only just realised that recently, when I started listening again. It became either LBC or the news. You change with what you listen to. This year was about information and what's current, so I don't walk into my MBA and be like 'Err Jay-Z's new track.' I had to change my thinking and music died out a little bit for me. But having that network that you can go to, and say what tracks do you have, what's feeding you at the moment...things like Ivan's CRXSS PLATFXRM with new music and artists is really helping boost the industry again. My relationship with music is really interesting. When good music is playing, it's on my body it just

completely connects to it and I replicate the sounds in movement. Why I love dance is because...everything comes from the music, everything comes from the sound. Disco developed into house music... suddenly there was a new way of moving that came with it called the jack. Music develops and then movement develops alongside it. Listen to the music, how does that make you move. Contemporary dancers don't always seem to have that same approach sometimes...they often create phrases and the rhythms are secondary to the music...I believe the most versatile style in terms of dynamics and innovation, and some might kill me for this, is Hip Hop...I'm going a bit deep here but a lot of what I am wouldn't exist if it wasn't for music.

