

Fringe of Colour Films 2023: Mele Broomes

Q&A

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With Mele Broomes and Jess Brough

Jess Brough: I'm just going to go ahead and invite Mele to join me down here. Thank you so much. Mele, you look amazing.

Mele Broomes: Thank you.

Jess Brough: Just spectacular. Okay, before we start, I just want to sink in this moment for a second. Grin was something I became aware of when you first were showing it at the Fringe. I couldn't make it that year, and I feel like until you submitted the film, I just felt like I'd really missed something important. And so it feels incredibly special to be able to sit here and talk to you about this work. Before we get into it, I also just want to make it really clear. The film had so many amazing things with sound and light, but it was a spectacular thing. So I always forget this part. Um, I'm Jess Brough. I'm one of the co-directors of the festival. Mele, how are you? How do you feel just having seen that with all of your friends and in this room?

Mele Broomes: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. It's actually quite emotional because that film was made up. Well, actually, the work was a theatre piece, and it was made at a particular time. And I'm so intense when I watch that. I'm like, I'm such an intense human being. And that was a really intense moment in my life. And a lot of it was around very, very intense conversations at a particular period. And then watching the film, I'm really rooting for the artists and myself and the conversations that we had, and also realising the time that we had. We made that in lockdown. The time, the capacity, all the things that were going on. And I can feel it. I can feel the clunks in it. I feel the power in it. So at the moment, I'm just like just hate. Let's take a moment because I'm there going like this, and then sat there watching it, like doing a back bend whilst watching the work. So, yeah, I feel a lot of feelings.

Jess Brough: Wow. I mean, does it feel different seeing it on the screen now, as it would have when you were watching it as theater performance? What is that difference like for you?

Mele Broomes: It was made in 2017, and when we presented it, I think it was last year, it's evolved anyway, like, in terms of the artists and myself really understanding what the work means to each other having agency over it, understanding what improvisation improvisation scores means to each other. Watching in a film, it's got a different feeling altogether. You can't feel exactly what's going on with Lebbly and Divine and everyone's going to take that in different ways. Um, when it's in real life and they finish, I'm running to this to the wherever

they are, because I don't know what kind of emotional state I am in. They are in so, yeah, it doesn't necessarily don't necessarily feel some of that energy that they're sharing in real life. It feels to me, it's got this, like a different kind of electric feel to it, like an embodiment.

Jess Brough: I'm really interested in that thing that you just said about wanting to run and be with them, because I'm sure I'm not making assumptions here. I feel like for you, Mele, the work that you do, collaboration is such a key part of it. You're always working with people, you're always bringing people together. So maybe you can tell us a little bit about the process of the collaboration on this film and what it was like. I'm always getting this wrong. I did practice choreographing, but also giving them the freedom to work with what you're giving them. Can you tell us a little bit about that collaborative process?

Mele Broomes: Yeah, actually, originally I was in this work, so we danced together, and I had a set of scores, and then choreographies but then there was a learning between each other about what type of style or movement that we like to embody and don't like to embody or, like, challenge or something like that. So all three of us have different experiences as individuals, but also in physicality. And when we first did it, it was challenging. Not that we were having a challenge against each other, but to go, how does that movement feel? By the time we got into the second year, that movement had become more and more embodied and was less and less of a physical kind of tension. So I created these set, choreographies, in a very emotional kind of response. And then particularly at the end with the last track, the sound score is made by Patricia Panther. And we had quite an intense backward and forward nighttime WhatsApp voice note in with that score. Uh, what's actually quite funny when we did the what's it called? Talking Heads, like, when I go, I am DA, I do RA. She came into this space and she sent me a voice note, and she said she didn't know whose music it was that they were doing the Talking Heads to. And I was like, it's yours. It's ours. She forgotten because it was so raw. And I think it just took such a period of time. But the music at the end is by, like, an evolving improvisation band or group or something called SPAZA, which is through a label called Mushroom Hour, Half Hour, based in Johannesburg, though people from different places, and I've worked with, that music label in kind of different capacities. And that score, that track, is an improvisation. So they have done a set with a recording studio, and that is an improvisation. And of course, it's gone to post production to tidy up and put it together. So that scene is an improvisation. And I've given a very loose direction, and even the direction I give Leby and Divine, don't listen to what I'm saying. At the end, I'm like, Just bring it back. Just bring it back. And they just go in and they're like, no, if I want to go down, I'm going down if I feel the depth. But I was trying to let them know that maybe you want to bring the lightness to it. But I recognise I don't have that choice, actually. It's their choice, so I allowed them, just do what is that you need to do, and I'll be there on the other side to grab you. But they actually finally walk out, they change their gear. They're like, Hi, thank you for coming. I'm like, yeah.

Jess Brough: As a director, that's an incredibly generous thing to be able to give to dancers as well, to just be like, let me just let the process be the process for them and let it be beautiful. I feel like I can still hear the music. The music is phenomenal. I mean, Patricia, I don't know what state of mind she was in when she did that, but my heart is kind of still beating along with that final, well, with all of the music and with that final track, I cannot believe that was an improvisation. And it just goes to show, like, the kind of artists that you are, Mele, you have these really incredible and meaningful relationships, working

relationships with all these incredible artists. And it came together so beautifully with this film. And just because we were talking a bit about the music, something that I thought was quite interesting is how we explained what we're listening to through the captions. And I know that you kind of collaborated with Sarya Wu on that so that they would get it right and sort of explain. Well, I don't want to over explain what I would love to talk about, but what was that process like of working with a captioner? Ah, to caption something that isn't dialogue. It's it's feeling, it's it's description of of the sounds. Maybe you can tell us about that.

Mele Broomes: Yeah, I didn't work as much as I would like to, but it was in dialogue. But I think the main thing is that there's so many perspectives, so there shouldn't be one. So if there's going to be that described, I would also like to question or, like, why did you say that? Why did you think that? Oh, I think that because of this. Just there to be as many people as you can. Of course, that's not always as easy, but it was to have that little bit of a backward and forward so the perspective wasn't coming from one person. And I think particularly when I've been working, um, in that capacity, things that were described with music, particularly like Black music, particular types of Black music, were described in a particular way. That. It was like, why is it jazzy? Is that jazz? Does that sound like jazz to you? Doesn't sound like jazz to me. So it was like just wanting to be there in that bit. And then also with describing movement, like deciding what a movement was called. And I was like, I prefer that a movement hasn't got a prescribed name to a technique, rather than just describe what you think that you see. Rather than I've had an experience where someone said a particular yoga, Asana, or like a particular dance technique. And I was like, oh, well, not everyone knows what that is. And actually that isn't that. Because as many an Asana pose also can be like, that might look like an Asana pose, but someone else is doing with a different intention. So it's just to have a varied perspective. Not that mine is the right one, it's just to have a varied one.

Jess Brough: Sometimes the concrete naming of a thing is less accessible than the feeling of it. Um, yeah, that makes total sense. We start the film. When I first watched this, I was really taken in by the way that you present what looks like it's like the Glasgow skyline at night. That's what I thought we were looking at. I thought we were seeing a cityscape at night. You're nodding. Yeah, it wasn't just me. That's just geniously done. I mean, it was just so beautiful. And then obviously these figures come out of that light and you realise that you're not looking at what you think you're looking at. What was it about that play with light that interested you? We start there. And light is obviously such a fundamental part of the film, and I'm sure of the original performance, too. Tell us about the light in the movement.

Mele Broomes: I think I really enjoy how you can manipulate costume and movement so that the viewer also has a choice of what they think they might have been seeing and just this creating a transformative sort of space or something. And that particular, um, material I actually saw in like, actually as a Vashanti in Leeds, and I was at Leeds Carnival, and these girls are just like, doing this thing with the pompom real far away, and I just was like that. I actually thought I was going to make a tracksuit. I thought I was trying to make a tracksuit, and then I was making something else with a designer that actually started to reference lots of other things particularly in West Africa. But that material allows me to shape so many visuals. Like when you walk in in real life, people would walk in, people would walk into the theater, into the auditorium, and they don't even know that Leby and Divine are like, on the

floor. And then all of a sudden they're like, and I guess it's about that visibility invisibility the choices that you make the choices, the way you choose to see something, the way you choose to not look at something, what you choose to focus on. And that also kind of leads into Divine's solo as well, what you choose to see, what you choose to make, how that makes you feel. And it's slow. Those things I know are really slow, actually. It's horrible. Sat in the audience because I'm like, sorry it's so slow, but watch it deeply.

Jess Brough: The slowness gave us that time to really look at and like come coming up with six, seven, eight different ideas of what we were seeing. We needed that time. That was necessary. Um, you made that noise from rising up. Something is going on there. These are two figures who are in dialogue with each other, right? I mean, not all the way through. We see one, we see the other, and we see them together. Can you tell us a little bit about what those figures represent to you?

Mele Broomes: Many things. I think I have to focus on Leby because I mainly spent an intense period with Leby on that opening that figure, because everything was based on a conversation. So, the conversation is seeded, but then the artist has the agency to choose how they want to talk about what they think about the materials, how they embody a material. And our conversations went between very fragile to a beast, to actually, there's something that KJ. Clark Davis wrote in one of the pamphlets that was a spin off from Grin and it was called Being Black in Public, which I feel all the time. And it was that how you're seen, but also the delicacy in between that. So to me, that costume represents the idea of someone seeing you as a beast, but also represents the delicacy and the subtlety and then the transformation you can make and the ownership you can have in this idea of a beast or something where somebody might see you as hard or aggressive. And that was our main conversation at that time.

Jess Brough: Mele, when you talk, I feel like I'm looking into your future. I feel like this is the only chance I'm going to get to talk to you about your work because at some point you're going to be off. It's going to be so hard to get you down. I mean, I could hear you talk for ages and I can't hear myself talk for ages. I'd love to give the audience a moment to ask a question, please. Don't be shy if you don't have one ready yet, I will continue, but I'd love to hear from you because the Q & A is for the audience and I will also repeat your question back for the microphone. So the question, for the mic was, has choice always been a part of your work? And how does that feel, to let go of that agency as a director?

Mele Broomes: Yeah, in most part, yes. But I have obviously experienced and been in different situations. Yes. Choice to me, is quite integral, because otherwise the artists that I'm working with I feel, don't hold a space in which they want to share or generosity is different. And I want to be in a space where generosity feels fun and nourishing. And rather than extrapolating something it's hard to say if I always been because that kind of changes. And I've also I guess before this work, I was in a different position where I was the performer in collaboration, and I had very little agency. And that really changed the idea of how I direct work, because I felt like I was told what to do, which is I guess you need that to an extent, like being held and held to be able to fit or think about a narrative. But you also need to be able to have that space and voice to say when something's too much or you're scared or you're tired or so on. So I try to do that. Um, but also, creating some boundaries is also

important. Otherwise, capacities of people can be quite hard to manage. Or, if you don't have some kind of limitations to things, then I feel like maybe people don't respect the things that they need for themselves, like sleep and eat and water. Yes, but I don't know if I'm answering your question right, but I think I try to do that. I think it's more authentic response to the way I like to make work. Even if I'm trying to create melody or dialogue, I'll listen to what I hear someone doing. I'll do the melody. I'll sing the melody. And, like, what about you think about that? No? You don't like that? So then, okay. Why would you try it? What do you want to share with me? Okay. You want to share me? That okay. I'll go off of that one. Some people want me to hold it more. So then I'll hold it more as much as I can. I can't hold it any more than that. Then maybe I'll ask somebody else to support me to hold that space.

Jess Brough: What I love about that question answer is that you flipped the question of agency on its head, and you really told us about how you respect the agency of the dancers. And that's so important, and it really comes through in the film. Does anybody else have a question? Yes. Thank you.

Mele Broomes: Hi. Yeah, I love that. I love a dream.

Jess Brough: I'm just going to repeat...

Mele Broomes: That dream swag all day long. It's my favourite work days.

Jess Brough: So the question is, what do you want for the film? For Grin? Where do you see it going in your dreams?

Mele Broomes: It's not the film for Grin. I respect and really happy with what we've produced in this. We didn't have very long, I can't even tell you. That was, like, jum-bum. Like, it was so quick. And I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to make that film again. But actually, it's a live work. But I respect this space of it because I learned that people there's lots of people that want to, um, listen and watch theatre through screen. So I'm like, that's so cool. Like, okay, now it can live and online, or work can happen in tandem between live and online. So that's really cool. But I would love this work. This work was made in 2017, 16-17. So it would be really nice to just share it in physical space to more people. And that's actually quite tricky. When the landscapes kind of changed. And then the way in which I guess when I was first doing it and thinking about how it's being produced and how that space can be hold me learning about what that means, what producer means, there was a lot of learning that was going on in that time. And who can hold that? Who wants to hold that? Who has the capacity? So I would really love for it to go on tour.

Jess Brough: Do you miss performing in it?

Mele Broomes: Is that another no, no, I'm good there.

Jess Brough: Well, thank you so much for your questions. And thank you so much, Mele, for your answers. This has been such a nourishing evening, even though I know this isn't the Nourish strand. I should have said something about being rooted. We're all rooted in this space together. Mele Broomes, everybody. Thank you so much.

