

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH ELSABET – July 2020

Ella Mesma talking to Elsabet Yonas– transcribed by

EM: Welcome everybody! We have here the beautiful, talented, amazing Elsabet Yonas! Welcome Elsabet!

EY: Thank you Ella, thank you for having me.

EM: So in this series of interviews with amazing women, women who were part of our video creation 'I Am All Womxn', we have invited 4 of those women to come in and just talk to us a little bit about who they are, about their magic, about what they're doing in the world, and I'm really excited to have Elsa join us, because I think she's such an inspirational human being. I met Elsa at Artists for Artists, and, then went on to invite her to be part of an R&D process which is such a gift, to have her in the studio. So welcome Elsa!

EY: Thank you Ella, what a beautiful little introduction! Thank you.

EM: So let's start with just hearing a bit about your journey, about how you got into hip-hop, what do you do for those who don't know you already?

EY: Sure. So, a little bit about me, I do generally just say that I'm a movement artist because I find it hard to categorise what it is that I do and what styles I use but, I my background is in hip-hop and other street dance styles so I tend to just bring them in to everything that I do. I teach quite a lot, I create for stage and for film, I've really discovered my love for film and dance on film in the last couple of years, so, yeah I teach, I share my work, a lot of what I do is driven by my desire to want to have some sort of impact socially, politically, the aim is always to create some sort of movement conversation. So yeah, I kind of got into dance in general through choreography, to be honest with you, it was choreography classes that I was going to, I fell in love instantly, and that led to a number of years under different crews - shout out Prototype, E-motionz and Definitives! We were learning a lot of choreography week in and week out so it was definitely these crews that laid out a foundation for me to build on.

EM: Awesome. And in terms of kind of, your movement style today you mentioned, I really relate to that as well of not wanting to be defined, maybe that's one of our missions as human beings is letting go of all of these boxes and all of these definitions...

EY: Mmmmm

EM: It would be really interesting to hear like, what hip-hop is for you, you know, if it was the first dance that you got into, yeah what does it mean to you as a style of movement?

EY: Right. The way in which I was introduced to movement, was less so in a freestyle format, and it was more so in learning technique through choreography, so I wasn't being taught hip-hop foundations or street dance styles, you know foundations as I am now for example with popping. But, I was picking up a lot of those techniques indirectly through learning choreography from teachers inspired by hip-hop. So my introduction to it as a style was never from a foundation point of view and I think, that made it hard for me to identify myself as a hip-hop dancer for a long time because even though the culture that I was heavily invested in and the music and the people were very hip-hop, I don't know that I would have been able to enter, for example, a hip-hop battle, and that my style would have been considered hip-hop. To be fair, I think that still rings true for today, even though I have now trained in more foundations, I think there's such a mix of styles in my movement

vocab, and that wasn't intentional, that's just the way that things have turned out, and I think depending on context, different people would look at my style and question whether there's contemporary in there, question whether I've ever trained foundations, question whether I've trained in popping, there's just a real pool of influences that have built up over the years. So, yeah I wasn't introduced to dance through hip-hop foundations, that was something that I really had to seek out for myself including useful information like names of steps etc so that I could have a solid understanding of the style, before being able to build on it. It was almost like I had to rewind a little bit, and learn those steps, learn those roots, so that even now I can understand how my movement is an evolution of those steps. Whereas before, I just wouldn't have known where they came from. So yeah, it's been quite a journey in doing that but it's been really worth it for me.

EM: Thank you Elsa. So, lets talk about your movement, because, you know, personally I think you're an incredible mover, and I really see that connection to many different styles, and in the piece that we are here for, 'I Am All Womxn', there's a really beautiful and powerful kind of very visceral way that you move, and also a connection to the words. Can you remember the words? The words that you move to?

EY: Oh god, me and lyrics, if you've ever been to any of my classes, you will know me and lyrics are not friends! But I do remember that the section I moved to was very spiritual, she speaks about being, almost being all things, so she says 'I am the earth, and in the sky, I am the answer to the questions why'. And then she goes on to say 'I am the conscience and the sub conscience minds intertwined', and I thought especially that line there, I found it super powerful. I remember reading that and that bit just resonating and being like, 'Ella I want this bit now'! In relation to my movement, I think I tend to no longer be super literal, so that's maybe one thing to mention. It's very much about how the content makes me feel, or how I can maybe encompass the essence of what it is that somebody is saying. In this case, it felt like simplicity and symbolism, which you'll probably see in my choices. Yeah it just felt symbolic, it felt like those lines, especially about the mind couldn't be literal because it's not tangible, and so it's quite hard to grasp, but yet it resonates on a deeper level, hence the choice of movement and the wanting to be aligned with this sense of infinite potentiality. So yeah, super powerful lyrics, I suppose I just tried to create based on how I felt the first time I heard it.

EM: You did a great job, and you know in terms of the piece that I worked with Elsa on, my own work, that was something I really loved about watching you as a dancer, you know, you get the dancers where they're kind of really in a movement and executing and you don't see the feeling, and with you I really feel like we also capture the feeling as well as your being a technician, as well as you having beautiful technique, the feeling really comes across, even through the camera. Like if we look at the first film that I saw that you had made, which was danced to...

EY: Was that 'Female Energy'?

EM: 'Female Energy'! Yeah by Willow Smith, beautiful.

EY: Thank you.

EM: Yeah so that's something really powerful about the way that you work is this, this energy, this emotion coming through your movement.

EY: Yeah, yeah. Thank you, that's really kind. I think it's just an extension of me as a person and it's not something that's super intentional, in fact it started to be picked up on externally and fed back to me before it was something that I was aware of. So I was made aware of that over time, and then I started to hone in on it a little bit more and understand that it's not maybe how everybody chooses to create and express themselves, which, makes all the sense to me that we're all so different in those choices but, yeah it's just the most natural way for me, no other way makes sense to be honest.

EM: So lets talk about that, like, you know, in terms of kind of like how you work and how maybe others work or like how you've experienced, perhaps that separateness? In terms of when you're working perhaps on the hip-hop scene, or you know in other dance communities, where is there that feeling of separation for you, or what is kind of the places where you would like to find more understanding of your way and others, yourself and others?

EY: That's a really great question. I think there's 2 things, I think, I realised, even though I spent so much time in the crews that I loved, completely, and they're family to me still, you know, dancing with these incredible people, even though everything was heavily choreography-based, it felt like there was a purpose behind it, whether that was, you know, connecting to one another in the group, or expressing ourselves through the music, it felt like we had a joint purpose and so it never felt like it was just steps. I think what I found hard was once I took a little step away to discover who I was as a mover, as an individual, I soon realised doing independent projects, whether that was taking part in somebody else's vision or trying to create my own, that there was a gap in how I wanted to create and how I was experiencing other people creating.

I soon realised that maybe things like the commercial world weren't suited for me, and even though I'd had, you know, so much training and been able to pick up choreography like that (clicks fingers), execute choreography, understand musicality, it's like I felt this skill set was actually not valuable to my career. Bare in mind this was an initial thought, it's not how I still feel now but, what still rings true is there is a disconnect there for me if I'm just learning steps, to just perform the steps. I don't feel that I am being of service, I don't feel like that is my purpose as a mover, and so, you know it's not just me, I think it resonates for those that seek those types of movers, they won't think of me and I won't think to put myself forward, it's a very mutual experience that I've had so far. So, I think that's one disconnect that I experienced, was in, you know, wanting to be a dancer or wanting to perform maybe with, I don't know, a musician or an artist, and realising that the people that were needed in those spaces... my skill set didn't seem to be, or who I am, and what I put out, just didn't seem to resonate there, so I learnt that very quickly.

The other thing I learnt when I was trying to create my own piece properly for the first time, was that people prefer to be told what to do! And I didn't want to create in that way, I didn't want to create in a way that was linear by creating the steps and asking you to regurgitate them. Even when I was working with people that I loved that are incredible movers, again there was a real disconnect there and I had a really hard time actually in that process, because it dawned on me very quickly that we were speaking two different languages, and that not everybody is willing to be in that kind of process where you're asking for a mutual 100% input.

Yeah, they were both two... they sound like really sad experiences. They were hard, they were useful, and they helped me understand the kind of creative I wanted to be, and actually that it was harder than I thought it would be. And I think for a while I thought that I was the problem, or you know, that there needed to be somebody to [blame in] that scenario, but actually working with you Ella, and working with others like yourself, it was a really affirming time for me to know that there are artists who create work in this way, and you just need to have the right people in the space, and you just need to have the team that's going to understand that creative process. And so, essentially it was just miscommunication, it was, you know, an assumption on my part, that things would work but, now I know that we're all speaking different languages and we need to get really clear on what language we're taking into the space, and see if we can all be fluent in it. So yeah, those two things have been massive lessons for me.

EM: Beautiful. So inspiring to hear Elsa. And language feels really important, like we've had lots of conversations about language, actually the solo that we made on you for 'Foreign Bodies: An Underwater Love Story' was kind of inspired by that... by language, by the idea of movement as another language, and by your experiences with language, so it'd be really nice to kind of talk a little bit about that, both in terms of, you know, is English your first language? Kind of your journey with English, like you know, I think when we listen to you we definitely think English is your first language and you speak with, a little bit of a London accent I think! What's your relationship to language, we also have talked a lot about like the language in terms of music, and in terms of the language of hip-hop, it'd be really nice to just hear your thoughts on language, and maybe you know the 2 languages that you spoke of, of kind of like, this way of working, this kind of, visceral way, of finding out and discovering what's in the space, vs kind of like, a language when you have the choreo and you set the counts? It'd be really nice to hear a little bit more about that, about your take on language.

EY: Sure. Yeah, sure. So definitely like in 'Foreign Bodies', I think that was a really good example of how to portray the way in which movement can be a language, and the way in which it can transcend oral language barriers, as well. I think, in terms of hip-hop, that was, so English isn't my first language, I moved to London when I was a kid, and I didn't speak a word of English, so I did learn how to speak it here. What I found, me and my brother found incredibly helpful, which I don't think we realised just how helpful it was at the time, we leant on hip-hop a lot, we used hip-hop music a lot because even though we didn't necessarily understand what we were saying, we would learn the lyrics and, phonetically we would learn the sounds and be able to reel off lyrics in that way, or try to write them down, half the time no idea what was going on! But that was quite literally, a gateway into British culture for me, and that evolved into a gateway into Black British culture, and into the world of Grime, and if you knew me as a teen, I drove my mum crazy because the only thing I listened to was Grime, and that was truly the only thing I listened to, for a long time. And so I think it was hip-hop musically that was a connection, it was almost like its own language, of course it was English, but it also didn't register in that way to me, like learning English (ABCDEFGH), was very different to me listening to a hip-hop track and trying to learn the lyrics, and so it made learning this language make more sense, it also made it more enjoyable, it also meant that I built a relationship with that genre of music from an early age, and I was somewhat dependent on it from an early age, and so as I say as it evolved into my love for Grime. It felt like these people were speaking on things that I couldn't

necessarily articulate. So it became hip-hop and Grime, like somebody was expressing me, and my lived experience as a Black person integrating into British culture, and integrating into Black British culture, it felt like somebody was expressing that experience for me, and probably at a time where I didn't really have the words to as well. So, musically hip-hop did that, you know, instantly before I even got into dance or got into learning hip-hop as a movement language, music in itself, had that impact.

When it comes to movement language, I think that's a tricky one to answer, but I think the simplest way that I can put it is that in speaking, there are so many limitations, and there are just so many barriers when it comes to this language. I teach for the British Red Cross, I teach for their young refugees, and most don't speak a word of English, you know, and it's an opportunity to make them feel welcome. I would have loved that when I was a kid, not speaking a word! It's an opportunity for them to feel welcomed and to have a point of reference for 'you are now a part of a community here', and I see, in the simplest way I can put it, I see how, in those sessions, languages that we're speaking don't matter at all, and I see how I can use movement as a language that transcends that you know, completely. And I've seen that over and over again, and it's been such a blessing to have that affirmed. And so yeah, that, that for me is the way in which hip-hop has definitely served as like this alternative universal language, even when I was struggling to understand the specificities of what it was trying to tell me.

EM: So beautiful, thank you. Totally moved by your words. I know another kind of, important person in this journey, you know, similar to kind of this hip-hop, almost like being a bit of a saviour at that time, is the Hot Brown Honey Collective, and that journey. It'd be really nice to just hear a little bit about, how you met the Hot Brown Honey Collective, and how that has kind of changed your life, because I think it's been really quite ground-breaking for you.

EY: Powerful. Yeah definitely, you are absolutely correct. Yeah, Hot Brown Honey is a collective of womxn of colour, mixed artistry, you know from dance to circus skills to beat-boxing. Created by Lisa Fa'alafi and Busty Beatz, so shout out to them both! In 2018 I was fortunate enough to apply and audition for a new show they were creating in London, called 'Hive City Legacy', and their callout was for 9 womxn of colour. They had tons of applications come through, it was such a privilege to take part in this, and it did Ella, it changed my life, it changed my perspective and my view on creating, on labelling yourself as a creator, on those boxes and those limitations that we place on ourselves, and not through them speaking about it, just through their being, and the way in which they created. I think it shattered a lot of those boxes for me, and labels that I had placed on myself. Hive City Legacy was a multidisciplinary cast as well, and it almost mirrored Hot Brown Honey in that way – womxn of colour, multidisciplinary, no limitations. The HCL motto is 'activate, pollinate, liberate', and it's political. It is hip-hop but it's also so many other things, and so I think the biggest impact that working with these womxn had was actually just looking at what happens when you give womxn of colour those positions within theatre, within movement, within music, within circus, you know. Not only had I never seen that before in a group, but to then be able to work under them, and see the kind of thing you create when you place these people in positions of power was just mind-blowing. Til' this day I've never been in a show like that and I've never seen a show like that either. I think that speaks to, unfortunately how, often, we still *don't* programme womxn of colour in these spaces. And so, it was a really empowering process for me and hip-hop, culturally, underpinned a lot of what we used to create the show from scratch. Because it was London stories and London based it was also an opportunity to bring in that Black

British culture and have conversations around how that may be different to Hot Brown Honey's experience as womxn of colour based in Australia, you know. Musically hip-hop was a huge part of that, movement-wise hip-hop was a part of that (led by Yami Löfvenberg) and yeah it was just overall an exciting and unique representation of womxn in hip-hop/theatre. That was a real dope experience for me.

EM: Yeah it's, I love that show, I still like, can get the music in my head... did you [create the movement yourselves] as well, like the whole company?

EY: Yeah everything was co-devised, everything was created from scratch within those weeks so, even that, just the sense of ownership that you can have in that creative process – again, I spoke Ella about how affirming *your* 'Foreign Bodies' R&D was for me, it was the same with 'Hive City Legacy'. It was like, 'ohhh I'm not crazy, like you can work with people that give, and you can work with people that give generously, and share their creativity generously for the purpose of the vision' you know, and so...

EM: A collective

EY: Yeah 100%. And it sounds obvious, but I had completely, you know after the experience that I'd had, I'd really doubted myself, I completely doubted myself as a creative leader. Just couldn't understand how it wasn't my fault, you know? And like landed on the fact that it must have been my fault. So having those experiences was priceless for me actually.

EM: So inspiring, and it's making me wonder about like, you know, if the future was female you know, what might it look like? I know that Hot Brown Honey, kind of they talk about that a lot, they say 'make way for the matriarchy'...

EY: That's right yeah

EM: ...A little bit about that, and in relation to you know, this creation we just made 'I Am All Womxn', what would the future look like if the future was female?

EY: Oh wow that's a beautiful question. I think it's important that we continue to ask that question, both through work that we put out, and conversations. I think the fact that there are so few women in positions of power, still, not just within, you know, the arts, but across industries and within actually most job sectors, I think the point is that we haven't seen what it would look like, and that is a shame. If we look at the state of a lot of environments and spaces, especially within the arts at the moment that speak to that, I think there's so many limitations, and there is so much regurgitating of the same narratives and the same work, I don't know how we haven't all just gone on strike, it's so boring to see the same thing, the same narrative being retold over and over again. It's also gonna start to get boring if, you know, the one or two women that you do give that space to feel pressured to, and responsible to then create work about female empowerment, whereas they might just wanna create work about whatever the hell they want to create work about, and they just so happen to be women. But there is a responsibility that comes from being employed or chosen, when you understand that you're a minority within that space, you don't necessarily feel entitled to create freely. You feel like, 'oh, shoot, this never happens, I am a woman, I am a Black woman, and I've been given this, you know, one opportunity that may not come around for another however many years, and maybe I'm at the National, no offence to the National that was just an example! But, you know, what if you just wanted to create a piece about, you know, an astronaut going to space, or about literally whatever the hell it is that creatively, you feel you wanna create, I know that a lot of people in that

situation are gonna feel pressured to create something around the fact that they are Black and the fact that they are a woman, and, as beautiful as that is, that's still the stage that we are at, and that's because there's not enough of us handing out those spaces and handing out those opportunities to more women.

I think that creatively, the spaces would just be so much more interesting, I think we would tap into creative processes that are more connected, more nurturing, more compassionate, spaces where people are heard more, and this is from the handful of experiences that I've had working with womxn, I've seen how creatively, whether it's to do with you know outreach work, or whether it's to do with creating a piece of theatre, I've seen how womxn listen to each other, I've seen the ways in which womxn communicate, I've seen how a lot of the ideas that come from womxn are so creatively different to what's already been done, and I don't think we realise the extent to which those voices have not been amplified for so many years, that we've just become accustomed to the existing narratives. We don't even realise, you know, these are narratives that are being led and devised predominantly by male voices, and that makes a difference, you know it makes a massive difference because they are gonna create from their lived experience. They are not womxn and so they're not gonna navigate the world in that way, so yeah I think we can continue to dream, but I'm positive that it will be a more nurturing, compassionate, diverse, creative space. Limitless, absolutely limitless.

EM: So empowering, it's so beautiful to hear you speak and kind of your vision for the world as well. But I'd like to finish with that, with kind of your vision for what next, both for you as an artist, and maybe, you know, connecting to the industry as well, kind of what would you love to see from the world and maybe you have a little offering for people watching this - what would you like to offer them?

EY: I think, as much as it's political, and hip-hop is political, and creativity can be political, I think what I'd like to offer is the reminder that something like hip-hop has also been a connecting thread for so many of us, and that sometimes that is what gets lost along the way, so whether you are part of that community, or whether you're an individual that just connects to hip-hop music or loves to watch hip-hop movement, whatever it is, whatever pillar it is that you resonate with or pillars that you resonate with, I think the reminder of disconnectedness and how that language can really transcend our differences and can be an opportunity to share and create from the same space. I would also really like to offer a reminder of listening to one another and an understanding that in order for us to evolve as a community and as a culture, that listening to one another and our different lived experiences is gonna be a huge part of informing the way in which we evolve, and that maybe a lot of its evolution has come about unconsciously, and so may we listen and communicate and be more intentional about how we want hip-hop as a culture and creativity as a culture to evolve.

EM: Beautiful. So inspiring, always Elsa, just summarising things with such heart in her words, such passion in her words. I think it's really beautiful as well, this idea that we don't always have to be political, we don't always have to be kind of, you know that maybe your service is in being you rather than feeling that you always have to do so much work, that you know, the gift is just in the beauty of your art sometimes, as well as that... I'm a massive fan at the moment of this idea of how can we use art as a hammer to shape the world? Art can also show heart to others, you know that art can, just by being art, just by having, you know like you said about the music, just being able to listen to music

sometimes is enough to take us out of our kind of, mundane or our beliefs or our subconscious minds.

EY: Absolutely, absolutely, and I think we spoke briefly about, you know that intersection of politics and spirituality and it almost feels that something like hip-hop for me can land right in the middle, you know right in the middle of both, and we have access to our relationship to it depending on what we need, you know in each moment or on that day, and something like a cypher, something like that circle and the freedom that we can define for ourselves within that circle is, that's spiritual and anybody who's ever felt that energy knows, that is spiritual energy right there, that is freedom.

EM: I found out actually, that the cypher in Arabic means zero, mathematically it kind of totals zero so it's like that, that idea that it's that point of connection, that point of nothingness and everythingness.

EY: Beautiful, beautiful, there you go. That's the perfect fact to end it on.

EM: Thank you so much Elsabet, it's been so beautiful to speak with you today and I can't wait to see the rest of your journey, you know, keep following Elsabet she has some amazing things coming up. Her socials are here with us now so click on the links, find out what she's doing and I will be watching too. Thanks so much Elsabet.

EY: Thank you so much for having me, so much love for you Ella, thank you.