

Contemporary Dance during Lockdown



Friday 13 November 2020

Event page: <https://dajf.org.uk/event/contemporary-dance-during-lockdown>

On 13th November 2020, the Daiwa Foundation hosted a webinar on the subject of “Contemporary Dance during Lockdown.” The speakers were Alistair Spalding, Artistic Director and Chief Executive of Sadler’s Wells, and American-born Japanese contemporary dancer Fukiko Takase.

Speaker: Alistair Spalding

Mr Spalding’s talk addressed three main points - the initial effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the theatre, efforts to keep the theatre alive, and speculations about the future. He started his speech with a flashback to March 2020, when theatres were told to close for what was initially a three-week period. This short period has now stretched into eight long months of closure and is the longest that Sadler’s Wells has been closed in its history since WW2. He explained how theatre is something that brings people together and so a pandemic such as this has had a devastating effect. Specifically, there has been a deep psychological effect on many performers who have lost work. Furthermore, Sadler’s Wells was heavily financially dependent on people coming into the theatre, with 80% of its revenue coming from ticket sales and bar purchases. That loss has been critical, and they have had to take advantage of the furlough scheme, with 90% of their staff on furlough, and pay cuts at various levels. They have also been successful in applying for an Arts Council Grant and to the Government for funds and this has kept the organisation going. Fundraising has also played a part in managing to retain some of the organisation’s income. Mr Spalding estimated that the organisation can survive until March on this basis.

Mr Spalding explained how Sadler’s Wells turned their efforts to the digital sphere after live, in-person performances were prohibited. He stressed, however, that the organisation wished to stand by the same values as previously and not change direction completely. At the start of the crisis, efforts focused on existing productions, with weekly Facebook premieres so that customers could view the full-length works in the organisation’s catalogue. Next, online dance classes were introduced, which Sadler’s Wells does not usually do, but which it considered important during the lockdown. The classes focused on people over sixty who,

during the first lockdown, needed to focus on moving and keeping healthy. These classes proved incredibly popular, with millions of views worldwide.

The next step for Sadler's Wells was creating new content. Mr Spalding showed us an excerpt of "Jonzi D & Jessica Care Moore - Our Bodies Back," a work made in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. This project was an example of how a quick response, which is usually not possible in the theatre due to long rehearsal times, preparation, and scheduling, was possible in the digital sphere. Working online enabled Sadler's Wells to commission Jonzi D, the Artistic Director of their Breakin' Convention festival, to make a work in response. Jonzi D chose to use a poem by the American poet Jessica Care Moore titled "We Want Our Bodies Back" which focused on the female response to the Black Lives Matter movement. In this piece, the soundtrack is the poem, and it has proved to be a very powerful piece of work which has received over 46,000 views so far.

The next project Sadler's Wells focused on was "Dancing at Dusk - A moment with Pina Bausch's The Rite of Spring." This famous work was due to premiere in Senegal, with 38 dancers cast from across the African continent. Unfortunately, the pandemic stopped the premiere and therefore prevented the European tour that was due to follow. Fortunately, on the third run of the piece in Senegal, a documentary film maker who was following the process of the creation filmed a performance of The Rite of Spring on a beach. This was only the third time it had ever been performed, but it captured the piece, which could not be performed at Sadler's Wells. All content up until this point had been free of charge, but customers were charged £5 to view this piece and the project was very successful, with 186,000 views. Mr Spalding noted how this project was an example of how you could turn a disaster into something more positive.

Mr Spalding then went on to discuss live performances. He explained how Sadler's Wells is planning some socially-distanced performances. At present, government guidelines mean that theatres must cut down capacity to around 30%, and in Sadler's Wells's case that means about 430 seats instead of 1500. Mr Spalding explained how efforts for these performances to go ahead are not only to build confidence in customers coming back to the theatre environment but also to provide dancers with the chance to perform. A recent performance by the Birmingham Royal Ballet was a huge success and was possible due to detailed guidelines about how dancers could work and form bubbles together. He explained how planned performances with the English National Ballet had been cancelled due to the second lockdown, but lockdown has taught the theatre to be flexible in terms of cancellation. Sadler's Wells is hoping that they can show work over the Christmas period as this is usually the biggest period of income for the theatre. A production of "The Little Match Girl", which is usually performed in a small theatre of only 200 seats will hopefully be shown in the main house so that it is both feasible financially and still a nice offer for customers.

Mr Spalding noted that the future of the theatre is all hanging on the hope of a vaccine. He explained that, while socially distanced performances are possible, returning to the old normal is not possible without a vaccine being rolled out into the population. He hopes that by the early summer we may be able to return to the normal world. At present, there is a backlog of productions that will have to be rescheduled. Furthermore, in the past ten years Sadler's Wells has invested around £4 million into artists and companies, but until they can start earning money again at the box office these will have to be put on pause and this will have a knock-on effect for the whole sector. Mr Spalding explained how freelancers have also been hit by this pandemic, with 70% of workers involved in performing arts in the UK being freelancers. Some of these workers have received support from government schemes, but it is estimated that around 36% of freelancers have had no support at all. He argued that this is a huge issue because many of these workers may leave the profession if they cannot get work.

To conclude, Mr Spalding stressed that we have an innate need as human beings to gather and enjoy something together and that, while Sadler's Wells will continue digital work in the

future, live experience is the most important. He hopes that the new world for the theatre will look like the old one that we loved before the lockdown.

Speaker: Fukiko Takase

Ms Takase started by talking about her upbringing and career. She was born in New York and raised in Japan, and started dancing at the early age of two due to the influence of her mother. She explained that as her mother was a single parent, Ms Takase was always taken to her mothers' workplaces, be they studios or theatres. While she became rebellious in her teenage years, dance was what always kept her on the right track and provided her with a purpose in life.

She started choreographing for dance competitions when she was fourteen years old, with her first piece only a minute and a half in length. This length gradually increased as she created solo work each year and she became a regular winner in competitions. This allowed Ms Takase to develop her own language and also became a form of therapy for her, as she could express emotions that could not be released in any other form. She explained that dancing was a language that she knew before she could even speak.

This progress enabled Ms Takase to receive a Cultural Affairs Fellowship from the Japanese government to study at the Codarts Rotterdam Dance Academy and London Contemporary Dance School. She joined Henri Oguike Dance Company and danced for Oguike for four and a half years before freelancing for seven months and working with Akram Kahn and Russell Maliphant for short projects. She joined Wayne McGregor in 2011 and danced for him for eight years, and explained that, while the work and travel were extremely challenging, she was very blessed to work so hard during her 20s and 30s as this provided discipline for her body. She plans to tell her future children stories of performing in the Opera Garnier in Paris, the Joyce Theatre in New York, the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, and Sadler's Wells in London.

Alongside her busy career, Ms Takase has always worked as a choreographer. Her first full-length work was 'Landing' in 2009, an ensemble piece in collaboration with Semay Wo (a cellist) which also included her mother dancing as well. Ms Takase then listed various pieces she had choreographed:

- 'Autumn Hunch' was commissioned by the New National Theatre, Tokyo. This was a funky romantic duet about time, performed with Ronald Wiser.

- 'Cultivate a Quiet Joy' was inspired by the poet Kenji Miyazawa and premiered in Kings Place, London, in 2013. This was a short male solo performed by Mbulelo Ndabeni. This was then extended into a 20-minute duet performed for Nippori Sunny Hall, Tokyo.

- In 2015 Ms Takase performed in Draft Work at the Royal Opera House, and this particular work took over three years to develop. She explained how she remembered creating this piece after the creation of 'Atoms' with Wayne, and on her days off.

- 'Measuring the Heavens' is a piece about gravity, in collaboration with Kensaku Satou (a traditional Japanese taiko drummer) and the piece premiered in Yokohama Kenmin Hall at the Yokohama Ballet Festival.

Ms Takase then explained how, since 2013, she has been featured in music videos, TV programmes and TV commercials, (Uniqlo, TOYOTA, Diner's Club Card). One of her successful pieces was 'End of Line', which was created to be performed in a gallery space. She collaborated with Polish artist Goshka Macuga, composer Mira Calix and dancer Mbulelo Ndabeni and the piece premiered at the David Roberts Art Foundation at the opening of the Frieze Art Fair in 2017, followed by a number of performances at the Lowry Gallery, Manchester.

(<https://vimeo.com/user15347954>)

Ms Takase then referred to one of her most well-known appearances, in the music video 'Ingenué', by Atoms for Peace, in which she performed a duet with Thom York. At the time she had little knowledge about Radiohead so she had no idea what impact this piece would have. This video has provided many new opportunities for her, one of them being to work with Hikaru Utada, a singer, song-writer and producer.



Ms Takase had the opportunity to choreographer Hikaru Utada's music video 'Forevermore', in which Hikaru performed contemporary dance for the first time. She explained that Hikaru Utada was very hard-working and that she was very impressed with her professionalism. It was also inspiring getting to know her because of their similar upbringings. She also choreographed for and performed with Hikaru for her debut 20th anniversary concerts, the "Laughter in the Dark" Tour.



(<https://www.instagram.com/p/CElaLFBg8Gk/>)

Ms Takase explained how she became an independent artist so that she could focus more on choreography, but also because she wanted to explore the possibilities of dance and find a different version of herself as an artist and as a person. One of her most extreme experiences was performing 'Cut Piece' by Yoko Ono, which was first performed by Ono herself 50 years ago at MoMA in New York. She performed this at the opening of Yoko Ono's exhibition in October 2019 at the Ruskin Gallery in Cambridge, UK. This performance involved wearing a black dress, designed by the Greek designer Thenasis Babanis especially for the performance. She walked up on stage, said "My body is the scar of my mind" and sat down in front of the scissors in the gallery. Audience members were then invited to use those scissors to cut off pieces of the dress and this continued until she was completely disrobed by the audience. She sat for 90 minutes in the same position, in complete stillness. The more naked she became the more powerful she felt and by the end she felt that she was the most powerful being in the room. Ms Takase explained how it was a liberating and unexpected experience that has changed the way she sees the world.

Ms Takase then referred to one of her commissions from last year, '1001', which premiered at The Lab Theatre, Minneapolis, USA. The work was lightly inspired by the animation 'Ghost in the Shell' and she created a 30-minute solo piece, in collaboration with Emmy Award winning composer Dustin O'Halloran and Lighting Designer Dr Yaron Abulafia. The collaboration was very successful due to the sense of artistic understanding between the collaborators, and as the three collaborators were in different countries until two days before the premiere, they managed to collaborate remotely even before the pandemic. She also hosted the first audition of her life in Berlin for 'Don Juan Techno Club.' She explained that this was strange, as she had never been on the side of the auditioner. The work was inspired by the Opera 'Don Juan' and was written by producer Rainer Menniken. Ms Takase noted how the audition was very important for the production as she only had two and a half weeks to create a 90-minute piece from scratch.



Ms Takase explained that, although she has achieved much, she still believes there is a lot to come. She explained that one of the greatest qualities of being a dancer and choreographer is the lack of hesitation to travel and move around the globe because dance is a universal language. She has been trying to balance her base between London and Tokyo for the last couple of years since she became an independent artist, because she feels as though she has neglected her own country. She stated that this balance has allowed her to feel reconnected to her Japanese roots again.

Ms Takase then went on to discuss the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on her projects. She explained how she was initially disheartened due to the cancellation and postponement of many projects, including the cancellation of '1001' at Kennedy Centre in Washington DC. She also noted the uncertainty regarding her financial situation and that she initially suffered a lack of motivation due to being trapped in her room. She then moved on to digital platforms to express herself and began teaching, collaborating, and training through Zoom. She explained that her favourite class was an Instagram Live by Merce Cunningham Trust, because she could participate without having physically to be in New York. She stated that her most interesting experience was working with Shobana Jeyasingh for her R&D through Zoom. There were six dancers participating, and initially she did not know what to expect. She explained, however, that she was really inspired by hearing Shobana say "I don't think we should stop because the world has stopped" and that those words provided her with the motivation and drive to carry on. (https://www.instagram.com/p/B_h7OpQH4K3/)

Ms Takase also went on to explain how the lockdown has allowed her to study musicals and opera which are something she had been interested in. (https://www.instagram.com/p/CHAtOB_gNHL/). She also participated in Chisato Katsura's "DistDancing" over the summer, which was a socially-distanced performance at Hoxton Docks that allowed the possibility of a live performance.

Ms Takase explained that she has been very fortunate to have the option of travelling to Japan to keep working. She was in Japan for 2 months over the summer and performed and toured in Yokohama, Nagano and Kyoto with the production SIVER. Following the government guidelines, seats were socially distanced, and it was compulsory for audience members to wear face masks for audience members. Temperatures were checked and disinfectant was provided upon arrival. She noted that ten shows were completed without any infections. (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CD242ihAIHH/>) She created a new solo work 'A Mirror of Saraswati' for this production and this was her second time collaborating with the Japanese taiko drummer Kensaku Satou. In this piece she danced as the Hindu Goddess Saraswati. She noted how the premiere performance of this piece in Togakushi Nagano was particularly memorable as Togakushi is a very spiritual place with many shrines and a deep connection to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu.

Ms Takase explained how while it was strange at first to perform to a masked audience, she has now begun to understand how to read the expressions of the audience and stressed that "eyes are the window of one's soul." She misses being in the theatre, and the thrill of the curtain lifting is irreplaceable. She hopes we will be back in the theatre soon and can celebrate the beauty of life and freedom of expression without a screen in between us all. She believes that the current restrictions placed on the arts encourage us to be creative and as we are all experiencing this pandemic together, the arts have played a big role in healing and inspiring people to have faith in a better tomorrow.

Question and Answer Section

Q: Can both of you comment on how dancers have survived through this period?

Fukiko Takase: I and many other dancers have applied for funding via the Arts Council and the Dance Professionals Fund. Many dancers have also turned to teaching on Zoom, which has been quite successful.

Alistair Spalding: I think it depends. We have a young associate who is sadly doing two jobs working in a school and a café just to survive. Many people slipped through the net and this shows the necessity for another way going forward in terms of support. These people are part of the talent pool and the reason we can all do what we can, so we need to be looking after them sufficiently.

Q: Do you have any positive messages for the next generation who want to have a career in performing arts?

Fukiko Takase: I believe that things will return to normal and that we must be patient. However, I do feel for the younger generation. When you learn something on Zoom you have no spatial input and so I do worry because spatial awareness is so important for dancers. My advice would be to utilise this time and absorb what you can from digital platforms. It is also important to train as well and as many dancers are teaching right now through Zoom it is a great opportunity to absorb really good information from people you admire. Focus on the positives and learn as much as you can.

Alistair Spalding: This is a real challenge because for young people who have recently graduated there has been a huge gap. When we get back up and running, we must take care of those people who are in that gap and offer them opportunities whenever we can.

Q: How does teaching dance on Zoom work, given that the pupil is often moving around and not necessarily facing the screen?

Fukiko Takase: I try to demonstrate as clearly as possible so that my pupils can see my whole body. I try to be specific when I teach children, and often call their names to ensure they are still present and focused. I also use fast-tempo pieces to keep their attention. It is more important to do than to explain. To be honest, it has not been easy, but I am trying my best.

Q: Which online initiatives do you think will continue when the world begins to return to normal?

Alistair Spalding: One of the things we have realised with these online initiatives is their international reach. Up to 80% of our views are coming from abroad, and I think online performances will continue for this reason. The main issue, however, is funding. Firstly, the production needs to be in a theatre so that it can then be distributed. In this environment it is also harder to bring dancers together from all over the world, and travel restrictions add another layer of complications.

Q: When you encounter a traditional dance style, do you ever feel like incorporating that into your modern dance style?

Fukiko Takase: That depends on the artistic vision. I will use that input if it comes from my heart, but it must be genuine. If it inspires me and it is my own voice, then I would love to incorporate it and I am proud of my country and its beautiful culture, so I am open to including more Japanese influences. I want to do it organically, however, and not to force it.

Q: Could you tell us about your performances in Japan next month?

Fukiko Takase: These will be a set of collective performances celebrating the birth of Eguchi Takaya, the founder of modern dance in Japan, who was my mother's mentor for many years. My mother was part of an organisation called Gendai Buyou ("Modern Dance"), so it is a kind of home-coming performance for me. I will perform the first part of the 30-minute solo for "1001". It will be in Tokyo on Christmas Day.

Q: Could you tell us about your mother's dance style and whether that has given you any advantage when you have completed serious, intense work with Wayne, even from an athletic point of view?

Fukiko Takase: My mother was a rebel and as a child she told me many amazing stories of the 70s and 80s, and so I am still inspired by those. She always pushed me to be physical and not work so much in narratives. She was very abstract and was always doing something completely different from everyone else in Japan.

Q: Is there any prospect of kabuki at Sadler's Wells?

Alistair Spalding: I love kabuki and we have presented a number of productions throughout the time that I have been at Sadler's Wells. However, it does depend on funding from the Japanese side because kabuki is very expensive to create. In recent years, those sponsorships have dried up on the Japanese side. We are determined to bring some again because it is such a beautiful art-form that has great influence. A lot of artists really do soak up the influences of Japan and kabuki, and new forms are being created out of these conjunctions of style. Furthermore, the kabuki style itself is something that needs to be kept alive.

About the Speakers

Alistair Spalding:

Alistair Spalding is Artistic Director and Chief Executive of Sadler's Wells. He has been responsible for the artistic programme at Sadler's Wells since February 2000, when he joined as Director of Programming, before becoming Artistic Director and Chief Executive in October 2004. Under his tenure, Sadler's Wells has become a world-leading dance house that offers an ambitious programme of dance in all its forms and presents first-class UK and international artists and companies. In 2005, Alistair announced that Sadler's Wells was to become a producing house. He has since driven the commissioning, producing, and co-producing of more than 170 shows, including acclaimed cross-art form collaborations *Sutra* and *milonga*, and William Forsythe's *A Quiet Evening of Dance*. Between 1994 and 2000, Alistair was Head of Dance and Performance at the Southbank Centre in London. In January 2019, he was honoured with a lifetime achievement award by the ISPA (International Society for the Performing Arts) in recognition of "unique lifetime achievement that has enriched the international performing arts".

Fukiko Takase:

Fukiko Takase is an American-born Japanese contemporary dancer. Born in New York, she was raised in Japan by dancers Takako Takase and Katsuko Orita, growing up in studios and theatres. She received the Cultural Affairs Fellowship from the Japanese government study at Codarts Rotterdam Dance Academy and London Contemporary Dance School. She worked with Henri Oguike Dance Company, Company Wayne McGregor, and afterwards became an independent solo artist. Fukiko has been featured in dance films, commercials, and collaborated with artists including Olafur Eliasson, Goshka Macuga, Bertil Nilsson, Nick Knight, Ruth Hogben, Gareth Pugh, Dustin O'halloran, and Yaron Abulafia. She performed Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, was featured in Thom Yorke's music video 'Ingenué', and choreographed the music video 'Forevermore' by Hikaru Utada. She choreographed for and toured Japan with Hikaru Utada for her 20th-anniversary concert *Laughter in the Dark Tour*. During the lock down she performed as a guest dancer for a DistDancing canalside performance in London. Her signature work *1001* is scheduled to be performed in Tokyo in December. She continues to work between Tokyo, London, and across the world.