

## **Choreography of Care (Conversation with Claire and Luke)**

A list of links to artists/organisations etc. that are mentioned in the podcast are available on [Claire's website](#).

Music by Matthias Herrmann.

## **Transcript (edited for clarity)**

[Music]

### **Claire:**

My name is Claire Cunningham. I am a choreographer and performance maker based in Scotland. I'm a self-identifying disabled artist, so that means that for me being disabled is an important aspect of my identity and it also means that my work is often informed by the lived experience of disability.

In 2017 I was appointed as one of the Factory Artists supported by Tanzhaus nrw in Dusseldorf and to mark coming to the end of that residency, Tanzhaus and I decided to create an event in May 2020; a symposium we were calling 'Choreography of Care', inviting artists, activists and change makers whose work we felt spoke to an ethos of care, together to share how they believe it shapes their practice and its influences out into the, world through their work. Because of the global pandemic, the symposium has been postponed to June 2021. However to mark the space of the intended event, we wanted to share some of the thinking behind the symposium, some of the voices that will be present hopefully next year, and to give a sense of why we wanted to create such an event.

In this podcast myself and long-time collaborator Luke Pell, Dramaturg and

artist who is co-curating and hosting the event with me, discuss some of the key ideas shaping the planned symposium, where those ideas come from, in relation to our own practice and previous works, and why the concept of care and the word itself has become important to us.

Luke and I planned a quite short conversation, but really, with both Luke and I, that's pretty impossible. We like getting into the details of things and are firm believers that things take the time they take. So please feel free to listen to this as it suits you in one go or break it into more manageable sections. There will be a transcript of the conversation also available wherever you come across this podcast. Thank you.

**Luke:**

I guess I wanted to begin today by us taking little journey back to one of the first moments I really feel like we started to talk about care and its problematics for you for various reasons, which I hope you can expand on. You gave a keynote at DADA Fest in 2016 which was one of the first times that you pointed out 'carers' is a loaded word for you, and I wondered if we could kind of begin there.

**Claire:**

Yeah it was a really interesting moment to be invited back to DADA Fest. Because I had premiered my second piece 'Mobile' I think in 2008 there, or 2007. And so when they invited me back with two other pieces in 2016, it was impossible not to reflect on how far things had come in my work and my practice in that time. Also, to really look at what mattered then in the work, as opposed to when I first appeared. So I made a speech that was trying to kind of reflect on the time and the change that had happened in my work and also the effects of being in DADA Fest. Actually it made a real difference to be in

that environment and that peer critique, the importance of being in a disability and D/eaf arts festival and then among audiences that had a much higher percentage of disabled audience. And so I talked at one point about how over that time, my relationship to various words had changed, like the relationship to the word 'Crip'. The relationship with my crutches and how I worked with them had also changed. The realisation was quite recent at that time, that I was starting to acknowledge that the word 'care' applied to my work, which was really a word I hadn't ever thought I would associate with myself as a person generally, but not with my work either. And I really began, I think particularly looking at the work of 'Guide Gods', that was the work that I really saw that shift. I knew that it wasn't a straightforward word for me because particularly, I think as a disabled person and particularly talking to that room of people, largely deaf and disabled audience at the festival, it was a word that everyone in that room recognised as very loaded, that has a lot of baggage with it, that have associations of, of being patronised, or sort of charitable, assistance. I guess in some cases the idea of something that has done TO disabled people or FOR disabled people but is often not understood as an active thing or a thing that people have control over or have agency in. I think it has a history of being seen as a very passive thing that you receive. And so it was a quite a problematic word to kind of reconcile with, but I began to understand that it was really apparent in the work that I'd made.

**Luke:**

It's interesting that you flag up that thing about, being 'done to' because it speaks back to this point that has come up in our conversations around care not being a thing or an instrument, but a process, being reciprocal. And also what care might look like and mean for different people in different realities

being very different things. That makes me think a lot actually about the practice that we've established together around your performance making and the care of that work. The worlds that we create for people who enter into those worlds, whether they be performers or audience or other collaborators. You mentioned just now 'Guide Gods', which was really the first time that we had explicitly started working together in a creative way and I was involved in quite a light way with 'Guide Gods' to begin with, and with the making of that work. I was only in the studio a couple of times, but that's certainly my first memory of when care and the very particular kind of care, that delicacy and the precision of care that I noticed both in the way that you handled the objects in that work, the tiny china teacups, which then became synonymous with the voices and experiences; and the people's lives that you were carrying in that work.

'Guide Gods' was one of the first works where you began to talk very closely with other people about their life experience. You had begun to explore that with 'Pink Mist', the work that proceeded 'Guide Gods', but 'Guide Gods' was the first one that sort of, became very explicit. I wonder whether you could talk first of all, about your experience of care of people when you were in the research process for 'Guide Gods', and then when it came through to honouring their voices and making the work.

**Claire:**

Yeah, I think it was an entirely different way for me to think about making work. And it was quite overwhelming actually on so many levels. I mean, I think actually the first conversation you and I had in relation to 'Guide Gods' I realised, was me phoning you probably in tears from my hotel room, having had my first conversations with people, because I was so overwhelmed with

what people shared with me. It was above and beyond what I had expected in terms of trust, that people trusted their stories to me. Also some of the trauma of the stories that were shared with me, was really quite shocking and I hadn't prepared myself entirely for that. And actually the concern was also, was it appropriate for me to be even creating a space for people to share that, and how did I make sure that those people were OK? And so interestingly, you were the person that I called to take care of *me* to find out how do I take care of those people and myself, you know, those things became really apparent, as being connected in that moment. I think in a way that had not applied to work I'd made before.

I think it was very important to me, this realisation I wanted to create spaces where it was just me and one other person talking. I think for me personally, I know that privacy is something really important to me. It's quite an essential thing for me at times. I don't know if it's right, but I kind of trace it, I think to growing up being taken to medical institutions and being displayed or exhibited or discussed by strangers and doctors and that sense of being in hospital when you don't have privacy. And I think it made me quite concerned with ideas of privacy ever since. My own privacy, but also the privacy of others, so I think there's something very quickly that that mattered to me. I didn't create areas for group conversations, I wanted to create spaces that were private for somebody to talk to me and that was really clear in my head. I wanted to assure people that they had complete control and agency over what they said to me. So I would take audio recordings, I very purposely didn't take camera recordings of people because I also felt that completely changes the dynamic of how people feel in terms of being observed. It was important just to record audio and I asked people obviously to sign forms that were giving consent potentially for their material to be used in a performance work, but I really

clearly let them know that they always had an option to veto anything that I proposed that I would like to use.

There was two layers of that. There was a first layer where I would return months later to them through email or record it and say, “look, these are the things that you said that I might use in the show, how do you feel about this? Are you still okay with this being used?” And they could respond and they were welcome to say no, and because it was a process of editing as well, of course, creating so much material to cut down. Then I would go back again with like “these are the five lines or the 10 lines that you said that I definitely would like to use. Are you sure you're okay with it?” And it was so much work. I mean it was a lot of work, because it was obviously transcription, there was editing and then there was going back and forward a lot for consent. It took a lot of time as well but it mattered so much to me that people really understood and were really okay with their voices being used and what they had said. Yeah, there's this quite drawn out process of checking with people and double checking. Interestingly, the only people that ever wanted to change what they said were academics, and it was this whole thing of going “I can't change what you said, you know, you did say this thing, I either use it or I don't use it”. They actually sometimes wanted me to change what they'd said and I'm like, “it's audio, I can't change what you said”! Everybody was fine and the academics eventually understood that as well.

I realised being in a room with people, that this act of sitting in a space with people and giving them all of your attention, undivided attention for that period of time really does something, it does something for them and it does something for me. In the sense that I realised that as an incredibly cynical person, normally, some of my cynicism couldn't get in the room, like it seemed to sort of, get left at the door. It was something about sitting and giving time to

somebody even when people were talking about things that I might, at the end of the day, find, hard to believe in because I was talking a lot to people about the issues around faith and things that I didn't maybe hold the same belief in, that people would talk to me about things like ghosts. But in the time of being with somebody, I really believe that they believed it, and I felt that and I respected it and I could find a way to respect what someone believed, even if it was very different from my own experience of the world. That, I think taught me so much, it made me really care, if I bring these voices into a performance space, how do I create the same respect for these people that I hold them in while I'm sitting opposite them talking to them. I don't want people to be made fun of, I don't want them to be ridiculed. I want them to be heard for what they're saying and respected for it, whether you believe it or not. And that was the overwhelming thing about 'Guide Gods'- was, how do I make sure I do that?

**Luke:**

I think that, you know, we've talked about that over time, somebody who, I think part of why we first talked about that project was that in my work as a performance maker, often my work is participatory and conversation-based, I have a whole series of works with one-to-one and sometimes use this phrase, 'sit with me' or in walking projects, 'walk with me'. We talked a little about this thing of what it is to listen. I talk about listening for the poetry and other people's words and something else that you and I talk about a lot is taking the time they take, and what it is to take the time to really listen to somebody. And that process I think really takes care, takes the time that it takes and this process that you just outlined of what it is to encounter somebody, to build trust both ways, to find out what matters to them and then to be able to position yourself in relationship to their care for a subject or a faith, or a set of

beliefs that might be contrary to yours, is all part of that process of caring it being this live thing rather than a fixed thing.

As many of us who make work across forms or describe ourselves in lots of different ways - I have for sometime called myself a maker, curator, dramaturg and writer, and part of why I continue to use the word curator has to do with an approach to making choices. Historically I've worked as a programmer, I have curated events, whether those have been in spaces or performance evenings, but, the etymology of, 'curate' is, 'curatus' this Latin word for the 'care of souls', which makes me think about, you know, when we're talking about 'Guide Gods', in that project you were talking about people's faith, but you know we both have talked about any kind of one's work, of what it is to take care of somebody's wellbeing as a person.

I think often when I'm working with you and the people that we work with, that we're taking care of the souls, the wellbeing, the spirits of the people that we work with, whether they're performing in the work or whether they're experiencing the work. But I was also thinking about curating in relationship to approaches to museum and galleries and the care and attention that is given between the space, between objects and we were having a conversation a while ago where you and I would talk about choreography and our approaches to choreography and the choreographic. You said something like, in the simplest way for you, you've thought about choreography as..?

**Claire:**

The arrangement of bodies and objects in space and time, is one way that I think about it, but it's also about the space between objects or space. Like the space between things is sometimes as important, if not more important, than what those things or people or objects are doing.

**Luke:**

I think what has struck me over the years that we've been working together now and in my relationship with you as not just a fellow performance maker but also as a dramaturg for your projects, is that the work that we do together is not just in the moment of making performance or production. It's very much about that space between the processes, the time and the attention that we give to the space between the thing that we might be moving towards or moving from, which for me feels so reflective of how you describe this approach to choreography. What is it to give it attention to the space between, and I think this was one of the things that felt so apparent to me in where you were at the end of 'Guide Gods'. You were talking about this space between your lived experience and another person's lived experience and I felt like this was something that became very present in the recent work 'Thank You Very Much' in that you are asking these questions again.

In 'Thank You Very Much' we hear the voices of Elvis tribute artists, as well as the performers who were in the work and their lived experience, their perspectives on Elvis, and to an extent some of their perspectives on disability. Some of those performance artists have not encountered disabled people that much previously, I know that we talked quite a lot in the preparation for that work, of how to give care to the space between the experiences of different performers as we entered into making that work. And I wondered whether you might talk a little bit now about the care that was given to the performers of various kinds in 'Thank You Very Much'. I'd also include,

um, the King in that, Elvis - we're not allowed to say that are we?! Uh, the other person who happens to be in the room that we gave great care to be careful of.

**Claire:**

It's ok, we can name him!

**Luke:**

It was important to you that you gave quite a lot of care to understanding his life and his home and the space he inhabited even before you began share the work with other people. Maybe it's interesting to hear a little bit about the care that you gave to the research for that project before the performers came in.

**Claire:**

I think because I started researching it in a very similar way to 'Guide Gods' in that I started with -. I mean the thing also about the research for 'Guide Gods' was it was really vital and it's been a core understanding ever since for me that it's important to go to where people are, where people are at in their life and where they feel comfortable rather than expecting people to come to you. Particularly in terms of if you're trying to create trust or learn about somebody. And so for me, with all the Guide God's interviews I went to where people were, I often went to their houses, their homes or somewhere that they felt secure. And with the Tribute artists, I was at a big festival and I sat and interviewed them in a very similar way to what I had done in 'Guide Gods'. I was very much in their world, so although I was in a performing arts environment, it was a very different environment from the one I'm used to, you know more historically these black box, modern contemporary theatres. This was like an end of the pier, grand hall, lots of glitz and lots of beer! It was very different environment, very raucous, very glittery. And so that thing of talking to

them in their home, where they're comfortable and where they're in control, and really realising quite quickly that some of them had a lot of things that I could really relate to and that they were very suspicious of being interviewed in the same way you know, when I tried to talk to people about faith, people were expecting that they were... These are people who are used to being stereotyped and used to being ridiculed and used to being sort of misunderstood in society. I was like, wow, that's something I think a lot of disabled people recognise and can relate to. In fact, very similar to the interviewing of 'Guide Gods', even though these were people from completely different life experiences. There's something that I loved about that, when you would feel these shared experiences among people that were ostensibly very different.

And so there was something about, in the same way that when I talk to people in 'Guide Gods', what happens when you give time to somebody, when you give time to let them tell you about what they care about. Is that it makes you care about that thing as well, you know? Or as I say, to respect it. It was impossible not to kind of be carried along and caught up in the love for Elvis that these guys had because it was a love, like they all felt that they tried to treat his legacy with care. That was what I got from them. That they tried to the best of their abilities to treat him with respect because it mattered to them. And so again, for me it felt like for one I want to treat them as human beings that I should respect anyway for giving me time and sharing their time and their knowledge with me, but also I felt I didn't want to ridicule the thing that they cared about.

I'd also, taken the time to try and learn about Elvis himself, which is almost impossible because you don't know what's myth and what's true, it's impossible to tell the difference, but I cared about it, he was somebody that I

loved as an artist, but also acknowledged was a problematic figure in lots of ways, far too many to mention. I also wanted to still treat him and treat the people that cared about him with a degree of, with as much respect as I could, especially if you're bringing people's voices into a room and they're not really, they are not there to defend themselves. They are not there to recontextualise something that they might have said. I think there's a great amount of care that has to be taken.

Again, with the tribute artists, for me the idea... So what I did was I set each tribute artist up with one of the performers from my ensemble, that they would each have one to one lessons, partly because I wanted to see if this approach, this effect that I got from being one-to-one with people, whether this translated for somebody else as a research method. I wanted to know rather than me dictating what the performers learn, I wanted to give them control and agency in what they report back to me is their experience. We work from what they receive and how they process it and what they remember rather than simply, I dictate what they learn and that's it. We tried as much as possible to be quite careful about how those interactions happened. I made sure that I had conversations with all the tribute artists first, usually over Skype if I hadn't met them one to one, and really tried to contextualise the project and the research and to really reassure them that we weren't gonna make fun of Elvis, we weren't going to ridicule the life of tribute artists or what they were trying to do. Also trying to sort of prepare them because many of them had never, they might know disabled individuals in their life, but they had never, to my understanding, encountered a professional artist who was disabled before. So just also trying to pre-empt some of the things that I felt might get in the way of that by assuring them, so doing a lot of preparation with them, but also saying there is nothing you have to do to change what you do. We want to actually see you perform, we want to witness how you authentically perform and then

our performers are professional, experienced artists that will take that and do what they need to do with it. You don't have to adapt your material for these performers. Their job is to work out what they do with what you're offering them. Trying to pre-empt that thing that they might think, 'Oh my'. We know this, you and I, from years of trying to persuade people about teaching environments and bringing disabled individuals into teaching environments, that paranoia that a lot of teachers get that suddenly they have to change everything they're doing. It's not that actually, you just have to be very clear about what you're doing.

**Luke:**

Can we talk about that? You just, talked very specifically about, what the performer's job is, what they will do with their experience, because of their experience. So you earlier on said one of the things that was really important for you when, introducing the tribute artists and the performers within the ensemble was that what the ensemble came back with was their experience and that they had agency around that. This word agency has recurred actually in this conversation this afternoon, the importance of agency. And I wondered if we might talk a little bit about agency and care for the ensemble in your work. Because for 'Thank You Very Much' this is the first time that you had made work with an ensemble that was an entirely new ensemble. It wasn't a pre-existing group. You brought these people together. So that in itself was an active process of care in terms of choosing who would come together to make that work. I know that throughout there was huge focus from you on the agency and the care that the performers felt as part of that work.

**Claire:**

Yeah, I think maybe partly also because, I often acknowledge this, but a lot of the things I learned about coming in to working in movement, and devised

performance and particularly beginning to make dance, a lot of the processes that I learned came from working with Jess Curtis. And a lot of those ways of working were really built around, communication with the person, with the other performers, and being able to develop methods for clear and honest communication and trust and creating spaces that were, really funded on an openness and, supporting each other, and an ability to kind of say what you needed, what was wrong. So I think that really equipped me as well for then beginning to work with the ensemble. And is something I carry into workshop environments and things as well. Bringing in processes, like always having a morning in check and simple, simple things like that. Everybody gets space to share what's going on with them that day, how they're doing, so we know where people are at. We know if something's worrying someone and also being, aware that if they don't want to say it in that space, that they know that they can say it to myself or other people who are supporting the project making it clear that there's always people to talk to if anything's a problem and trying to make sure that's really felt in the room.

Trying to sort of break notions of, too much hierarchy in the space as well that, there isn't sort of the, the choreographer that comes in the room and everybody just does whatever they say. It was really important to me that it's not that sort of space, which because I didn't go through dance training and to conventional colleges or institutions. You know, I think it really shocked me actually as I began to work in dance, how prevalent the idea of dancers just doing what the choreographer wants, you just do whatever you're told to do. I think it kind of shocked me to realise how prevalent that idea of power was and trying to make clear in the beginning with the ensemble that's not how I want to work. I will make propositions, and will try and make sure that it's something that everybody wants to do and if there's issues and problems and resistance that we find ways to negotiate that.

One of the things I think that surprised them early on was when I said something like, “you won't ever have to wear something that you don't want to wear”, in terms of costume, you know? And I think it's also that thing of recognising where things that were trigger points for me, because of my body clothing, costuming is a really sensitive issue, it's not straight forward. Like it's a really problematic thing, to feel comfortable in clothes and to find clothes that I feel good about myself in. So even just simple things like that, sharing that with the performers and some of them being really surprised by that. Of course it might mean that there's moments where that becomes a moment of trust as well, if I do feel something, but I would never push something if somebody really didn't want to do that. Also wanting them to contribute as well, trying to work from places that bring their creativity and their desires into the room.

One of the early things we did was a list, everybody devise a list of what you need to be able to work and that could be from the most sort of profound to the most banal, you know. In order that then, Dan Watson and I then took those lists and that was how we then work out, okay, what's the schedule going to be? Some people really need a 15-minute rest after lunch. Some people really need to start not too early. Some people really need to not to run too late. How do we work with all of these realities? Some people really need some cushions or a mattress in this space. Being able to work from what people really need, and try to find a way to balance that across the group as a starting point rather than also trying to - of course there are things that you work and then you find, ‘Oh actually this doesn't work, we need this thing’. But trying to start from a place that they're arriving with knowledge of their own bodies and what they need. They're experienced artists. Tell us what you need and then we'll try and start from that place.

So we asked for lists of what did they need, and then I asked for lists of what they wanted to do. What did they dream of doing in a work? This idea that I wanted to create a work in which fed them, because I think that's the privilege I realise I have as a performer and a maker because I get to make my own work, is that I get to make work that's always feeding me creatively in the act of performing it.

Like it's not ever work that I can just trot out on stage and just, go through the motions. The way that I make work, it requires me to have to pay attention and be very invested always in the thing that I'm doing, and bringing them into that way of thinking about material. But also that does something about making you want to be onstage about being the work together.

**Luke:**

And you saying that - I think we've heard, our experience thus far has been with that work, that the audience feel that they are, there together, that invisible care is felt. We've heard people saying from audiences, from colleagues and peers, you know, "the care", or "what is it?" "What is that thing that I can feel that I can't put my finger on?" And it certainly, I know later in this series of podcasts, Julia Watts Belser is going to talk a little bit about that approach to care with the performers and that being a powerful thing that has been felt. I think it's interesting now that, you've touched on and in the symposium, which is to come next year. Hopefully we'll expand on these ideas more, but you've touched on many different ways in which care is present or we've begun to describe care present in your practice, whether that's visible or invisible. You've mapped out a number of propositions of care as, care as time, care in design. Could you just say what those are that you think we're going to talk about more in the future?

**Claire:**

We were breaking it down into these, these concepts 'performance itself as care', was one, the very act of performing and I think, you and I have talked about this in different moments, of 'the consciousness of performing' and 'the choice of performing', and that the distinction. I think for us sometimes with the works that we experience from other makers that feel like they are full of care is also where it feels like there is a real choice that this is performance or the act of witnessing it is essential to it, you know, and I think as opposed to, there is sometimes, maybe work that I experienced that I don't always feel like there's been a care or an attendance to even the fact that an audience will be there. That sometimes I feel like the work could exist in a vacuum or in a studio and it doesn't really need to be witnessed. It doesn't need to be experienced. It doesn't actually have an exchange with an audience. And I think that's where, for me there's something about just the notion of performance as care in itself, of when I feel work, yeah, the actual choice to perform is considered as necessary to that thing existing, I think really matters.

Things like the idea of time as care, the attending to time, and the investment of time in people or in budgets, you know, the reality of the things that, , quite often these things also come down the relationship they have to finances and money that time is money or money is time and the time spent in understanding what is needed and the time spent, learning from people, what do you need. From the simplistic thing of let's pre-board an audience, you know, let's give some people a little extra time; to actually, we need to take more time to make the work, , or we need to bring somebody a day earlier to rehearsals so that they are rested; , it can manifest in a lot of different ways.

Another way that were thinking of it is design as care. I think that's been quite essential through a lot of the work I've made, is the relationships to designers that have worked and collaborated with me. 'Guide Gods' was a very potent

example of that, in the sense of the choice of the space being very contained, very minimal audience. I was very adamant that there's only really one row of people, so to speak, and that there's a sense of community created by, making a small audience. I think I realised that more in recent years also, of making works that try to make a little mini community for an evening. And part of that is making audiences be visible and accessible to each other, that nobody's really hidden from each other. So that becomes more present in the work as well, designing spaces that take away the hierarchy of the performer above the audience or separate from the audience and the idea that the performer is more important. I'm trying to sort of level that out. I mean in 'Guide Gods' I tend to be on the floor. I tend to be below the audience more often.

With things like 'Thank You Very Much', things like the stairs. Working with Bethany Wells and designing stairs that are specifically designed to the bodies of the performers. So we made physiotherapy-esque stairs and they are completely and utterly designed to the bodies of the performers. They have the handrails where different people need them. The treads are exactly to the shoe sizes of the performers that need them. They're different heights for different performers. One set of stairs has a handrail on one side and I quite enjoy it as a thing that not that many audience members maybe notice except it's a little bit of an obstruction at times to site lines, but the reality is that's what the performers need in that show. But I know that if you went to the vast majority of performances made by sort of normative bodied companies, that stair would never have a handrail. It just wouldn't aesthetically in traditional theatre if you have two or three steps up to a little mini stage, they would not put a hand rail. And I *love* that we have a handrail and I *love* that it's kind of in the way and it's a little bit interrupting the site lines. And I really love it for that reason. It's also beautifully designed, but I love it because it makes it ours. It's a choice.

[Music]

**Luke:**

The thing that you said about, levelling things out, it really reminded me of - you were also talking about community, what it is to bring together communities or small communities. It really made me think about how this is the case and something that we're busy with, or that we're attending to, both on and off stage. That the community that you work with in terms of your producing team: Nadja Dias, Sheena, Vicky, myself, the other people, the partners at Tanzhaus that we work with. But this levelling out of shifting hierarchies. We've talked a little about sort of, Crip producing or interruption to dominant rhythms. These choices are happening at every stage of the process, and in every aspect of your work. I think that's one of the things that I'm very interested in next year when the symposium happens, is again, this desire of bringing together a community for a moment around these conversations of care in different aspects, how they manifest in people's practices, the thinking and the practicing of care.

I guess one of the things that I wanted to just flag up that you and I have been beginning to talk about lately, is the effort of that, the labour of that. You had said to me recently in some writing, "can we care too much?" And I said, "I wonder if the thing is, do we need to care harder?" And we've started to talk about that it is harder to do this. It's not the straightforward way we live in a world where if we are an interruption or on the edge of the dominant systems and structures that that's harder to navigate. Also we need to care harder to shift things and that's something that feels very present and apparent in your work and the way that you go about making and working with people.

I think one of the things that excites me about next year is the people that

you're inviting to join this symposium are people who care hard. That I think we see that in their practices and feel that in their practices. I just wanted to come back to that, you talked about time as care, materials as care, design as care, performing as care, communication as care. And we've also talked about criticism and cynicism, that criticality can also be care, that care doesn't always have to be, might not always be the soft thing, that actually it might be in being critical we might be caring.

**Claire:**

Yeah. I think that was quite an interesting shift for me just recently. This question of, could criticality - because I've always considered it quite a negative aspect of my personality- but actually I guess it often gets provoked because it's in relation to something that I care about. And I think I hadn't always noticed it in that way or considered that it can be a necessary thing. I guess it depends what you do with it and how it manifests out into the world.

I also talked about that with Julia Watts Belser, who we'll also hear from in another podcast probably. She puts it in a nice way; just how important and how much she enjoyed like loving argument, like the importance of being in dialogue and, being able to sort of, be in loving argument with things that matter, you know, and not just, all the things that we can, agree on. Also I think when we talked about that idea of caring harder, there was this question of historically being worried that that word implies a kind of softness and it often, I think can be understood as being this very gentle thing and very soft, and as is often associated also with maternal sort of things. There's a lot of gendering, I think, of care as well. There's a lot of questions about gender roles and aspects of care but I think we were also kind of trying to understand. I'd heard Emma Franklin say it in a show, a simple sentence, something like, "caring is a radical act." That was quite an important thing for me to hear. Just

beginning to understand that it doesn't have to always be in those soft forms or the gentle ways that we understand that it can be quite hard and it can be a radical thing. I think that's been quite interesting for me to also start thinking about.

**Luke:**

I think this is one of the things that you and I have come to understand implicitly, but it's really apparent in the way that we work together is that this practice of being bothered about care about caring hard is, I wouldn't say implicit, I'd say it's *explicit*. It's really there in what we both do as performance makers in different ways and we both collaborate with other artists in different ways. I think something that feels increasingly important to me, is that particularly when I work with you or when I work with our other peers like Kate Marsh or Caroline Bowditch, I don't stop being a making artist. My practice doesn't disappear even though I'm working with you as a dramaturg, if my practice is care. I would very much say that what I do is so much about the choreography of care, or the care of souls. That is manifest in process and that doesn't necessarily have to be my process. Interestingly, you talked to the other day, when I mentioned earlier that you had said that you sometimes understood choreography as the space between things, between objects and people. And I have been talking about how my relationship to the choreographic tends to be more around patterns and processes. I was thinking about that the other day, about why we work so well together. It's that we're bothered about the same stuff, but we have different approaches too. So in terms of your relationship of the choreographic (body, space, objects) and mine (processes), that's why those things come together so well. And yet the thing that we both care so much about is the space between.

**Claire:**

But do you think you have, maybe it's impossible ever to pin down, but do you think you have a sense of why that emerged?

**Luke:**

Yeah, it's funny actually when you were talking about 'Guide Gods' and care, I was also reminded of, care and curates, and curatus 'the care of souls', and I was also thinking of 'Guide Gods' and faith. I was thinking about the confessional. But I think I also remember saying to you early on, and lots of people know this, before I worked in performance for theatres, I worked as a hairdresser, or in a hairdresser's. I didn't really pass as a hairdresser.... I didn't quantify as a hairdresser!

**Claire:**

I think you'd be highly in demand very soon! If the dramaturgy isn't coming back! [Laughs]

**Luke:**

I was head receptionist and salon manager for a hairdresser. But I certainly think in that work, you know, and I have this one-to-one practice, I do participate in conversations with people as part of nearly all of the works that I've made, and I think that comes from this history that people talk to their hairdresser about anything. And that's also about trust, agency, feeling good. That what you have to say matters, that there's interest and also somebody that you can say these things to. I think I shared some of that with you when you were making 'Guide Gods'. I think that history of working hospitality, social spaces or civic spaces and civic spaces of care is a thing that's in the background for me.

I'm working on a piece of writing which hasn't quite hit the page yet but feels quite pertinent in relationship to what's going on now in the world in relationship to the current pandemic conversations around care and touch. I'm conscious that from a very young age, I lived and have lived with the fear of touch because of being a queer person, being aware of that from a very young age and the violence that I encountered in various environments because of that, whether that was out on the streets because I'm queer or my own fear of what touch might bring about, because I grew up in the wake HIV AIDS crisis. I grew up under the conservative government. So at seven years old, knowing very clearly that I was gay and what was in the media, what we weren't taught at school, what wasn't acknowledged; I've, I felt very little care and I have in my life, as you know, I'm a survivor of domestic violence. I lived in a situation with another man where, I didn't experience care, I experienced the other side of care. So I think as somebody who hasn't encountered- has spent a lot of the formative part of their life, not encountering care, it has become increasingly pressing to me to think about how we give care, and how people recognise that they deserve it.

There the convergence there that we've talked about, around queerness and disability and you were talking earlier about teaching and pedagogy, I think so many environments that I've encountered and still do, where certain powers govern how those environments are shaped, are not *careful*.

**Claire:**

No, absolutely not.

**Luke:**

There's a commitment to care, because of having not experienced it. And then, there are moments when I have experienced it. We've talked about this in terms of the people that we are inviting to be part of this symposium and what we feel and see in their work. You talked a little bit about Jess Curtis earlier and I think I'm very lucky to have - I also didn't train in a conventional way within dance and choreography or performance - but in my training and my sort of performance lineage, coming from a live art background, I worked very closely with Fevered Sleep and David Harradine, I had a professional and personal relationship with Nigel Charnock, I was good friends with Adrian Howells. There is care and has been care in the work of the people that I have trained with. And I was thinking about this last night for some reason. It's a thing that I often say or have said to people, is that people don't love us the way we want them to, they love us the way they know how. And I think we learn to care and to love from what's demonstrated to us or what we have a proximity to. I think that's one of the things that people feel in 'Thank You Very Much' for example, they feel a *thing*.

Going back to your point about affecting, I think, we pass stuff on by sharing an energy. That's how things shift.

**Claire:**

I think I sometimes just hope that, from a very simplistic place, that maybe just some audiences then notice in the next space 'Oh, wait a minute, this thing hasn't been considered'. Or 'why is there no sign language interpreter here?' That if people just begin to notice who's not there or who's not been considered, who's been expected not to be there? Just that level of people's attention being drawn to something, can sometimes hopefully make people ask the question and in very small ways sometimes.

I'm curious, how do you consider care within Nigel's work? Because I didn't get to see much of Nigel's work unfortunately while he was alive. I saw the maybe only the Candoco piece. But I'm curious how you would consider it manifested for Nigel.

**Luke:**

I mean there's very specific examples. I mean in lots of ways like I am with you. In the time that I was with Nigel, I was in the studio with him a lot, either because we had to make our relationship work on the road or with him as Associate Producer, with Nadja your Executive Producer. So I experienced his process and some of what you just described and in the way that you worked with the ensemble for 'Thank You Very Much'. But in what I would site as artists and companies that I really revere or respect that I have had the privilege of seeing into the way they work, Nigel was incredibly committed to knowing the people that he works with and what they wanted and what they felt had been missing in their work, what they wanted to do on stage. He took a huge amount of time to build trust and to then have very quiet conversations with people. You know, people remember Nigel, this loud maverick person. He really gave a lot of space to the quiet time and I know many of the performers at worked with him. He created space for people to turn the volume up on the aspects of themselves that they wanted to. I think that's also the other thing that Nigel always said to me, that fundamentally part of why he made work was to wake people up to the world, and to wake people up to love, and to joy, and to feeling. And you know, we've started talking about this phrase of 'care harder', Nigel cared hard, and that manifests differently.

I have quite a quiet sensibility most of the time, you have a very specific sensibility, you're really particular. I was thinking how my work and the way I

am is quite loose and sprawling, it has a kind of rough edge. Nigel was fast and fierce and furious. The way that our works and we manifest in the world are very different, that's because we're all individuals, but the caring heart is still there. It's a huge privilege that I carry with me or in me fundamentally. I think, from my love of and love with Nigel, both in terms of him as a maker and as his partner, was that he was one of the people that cared most in the world. You know, right now, who knows if he was still alive, he would be finding this and some of what's unfolding, incredibly difficult and he would probably make a very loud, shouty work about it, but because he *cares*.

But within that shouting there was always joy. There was always joy and always love.

**Claire:**

That's really beautiful to hear. Really, really interesting. Really beautiful.

It made me think, when you said the thing at the beginning, especially, this thing of wanting to know people, to know who's in the room and get to really know, it reminded me of the first time I was in Jess's own work and his ensemble and one of the early days, and he asked something like, "What do you all bring to the project? What do you want to bring?" And I'd never-, it just floored me. Then I had to get over my ineptness of like "I can't bring anything!" Just what it meant to be asked that, was terrifying. But the liberation it eventually brought, of working with somebody who created that sort of environment of trust and safety and drawing out of people to go beyond what they maybe thought they could do or felt brave enough to do or whatever it is, or to be able to go right into those vulnerable places with someone. I had forgotten that moment though, of being asked that.

**Luke:**

That for me speaks back to this this thing I was saying, that people love us the way they know how. I think as performance makers, we have the privilege of having worked with some amazing improvisers and devisers. Which I think is also a very particular approach to making, you know, Nigel was an incredible improviser, David Harradine of Fevered Sleep, who I think of as having trained with, they make devised work. We've talked a lot in the past about Jess Curtis and his performance lineage and his relationship to Keith Hennessey and Sara Shelton Mann and 'Tell me something you love', this task which gets passed on. We experience things, which for us as performers or collaborators in a process, shift. We know what that feels like and then we want to share that out.

I know very much last year, when I was revising, re-imagining my work 'In the Ink Dark' with a larger ensemble than when we first made it, that I'm very much focused in the studio of doing what I learned with Nigel, of supporting people to turn the volume up on themselves. I learned that through Nigel. What I do in my work with ensembles or when I teach class is very much, - I don't have the vocabulary that Nigel would teach - but the intention is the same. You know, 'magpies are we all', we take the things that shine for us and we bring them into our practice. And I think that's also one of the things that I find very exciting about this symposium, is that we know we're part of a peerage of people who care, of artists who care, who are explicitly or implicitly concerned with matters of care in their work. And what happens when we come together and share that out, and, goodness knows we're going to need all the care that we can make manifest and re-imagine in the years to come.

You know, I've been thinking, going on a tangent now, but I've been thinking quite a lot. There's been a lot of conversation about how we've never

experienced anything like this before. But for those of us that grew up in the wake of the HIV AIDS crisis, and those of our peers and our elders who lived that we have known stuff like this before and it's not been pleasant. It's tough, and getting care when you're on the edges can be hard. So I think, the work that we want to do to bring folks together to care harder is critical.

**Claire:**

Absolutely. Thank you so much for chatting. It's always, *always* so joyful.

And the chances of us ever making a podcast that was going to be 20 minutes or 30 minutes was *absolutely impossible*. What were we thinking! [Laughs]

[Music]

[Ends]