Sze-Wei 0:07

Welcome to Making a Scene, an Esplanade podcast about how art gets made. In this episode we'll be talking about the art of writing about dance. How can movement be translated into words and analysed using words? I'm your host, Chan Sze-Wei or Sze. I'm an experimental performance maker, dance filmmaker, arts journalist and mum. Today I'll be talking to Roslyn Sulcas, a dance critic and culture writer for The New York Times. Roslyn is joining us from London. Roslyn, thanks for being here with us today.

Roslyn 0:37

Thank you for having me.

Sze-Wei 0:39

Roslyn, you grew up as a ballet student in Cape Town, South Africa. How did your passion for dance come to be channeled into dance writing?

Roslyn 0:46

It was actually a rather roundabout route because I never thought about dance writing, although when I was growing up, I absolutely lived for the moments that the dance and dance magazines would arrive from London, which they did, very, very late, months after their actual publication, and rather intermittently.

But I adored reading about dance all over the world, and about these sort of mythical far off places like London and Paris and New York. So I suppose in a way, the seed had been planted that this was something rather wonderful to do and to experience. But I was focused on being a dancer.

And after I had stopped dancing – I only danced for about a year after school – and then I stopped and went to university. It didn't occur to me that perhaps I could channel that previous passion for dancing into writing. It didn't occur to me for quite a long time. I did other things. I studied, I did postgraduate work.

It was when I was living in London, doing research for a thesis, that I was at Covent Garden one night, and I was with a friend, we'd got cheap student tickets, we were up in the gods, as they call it in Covent Garden. And it was the ballet Giselle. And I was explaining the history of the ballet to a friend and explaining how it was an epitome of romanticism in ballet, about the fascination at the time with the supernatural and the mysterious and the eerie. My friend said to me, you know, you should write about this, because you know a lot. And I thought, hmm, it sort of planted a seed about that.

And I, I didn't do it immediately. But I did, at some point after that write a kind of, I suppose a sort of sample review, and rather naively sent it off to a whole lot of people, different publications, and mostly didn't hear back at all. One or two sort of said, “We'll keep you on file, and thank you for writing.”

Then some months later, I had moved to Paris, I was living in Paris, still doing my research. And I went to see a performance at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, by the San Francisco Ballet who were on tour in Paris. And one of the pieces they did, I actually don't remember what else was on the programme. But one of the pieces was a work by a choreographer who I'd never heard of, called William Forsythe. And it was, you know, not an exaggeration to say it was a kind of epiphany when I saw this piece, because I thought to myself, if I had known that ballet could be like this, which is to say, contemporary and part of the world I lived in, I would have stayed a ballet dancer.

I immediately wanted to write about it. And I tried to find information about William Forsythe. There wasn't a lot around because in 1988 he was relatively unknown, although he had had a big success the previous year at the Paris Opera with In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated, a very famous work now. I wrote off to all these dance magazines who had ignored or sort of vaguely rejected me saying, I want to write a piece about William Forsythe.

And one of them wrote back saying, and that one was a publication from the UK called Dance Theatre Journal, quite an academic quarterly magazine that was affiliated to the Laban Centre, they wrote back and said, “Yes, we'd be interested in reading your piece.” That was, that was about as good as it got. And I took that as a firm commission.

And I wrote an extremely long, slightly academic piece – it was probably about 5,000 words – on William Forsythe and – maybe it was four I don't know, but it was long – and sent it off. And it was published. In fact, they put Forsythe on the cover, and they published this big piece. And that was my first experience of being a dance writer.

And in the interim, while this was all happening, I realised that you could ask theatres for tickets to go and see things if you were a dance writer. And it was magic. And so you know, I phoned up everyone and I was off to see dance performances, and my poor doctoral thesis was more or less abandoned, as I rushed around Paris going to something new every night. I mean, it was just the most fantastic new world to me. And that's how I became a dance writer. Sorry, that was a very long answer.

Sze-Wei 4:49

Thank you for that beautiful account. I find it really wonderful that you're telling us about how the first piece that you had published was really a very important juncture, I think, in dance history, and ballet history, and that you were kind of there in the thick of realising how important this moment was with Forsythe’s work and being able to write that, to help people understand this.

Roslyn

Yes

Sze-Wei

In a very strange way, we had a similar moment because Forsythe never showed in Singapore until last year, when the Esplanade brought in Impressing the Czar, as well as new works with the Paris Opera Ballet. A few of us writers here in Singapore were commissioned to write some pieces to try and explain to people what was the import of these pieces, and this choreographer, and I guess the waves that he brought about in ballet, which we still feel today, and that was so exciting for us.

But I'd like to just come back to this point about ballet. It's a form that's very dear to me from my own conservatoire training, but also many in Singapore, of course, thank you colonisation, we still have thousands and thousands of girls each year going to the Royal Academy of Ballet exams.

 And ballet, in a very sort of conventional orthodox sense, is something that is extremely well known, and which a lot of people in Singapore think about when they think of dance. But of course, there's so much more out there in dance. How does your background in classical ballet influence the way you watch dancing and the way you think about dancing today?

Roslyn 6:18

Well, what you're saying resonates with me, because I grew up with very little exposure to contemporary dance. There was very little in South Africa, and very little to be seen when I was growing up. And because it was the apartheid years, very little came from abroad to us. And of course, there was no video or, I mean, the videos were kind of starting up when, I suppose when I was older, but they were not easily available and there was very little contemporary work on it.

So my main exposure was to ballet. My main technical knowledge about dance was ballet, although I had done a few Martha Graham classes and other Limón technique and a few other things, but not much.

And when I went to France, it was when I started living in Paris and seeing work in the way that I described in my previous response, when I was just going to so much, it was a huge education for me in different kinds of physicality and different ways of moving and different aesthetics. And it did make me think about precisely this question that you're asking, which is, how does my ballet eye inform the way I look at this other work?

And I think that the answer is that it's inescapable. If you have a very embodied or embedded sense of the physicality of ballet from having done it for a long time, you, in a way, look at other movement through that prism. You translate it physically how it must feel. It's not that I judge other forms of movement through a balletic prism or whether they do or don't correspond technically. It's just that my kinetic understanding is a balletic one. I don't know if that answers your question well enough.

Sze-Wei 7:55

Absolutely, absolutely. I think I'd like to jump from there to this question, which comes from a recent experience that I had. For the first time in Singapore, I and two other dance writers here, we taught an introductory course to writing about dance for some aspiring dance writers here. And it was a very interesting group, half of whom were dancers, and half of whom were more theatre writers who wanted to transition and write about dance.

And a big question that the group had was whether dance writing is fundamentally different from other kinds of arts criticism. So you just mentioned some of this embodied response that someone with a dance training might have. Do you think that's fundamental to dance writing and being able to describe and analyse dance?

Roslyn 8:43

That's a really interesting question. I think the confidence-bolstering answer for the students, and I've had those questions too, for that is that most dance writers have never danced. It's actually much more uncommon to have a critic who was a dancer than the other situation. So no, it is not necessary at all to have danced, to write about dance, I don't think. There are many absolutely wonderful dance writers who have never danced. I mean, they may have tried a ballet class just to see what it feels like, but they certainly have not been dancers.

So I think that you need a corporeal sensitivity, if I can put it that way. Some people, I think, don't really, don't really have a physical sensitivity of what it feels like to move. And I don't really know even how to describe that exactly. But I think that it's true that some people are more sensitive to the way movement feels than other people. And that could be as true of watching tennis, gymnastics, or golf, or anything really, as it is of dance. And I think if you don't have that sensibility, you're probably not going to be drawn to be a dance writer.

Sze-Wei 9:50

Or to watch much dance, I suppose.

Roslyn

Or to watch much dance. But I think if you are very sensitive to the feeling of movement, that is one thing that draws you to dance. And you know if then you have the other gifts that you need for dance writing, then why not? That would be my answer, that I don't, I don't think you need to have danced, is the short version.

Sze-Wei 10:06

So more on this question of being specifically a critic, I'm curious about how you see the function of the critic in the arts ecology. So we had a very sort of simplistic survey that we presented to our dance writing course students, where we asked everybody to sort of on a poll, indicate whether they thought it was more important as a critic to do, number one, a documentation of the performance presented; number two, feedback to the creator; or number three, to influence audience to go and see the show. And of course, there are many other roles, but I'm wondering how you see your role?

Roslyn 10:44

Well, I suppose they see the role of the critic partly as a sort of important historical documentation of our own era in dance. You know, I think without reviews, we have very little sense of the work that is being made in a particular field. You know, when I started at the New York Times in 2005, the practice, the intention was to review every single professional piece that was shown in New York.

Sze-Wei

Goodness.

Roslyn 11:17

So, yeah. So there were five dance writers. And anything that was shown in a sort of professional setting was reviewed. Occasionally, things weren't good enough to actually be reviewed. And we would call our editor and say, it's just, you know, it's just dreadful. I can't review this. But that was actually relatively rare.

And so mostly, The New York Times for quite a long time, until a couple of years ago, you know, has provided a huge historical documentation of decades of arts practice in New York City and beyond, which perhaps, because I come from an academic background, but for me seems so important as a history of the field. I was very sad when the paper decided to no longer do that. And it became – there's still a lot of coverage of the arts in the New York Times, than I would venture to say any other newspaper in the world, I mean, I could be wrong, but I think it probably is the most extensive coverage. But it is not, the intention is no longer to try to cover the entire field. It's much more selective.

That is a very important part of what you're doing as a critic, you're not just identifying a moment in time when you're saying, “This is fantastic. Everyone should go and see it,” or “Terrible, don't”. You are actually providing a historical record of what was being made. And I know that now with video, and film, there is more record. But there isn't of the small things. There isn't all the grassroots work, all these people starting up, you know, if you think about people who are famous now, but did small pieces in tiny workshops or experimental spaces, at the beginning of their careers in New York, those were documented. You have Mark Morris's early years, you have a record of these things that is fascinating to go back and look at. And I'm sad that that won't be as extensive actually.

And so for me, that's a very important part. And so documenting is important to me, like, what it looked like, what the movement was like, giving the reader now and in the future, most of what they want to know, or perhaps not most, but much of what they want to know. It's not that with every review I write I am thinking about the place of this review in some huge historical context, because that would be too stressful.

Sze-Wei

And difficult in your word limit, I'd imagine.

Roslyn 13:35

Yes, exactly. But it is a sort of broader picture. That is what I do think of it as a very important part of the critics’ role. Live arts are so ephemeral, you know, all live arts. And a record of that moment in a theatre is very different to having a kind of, you know, some archival footage of a performance, you don't know when, where, what, you don't have a sense of the experience of the audience, of the live feel of it. I mean, that's, it's a very different kind of record.

Sze-Wei 14:03

May I throw you a, I don't know, a topical question?

Roslyn

Of course.

Sze-Wei

Do you think a critic must be critical?

Roslyn 14:08

Yes, I do. You know, that is a school of criticism, most notably and brilliantly led by Deborah Jowitt – who wrote for decades at The Village Voice and still writes wonderfully about dance on her blog – a more neutral approach where Deborah always described dance without really saying whether or not she thought it was good or not, or what her sort of value judgments were about it. But she did that really wonderfully and I found her work very inspiring, because she always described movement. And I think the thing that I learned, one of the people who I learned most from was her, and in those reviews that were so descriptive.

But I do think that one of the enjoyable things about reading criticism is a point of view, is, is when someone pronounces on whether they think something is good or not, and why. And that is part of the fun of, if I can put it that way, of the form. And of course, it's all about temperament. I mean, some people love that part of it, some people like it less or are more cautious with it.

I think at the New York Times, you realised there that what the New York Times said about anything was so important in the New York ecosystem of dance, that, to me it always seemed you had to be pretty careful. You know, you don't want to use the big guns on someone who is just starting up, for example, or they're doing their first show. So it's also I think, how you weight your criticism is also an important factor in any kind of reviewing.

Sze-Wei 15:46

That is actually something I really am very curious about and want to ask you about, is how you feel about writing specifically for the Times and how different it is from writing dance criticism for really any other publication in the world. Because as you say, like it's read by pretty much, well, not everyone, but maybe a vast majority of the dance community in New York, and it shapes how dance is evolving. But it's also dance criticism for the world, really. And definitely programmers also around the world who are looking for pieces to bring in.

Roslyn

Yes, yes.

Sze-Wei

Do you feel that it's a very different position to be writing in than say other, maybe a more local publication?

Roslyn 16:26

I think it is, because of all the things you've just said. But I think also you can't, in a way, think of it like that in a day to day way. For me, I can't sit down at my computer with a deadline in two or three hours to write a review and think, “I have to, I have to document this perfectly for posterity. And, you know, I have to really think about the fact that everyone in the dance community is going to read this.” For me anyway, I really can't think that stuff because it's too nerve-wracking.

Sze-Wei

Of course, paralysing.

Roslyn

So I write it just as I think, would write it for anyone else, with the exception of the fact that you usually have a much faster deadline, a much narrower deadline. But I think it is true that your words do carry a lot of weight, and that you need to be responsible about that. And I, I have always felt very aware of that. Yeah, from the beginning.

Not that anyone ever said that, to me. That said. The New York Times actually is really wonderful with its critics and never, almost never changing, suggesting anything. You know, critics are really given pretty much free rein, if they trust you to be a critic there, they trust what you're going to say.

Sze-Wei 17:31

So at this point, I'd like to come to this question about how we watch dance. And I love that, in your biography on the Times website at least, you say something about always feeling like an outsider peering in. How does the cultural positioning of oneself influence how you write for dance? Or how do you see that?

Roslyn 17:52

I think that I've been lucky because I grew up in one country, South Africa, I moved to a number of others, Britain, France, New York. To put in more specifically London, Paris, New York, and then back to London. And had this kind of window onto different arts and dance cultures.

I think that you can't help but be schooled by the dance, cultural, the theatre, culture, whatever it is that you grew up in. So mine in South Africa was actually a sort of British one, because we did, it was the Royal Academy of Dance system. And the examiners would come out from England, and all our references in a way were British ones. There are a lot of Royal Ballet, former Royal Ballet or Sadler's Wells ballet dancers who were South African who had gone over, who came back to teach or to, to run the ballet company or schools in South Africa. So I suppose my shaping was sort of British. But of course, you know, it wasn't in England.

And I think then moving to France, I became aware of how differently, which kinds of artists were valued in a completely different way. People that in a British sort of cultural outlook was sort of slightly looked down on or a little bit sneered at as sort of populist, let's say like Béjart, were revered in France.

Then to take another example, Forsythe, who, as we've discussed, immediately adored his work and, and have followed ever since that time very closely, I realised soon after starting to write about him and find out about him that his work was more or less dismissed in the US. He is American, but the Americans didn't value it or at least the critics didn't value it. When he first brought work over there in the late 80s or early 90s they were very, very dismissive and actually continued to be so for a long time.

And then I moved to America and you know there was a kind of fairly wholesale critical dismissal of an entire school of French and European contemporary creators who I had seen a lot of in my years of living in Paris and who were venerated over there. So it's just very interesting to have that outsider's point of view where I wasn't invested, really, in anyone.

They weren't – I’m not French, I didn't feel patriotic about the French choreographies. I didn't feel, you know, I felt a little indignant about Forsythe, because I felt so strongly about it. But I could see, I could see the relative cultural points of view, I understood why it was valued in one place, and not in another. Well I thought I had some understanding of it. And I thought that was very – I think – thought and think, that that's a very lucky position to be in as a critic, because in a way, you don't have those blinkers that can come from being too steeped in your own cultural formation.

Sze-Wei 20:39

That is also something I've wondered about very much over the years. I suppose it's not specific to dance, but I guess I've just watched predominantly dance, right, in my life, but that so many makers find recognition outside of their own context. That their work finds its relevance, somewhere where it didn't originate. I do wonder about that. Is there some operation of exoticising or othering, or I wonder what it is that makes it work?

Roslyn 21:10

I don't know. It can also just be, I think that temperamentally a culture is more attuned to certain elements of work than another. I mean, I'm thinking of Pina Bausch, for example, who's again, revered in Europe. And I remember going to New York for the first time in the early 90s. I was living in Paris, I was writing about dance. And my editor put me in touch with Clive Barnes, who was then a very famous… he’d actually left the New York Times, he was at the New York Post, but he was a theatre and dance critic. He was probably one of the most famous critics in New York, and very powerful in both the theatre and dance worlds.

And I remember having lunch with Clive Barnes and talking about Pina Bausch who was such a, she was such a deity in Paris. And I remember him saying very dismissively, “Oh well, you know, I don't know what all the fuss is about. I mean, people have been doing this in theatre for years.” And I was sort of stunned by this, you know, this heresy.

But I think to him, it was just sort of like a, sort of fringy experimental theatre that didn’t, or it had aspects of that, that it didn't resonate temperamentally somehow, with what was happening in the UK or the US. I'm not putting this very well. But I do think that there was a kind of innate understanding of her work in, let's say, I want to say Europe, but that's perhaps overstating it, in France and Germany anyway, that came from a kind of cultural and temperamental fit. And I think that is often the case. And it often takes people a decade or two to get over that in a way and be able to, to kind of see the work for what it is.

Sze-Wei 22:53

I definitely hear that. I think coming from perhaps 12 years ago was quite a conventional time to be doing a conservatoire training. But coming out of there studying choreography and then watching a Pina Bausch piece for the first time in my life, it was just before she passed away, actually, I managed to see Carnations. It resonated with me so powerfully. But I did not understand how such a famous piece appeared to be incorrect according to all of my choreography textbooks. It was something massive to wrap my head around at the time.

Roslyn 23:26

That's so interesting. Choreography textbooks. Goodness, that's another whole conversation.

Sze-Wei 23:31

Well, Mr. Barnes was also one of the criticism textbook authors wasn't he, so…

Roslyn

Yes, yes, absolutely.

Sze-Wei 23:39

So I have a question. But tell me if you're just tired of answering this these days.

Roslyn

Yes

Sze-Wei

I'm wondering about the place of specifically the dance critic in the pandemic. Because now that we're moving so much to the screen, we of course, have had dance film, and I saw one of your colleagues recently wrote a piece on Dance on Camera Festival. But dance film and dance for the theatre or live dance, at least in the way I see it, have been very separate worlds for a very long time. What is the place of a critic who's mainly looked at live work in this time now, when everything's going digital?

Roslyn 24:15

You're actually the first person who’s asked me this. And it's a very interesting question. The answer is, I think, none of us know. It's such a new moment for all of us. My colleague, Brian Seibert, just reviewed a piece by Rambert that was premiered online. I think it's in in today's paper, or maybe it came out yesterday.

And I read it with great interest because the questions that you are asking me I am asking myself. How, how do we approach this now? If we are going to be reviewing online, what are our criteria? And are they different? And I don't really know, I haven't done it yet. I haven't written a review of an online piece. I feel like this is just starting to happen. I think that the first months of the pandemic, there was a lot of dance online. But it wasn't new. It was work that people had and could find to put online.

Sze Wei

It was documentation, essentially.

Roslyn 25:06

It was documentation. And I did write something about that. But that was, it's really a different approach, writing a review from scratch, this is a new work. And this is the way in which I'm watching it. And that is a completely different way. I think we all going to have to just feel our way. I'm not sure what the answer is.

There’s the other question as well, that I think raises itself that is very difficult for a critic, and that is, how critical can I be in a pandemic, when everyone is struggling? Companies are struggling, dance artists are struggling, the entire arts economy is in crisis. Can I say that something is no good, or not very good? You know, I think that's very difficult. Because you feel so admiring of the fact that these organisations are managing to find a way to make a plan, to have new projects. It's so, it's so difficult for them.

Sze-Wei

Absolutely.

Roslyn

And, you know, one feels so much empathy for them. So there are a lot of questions raised by the circumstances in which we find ourselves now. And I don't feel that I have any ready answers, but I think they are, they are all questions and issues that critics are going to have to think about quite hard.

Sze-Wei 26:16

I'm definitely carrying a lot of that with me. It's an interesting time, I think a lot of us are trying to figure out if it's a different eye, that we have now.

Roslyn

Yes, yes.

Sze-Wei

So I was thinking as a treat for our listeners, if we could just go to talking about our different approaches on how we put movement into words, like what are your strategies? And I'm happy to share mine as well.

Roslyn 26:43

This is the most difficult part of dance writing, I think. How do you put movement into words? How do you make it visceral, tangible, kinetic for people? I don't know that I exactly have a strategy. But what I do when I'm watching a dance piece is I try to write down adjectives for what the movement feels like. So verbs, so it could be simply: jerky, truncated, staccato, let's say if the movement looks like that. Or fluid, wave-like, oscillating. You know, I just try and write descriptions, in my note taking.

And one thing we haven't discussed, actually, which is people's different practices in how they watch a dance piece. I take a lot of notes, I essentially write incessantly in the dark, in a notebook, throughout the entire piece, which I'm sure is perhaps a bit annoying for my neighbours. But that's just my way, I don't necessarily use those notes, although sometimes I go back and look at them. But it's a way for me of fixing the performance in my head and concentrating. And also writing down things that sometimes you forget, like, the colour of the costumes, or the backdrop, or what things look like. Because sometimes you're so focused on trying to, let's say, work out what the kinetic feel of the movement is that you actually forget to look at that stuff.

So I take a lot of notes, and one of the things I've always try and put in the notes is descriptions of the actual dancing. And that is much, much harder than you might think it is. Sometimes you can have a shorthand like balletic, or Martha Graham-like contractions, or you can use shorthand known to you.

But in your writing, I think it needs to be simpler and clearer than using a kind of dance jargon or idiom. So at the New York Times anyway, we presume a non-specialist audience, even though probably most of the people reading a dance review are going to be people who are interested in dance, you want to work on the assumption that no technical knowledge is needed.

So you would never say a Cunninghamian use of the space or something like that. You would rather describe what that is, which is difficult to do in 400-word review. But you will try to find some shorthand for that. So that's not a very clear answer. But all I can say is that I try to get in, in every review, I try to have some feel for the quality and look of the movement, what it feels like physically. What about you? How do you approach that?

Sze-Wei 29:10

I'm also a mad scribbler. And we were having some jokes in our sort of little dance critics group network that we have here in Singapore that we need to organise a kind of embarrassing exhibition of critics’ notebooks and the kind of things that we put into them.

Roslyn 29:25

Yes! I could contribute to that.

Sze-Wei 29:27

Illegible scrawls all one on top of another. So I scribble a lot, but for me, it's images. I started with words, even before dance, I will get a sentence, which is like sort of metaphorical. I guess I remember one of the first reviews I put out, it's just on my own blog, was boxing rings for butterflies. And it was a balletic performance.

Roslyn 29:48

Yes, that's great. It's a very nice analogy.

Sze-Wei 29:51

So it's very much sort of images in words. Like a separate, a separate image that came out of the image that I saw, I guess. But what I love so much about writing dance and reading dance, I guess like interpreting dance in that way, is that associative possibility. I guess even more than, than what we might get in theatre because the text weighs very heavily on our interpretation, but that dance associations that we can take from the visual images, from the quality of movement are so much more open and sort of horizontal in that way. So that's where I work from.

So thank you so much, Roslyn, for that fantastic conversation.

Roslyn 30:27

It's a pleasure. It was very nice to talk about dance. It's not – in an in-depth and in a niche-y sort of way that I'm not often allowed to do.

Sze-Wei 30:41

I'd like to thank again Roslyn for joining us on the Making a Scene podcast. This series is produced by Esplanade Theatres on the Bay, Singapore's national performing arts centre. Look for more episodes of Making a Scene at esplanade.com/offstage and on Spotify and SoundCloud. Thanks for listening and stay tuned for more inspiring conversations with art makers.