

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH YAMI - June 2020

Ella Mesma talking to Yami "Rowdy" Lofvenberg'– transcribed by Hannah Robertshaw

Hi Yami, we have the amazing Yami with us today, how are you doing?

I'm doing good. It's a crazy world out there. Actually, it was something this morning that made me almost chuckle to myself a little bit; how many people came out at the beginning of this year saying this year "it's 20/20 vision". And then, actually everything happened and I thought, well you didn't see this one coming with that vision! But turning that around, 20/20 vision is where you see things clearly, we see things coming out in the light, the truth and we are opening our eyes that is the kind of true and real 20/20 vision.

And Yami, two days ago, you spoke live on Instagram about some really big issues that I think we're going to delve into a little bit more in this interview about women's voices being silenced in this industry. For me, there were tears listening and it was so inspiring to hear you speaking up and to have that invitation for other women to speak up.

Yes, definitely. I think coming from a black woman's perspective where I had my voice silenced for so long and constantly questioned about what I have to say, it's a topic for me that is very important.

I grew up in Sweden which is predominantly white, in the 80s. Black lives matter movements and race issues wasn't really a big thing like it is today and so racism was very much rife and unchecked. I learnt from a very young age that I was different by being black and subjected to countless racist interactions and racially abused for most of my life living in Sweden, and trying to overcome this I then when went into the hip-hop dance scene where I had to overcome the hurdles of being a woman in a male-dominated industry. And so, I had to find my voice and I had to find strength within myself because no one was giving me that strength to survive these encounters throughout my whole life. Being in the hip-hop industry as a woman and trying to progress, taught me that my voice is not going to be amplified by anyone else but myself, and like-minded people - but I didn't learn that until many years later.

Female voices have always struggled to be heard amongst the noise and this noise comes in different shapes and forms; whether it's a patriarchal system, whether it's white privilege, whether it's any sort of discrimination that disrupts our focus. So using these experiences, I decided that I'm not going to be silent and I'm going to be quite opinionated. I got the name 'Rowdy' (my stage name) I was told, (English is my second language), "this girl, she's too much", "she's too noisy", "she takes up space", "she comes in the circle and thinks she's all that". For me, loving dance and loving hip hop, I couldn't understand why people were saying these negative things about me. I realised in order to survive this negativity, I have to take this negativity and 'flip it and reverse it' (as Missy Elliott says.) So I took the

name Rowdy to take ownership. Yes I am here, I'm going to be all the loudness and in your face that I can be because you can't tell me what I can and can't do. That is my ethos and drive throughout my whole career and how I mentor others how to overcome difficulties. "Time to get Rowdy" is my mantra. The ethos of me saying "it's my time to do whatever I want"... it's time for all the women and underdogs to be rowdy and to do what the F they want. I always have this in my head and I fully believe in it, no matter what.

I've had countless of interactions that have put me down but have pushed me to be the person I am today. I'm lucky to have met women in my path who have amplified my voice and made me stronger. I'm part of an intersectional feminist cabaret circus hip hop group from Australia called Hot Brown Honey. They are a mixture of First Nation and black women from Australia who have gone through that same story and uses their voices and skills on stage to fight injustice, racism and for Women's rights on stages across the world. I was lucky to be part of their company and to have found my tribe. It's made me even stronger as an artist and trailblazer.

So you're an international artist can you tell me a little more about that?

I started my professional career by creating Sweden's first all-female dance company called 'Chutzpah Crew'. Chutzpah meaning, "so confident that it's almost too much". A few years after moving to the UK I Co-formed the first B girl crew called 'Flowzaic' and then a few years later the all female Popping and Locking crew 'Funkamental'. I decided to do this because I didn't see that representation on stage and I wanted to be a role model for young girls coming up in the scene. And looking back, this have seemed to be the through line in my career I had always worked for women's rights and pushed within the scene to make a change. This passion and career has taken me to other countries through competitions, workshops and performances, and now making my own work as a solo creative.

How about the rest of the UK scene? How does that differ from your international work? For example, with Hot Brown Honey, you've performed across the world but how do you feel the UK is different?

I think it's hard to say because I've lived in Sweden and I've lived here and every country have different support systems for the arts. But what I do know whenever you travel outside your country you get much more love and respect than you do in your own country, I don't know why that is. I don't know if it's because you're a guest in that country and therefore you're more interesting. But I when I travel outside of the UK I get much more respect than in the UK. I find it's easier to be heard and listened too when you are somewhere else, but at the same time I think that the women in those countries feel the same way whenever they travel.

Countries has different opportunities too for example In the UK you can be successful in whatever you want to do because there's so much space and interest to make different kinds of work, whereas in other countries there might not be that funding or space.

Was Hot Brown Honey funded in Australia or the UK?

Hot Brown Honey is a company that's been going for 5 + years. The women in HBH are of black, pacific islander and aboriginal first nation origins – and like in so many other countries these artist are right at the bottom in the arts – they are not represented enough on TV or on stages in Australia. These artists decided that in order for them to get work and to be heard they had to make their own opportunities and make their own stages. Starting as an intersectional feminist cabaret night mixed with circus mixed with Hip Hop, they gained great success this culminating in a self-funded full-length show telling their stories in their way. This genius move today allows HBH to spread awareness in worldwide tours. We have mothers in the company so we sell merchandise like earrings and pins with our slogans on it –our “cultural awareness merch” and the money goes straight back to the mother's so that they can be on tour and provide for their children. One slogan reads “The Revolution cannot happen without childcare.”

So Yami, you're talking about speaking up and how that's received and whether you feel like other people can speak up to you in the scene, in the UK?

I had a question recently “can you remember a time when someone spoke up for you? Can you remember a time when you spoke up for someone else? Can you remember when someone spoke up for you as a black woman? Can you remember when a man spoke up for you? Unfortunately, I don't have many of those stories where I can remember anyone speaking up for me. However, I have countless stories where I've spoken up for women and men in unjust situations, where I have been physically supporting people with my hands (not violently but protectively.) So it's sad because I feel like it makes you tired being that person speaking up for people. I had a conversation today with someone who said “I feel tired, I feel stressed, I feel vulnerable speaking up for people”. I said to them, if I stopped speaking up for people, I couldn't live with the guilt of not speaking up. I couldn't live with the feeling that I could have done and said something about the situation and that feeling for me is worse than the repercussions of speaking up for people and standing my ground for something I feel is unjust. Yes, I get labelled as an angry black woman, yes I get a label of too outspoken and too noisy. No war, no revolutions and no role models in our history or lifetime has ever been quiet and not spoken up. The people who we look up to are the people who speak up. The people who we want to be like are the people who stand up and stand for something, so there is never an option of not doing just so.

Many people think speaking up means you have to be an Audrey Lord, Angela Davies or Oprah Winfrey. They feel that they have to be that type of person. But speaking up for someone, in a small way, is basically saying, “are you ok? That's not right. I don't agree with

this. I don't think that's the right behaviour. Is he making you safe? Is this a safe situation?" Small brave things like that is speaking up, helping someone out of a situation. We've seen on the black lives matter movement, such an action of standing in front of someone to shield them - it's not speaking, it's doing, yeah, it's a physical act of doing something - it's the smallest and the biggest thing you can do, shielding someone in a situation that you know you're not as in danger as the person behind you. That is speaking up and being outspoken without even saying anything. We don't need to be revolutionary but we all need to be accountable and take action in the tiniest little way.

And on that note, do you have a message for people who might feel for some reason that they are not able to speak up? Or, why do you think people feel they can't speak up? What do you think is taking people's voices and why do people feel silenced?

Fear is one of the things that kills people's voices. Fear of causing offence, of a backlash after they've said something, fear of, 'once I've spoken, I've now put my opinion out there and am I sure that's my opinion? Am I sure that this is the correct thing that I'm talking about? 'I better not say anything. It's better for me not saying anything rather than saying the wrong thing.' there's many things, but fear is the biggest stopper as to why people don't speak up.

I think one of my main advice is to start with yourself. I might not be an expert on something but what I'm an expert on is my lived experience and how I feel. So speak about yourself and how you feel in the situation and use that as the way of speaking up. Many people feel like they need to have facts and know what they talk about. You just need to know yourself. Start with yourself, start with your own voice. Start with things that physically and emotionally affect you.

And in terms of Hip-Hop and all the things that are emerging on the scene and what would you like to see for the future of hip hop dance in the UK?

I think the hip-hop dance scene is all always growing and sometimes it grows a bit too fast and people haven't got a chance to catch up. Many kids that are forming groups and becoming teachers and sometimes this happens at a very young age. Back in the day we just did it for fun(dance) and the innocence was still there, it wasn't about being professional and getting paid to do a job - But right now, in 2020 you can very quickly get offered to do things and get exposed to contracts and sometimes no contract or payment and these young kids might not have learnt a lot about this part of the industry.

And then these young dancers are going into schools and establishments that haven't been taught how to teach safely or with an understanding of how to deal with different situations making the whole industry look unprofessional. We're (the industry) not churning out educational leaders as much as we're churning out unprepared dancers who just want fame. In a social media world where everything is a quick fix, people want to learn a dance really quickly and do a TiK ToK really quickly. Back in the day, it took much longer to master

your skills and educate yourself, so I would like to have a bit more education and knowledge put in place and for sure safety.

Safety being a major issue in the dance industry because we sometimes do not have a union, a faculty, a body that can protect young women and men in unsavoury situations. I would like to see a more active engagement from our Hip Hop community to help bring the culture forward where everyone can enjoy being part of this culture safely no matter sex, beliefs and identity .

You say 'make way for the matriarchy'. It would be nice to hear your thoughts on that and where does the female come into the future? Is there a female way? What is the matriarchy and how can females help positively impact or change this scene?

Well first of all it is a patriarchal system and it's been that way for a long time so that needs to change. We've (women) been on the side line for a long time now. Women, Mothers, Sisters make life. We are the very essence of life and how we all become, so the patriarchal system is there, but it is not acknowledged. In some villages the matriarchs decide what rules and systems should be in place. There's no old, sexist racist orange 45th's making decisions about women. Reality is that the system is very old ,tired, male pale and stale, the patriarchal system does not serve all it serve a power that in the very near future holds no power.

With what is happening now the biggest civil movement ever in history It is inevitable that we're going to go forward with an more understanding for each other. I believe the future is equal and I call myself an 'equalist' because I want everyone to be equal whether you are different colour, non-binary, fluid, man, woman, trans, able bodied or not- whatever you choose. I want justice and peace for all.

On that note, can we talk about power and what the future can look like what needs to happen? How do power structures need to change?

I think power, and I bring it back to the BLM movement and back to fear because fear is power and power is fear. Unfortunately, in every society there is a power structure and the power structure want to stay in power. I feel like when people understand about their privilege, their power and the realisation that they can lose it, the fear comes in. People want to stay in their positions of power by suppressing, putting fear and doubt into people because they do not want to live in the reality and in their guilt because the fear of waking up and realising 'oh my god, I am the problem. How am I going to live with myself? How am I going to be in this space when I'm a problem? I know I'm not hiring enough women. I know I don't have enough black people on my board.' Many people don't want to be in this space, they don't want to feel that guilt or fear. They feel they just want to be in their bubble and they feel comfortable there.

In our community (hip hop), it's very male-dominated. If you tell the men in the hip-hop community, "hey by the way, can you stop being negative and derogative to women and give women more opportunity?" they feel threatened as losing that power will ultimately lose their privilege as men so they rather stop you from succeeding by undermine you so that you lose that focus (remember the noise). So what we have to do is step people aside and force them to share that power and give them a helluva noise back!

You can fight against oppression, people have had enough, they are fighting the power fiercely. The future has to be shared. There's one Earth and there's plenty of space on this earth so we have to share it. To the hip-hop dance community instead of always going with a man to lead a project, why don't you hire a woman of colour? Kids get taught from a very young age to share so it's quite simple, share.

I was watching an old interview and it was saying that because women are very nurturing, they're very good in supportive roles but maybe not so good in the central role. I think you're a very good example of someone who, when you're given an opportunity to go for it and create...you go for it

Who made this assumption? I don't understand the notion of asking women to constantly prove themselves in leadership roles. We don't ask men to prove themselves and they do all sort of madness when leading. One thing I'm very keen to do is change how we talk and what language we use about women, what they can do and what they can't.

Can you expand on that and how we talk about women?

For example when you see people describe work by a female, you might call it 'poignant or interesting or beautiful'. Then speaking about work by a man, he's a 'genius, intelligent, he's a game changer, ground breaker.' Stop that language. Give that same language across the board and stop pitting work by women against each other or saying her work wasn't as good as his work. Talk about the artist and the artistry without gender. Another example is on mentorship programmes, we talk about supporting women's confidence and their voice, but in male mentorship programmes we talk about creating strong leaders and the future. It's so outdated, it's so boring. Treat people the same. Period.

Is there anything about how to follow you and find out more about your work?

I'm currently writing my new solo show about trans racial adoption, my first meeting with my biological mum and the obsession with happy endings. That will premiere in 2021, and I am currently trying to find more money to fund the project, (I need some money.) I still teach Hip Hop theatre workshops, mentor artist and work (before Covid) as a Creative Movement Director. You can Follow me on Rowdy Yami on all socials for any other announcements. #iamavailable

Thank you Yami, you are so awesome. Yami also mentors so you need to think about this amazing human being.