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Andréa Spearman: Dancers' Group is experimenting with new ways to unify, strengthen, and amplify voices in the Bay Area. We're excited to share a variety of ideas and stories.

[music]

Andréa: In today's recording of *In Conversation* you will hear from Maurya Kerr and Alaja Badalich. Maurya Kerr is a Bay Area-based choreographer, poet, educator, performer, and the Artistic Director of [tinypistol](#). Much of her artistic work across disciplines is focused toward Black and brown people reclaiming their birthright to wonderment. Her poetry has appeared, or is forthcoming, in the *Hole In The Head Review*, *Blue River Review*, *River Heron Review*, *Inverted Syntax*, *Chestnut Review*, and *The Future of Black*, a Black comics and Afrofuturism anthology coming in 2022. And she was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize - ooo, exciting! [all laugh].

Alaja is a native to Eugene, Oregon. She is a recent graduate of the Alonzo King LINES Ballet Training Program. Since the COVID-19 crisis she has found herself as a young choreographer, professional dancer, and dance educator in the Eugene community. She is the youngest co-founder of seven (ooo!) to form [Fermata Ballet Collective](#), a place for dance artists in the Pacific Northwest who have found their careers and projects on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Maurya: Hey, Alaja.

Alaja: Hey!

Maurya: Nice to talk to you. We talked a little bit the other day. You know, when Dancers' Group approached me about this possibility of an intergenerational conversation about language and movement, you immediately came to mind as you had emailed me earlier this year asking about Black poetry, an email which I never responded to [Alaja laughs]. Apologies for that. I got so overwhelmed by just the thought of Black poetry and how to even start that list because there's so much, there's just so much to talk about and offer. I know you from the Training Program, as I taught you for two years, just as very astute and articulate and curious and brave and thoughtful. It really seems like since graduation you've really come into your power this year, from what I've seen on social media and what you're posting. You were my immediate, actually my only thought, when it came to who would be my partner in this conversation. So thank you for agreeing to join me in this experiment with Dancers' Group.

We do speak at LINES a lot about language, I think. About movement as language, and hopefully more pragmatically than just the stereotypical abstract tropes about like "movement's a language" and it ends there. In just thinking about language as we speak—it has intonation, it has pauses, it has punctuation, it has extreme shades of volume, it has the stream-of-consciousness. Really trying to link movement as a possibility to embody all of those

qualities of language, and how did you find that when you were training at LINES? Was that a new concept, or...?

Alaja: I think for me, it was a new concept. I think what became apparent besides language being a product became more of a process, a happening, same with movement. I ended up traveling to Europe between the two years of the Training Program for dance itself in Holland, and not everyone spoke English, so I realized that it was universal what they were teaching at LINES. And also not only was it that, but poetry was kind of the same thing in that way of it's experienced so much different culture and different backgrounds and it always comes to circle back around as some sort of not white supremacist tradition. Same with movement I think, it comes in all shapes or forms. I think it wasn't a new concept, but it was just reintroduced to me in a new format.

Maurya: I love the idea of it as a happening, as opposed to a thing that's happened. Also this idea that I do think there is much greater access and representation for Blackness in language and in poetry than there is in dance, in traditional dance, so I do think that can be a really good entrance point. I like the idea of that.

So when I started looking through poems to share with you in preparation for our conversation today, I was somewhat shocked to find myself in this rut of picking poems only by Black poets that dealt very directly with the quote-unquote "Black experience." Because you and I are both Black women, I needed to attend to that in a specific way, which is *completely* counter to everything that I do artistically [Alaja laughs], and how I speak about Blackness and creation and how I move through the world, in that I'm really defiantly against any sort of monolithic or stereotypical or didactic representation of Blackness, so it was a really odd moment for me to realize that I was doing that and had to pause and re-enter myself, and I'm still not quite sure what that was about. Just sort of going back to your email that I didn't answer earlier this year about really wanting some information about Black poets, and really understanding that desire, but also wondering if you can talk a little bit more about that, how Blackness and language has been important, or is important, to you.

Alaja: I had a series of life events happen after the Training Program, starting in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Losing my brother on my ancestral African-American side of the family was a connection that I was looking for already, or going and looking forward to having, and losing it before that made me dive into what is also the time in the world, the biggest Civil Rights Movement in history, of what is Blackness, how is it created, what is that for me and is also already within my artforms that I love such as dance, because it's not being really represented to me besides at the LINES Training Program by you and other teachers. I wanted to dig up and represent it in other things in my life that I love, like other art mediums, such as, I feel like poetry is its own art medium almost, that feeds into dance and why this conversation is being had. I was mostly looking for that, some sort of representation that I could relate to and try and find words to what I was going through.

Maurya: Yeah. I mean I read a lot poetry, and there has been I think, I don't want to say an explosion, but there has been more intentional poetry being created and published this year around this moment in time, which I really feel like is a moment of white people coming into reality, into the reality that Black people deal with. And I think partially when I was trying to think about poems to talk about today or to just have a reference of or a base from which to depart, I was leaning in on some of those poems but also realizing that I want to talk about poems that have meant something more historical for me or have helped to layer me in more long-term ways.

And we shared a little bit of each other's poetry which was great [*both laugh*]. I did notice the poem you sent me had rhyming couplets and I was just curious about your feelings or experience with form in poetry. What you like to read or what you like to write? Was that unusual for you to write a rhyming couplet or...?

Alaja: Yeah, it was unusual. I also feel like it's very childlike, and that's where it sends me. It sends me back into my inner child when I rhyme like that. And I think that's somewhere I haven't visited in a long time. Just that feeling of rhyme—I think it's all the childhood nurseries we were told, or just the books that we read, that at that time became so, it was always in your head. You could repeat it out loud, so many cheers or rhymes, when I was growing up. Who knows if they even have that now, you know, but I feel like that's what it has brought back to me. It's not something that I usually do, but I feel like it adds that.

Maurya: I agree it has a childlike quality, but it's actually *really* hard to do [*Alaja laughs*]. I reread it yesterday and was like, "Oh my god, that's so amazing." I find rhyming to be really difficult, so I feel like it's a lot of effort to go into that childlike space, a lot of adult effort to get there. I was kind of impressed.

So we can maybe reference the poems we shared. We both shared one by Mary Oliver, again a pretty amazing poet and writer who died, I think, last year. And then you shared one by Rupi Kaur.

Alaja: Yes, that's correct.

Maurya: And then I shared one by Rita Dove. So I'm wondering if you want to talk a little bit about why you shared those poems with me.

Alaja: The first one by Mary Oliver, "[When Death Comes](#)" is what it's called. After the COVID-19 crisis and, not after, but during the very beginning of this three months of very long quarantine before I could get back into the studio because Oregon mandates are a little bit different, I started choreographing in masks this piece for my teenagers here in Oregon that I work with, and I made a piece called *Between Life and Death* signified from all that's happening in the world and all the life experience I was going through with grief. I recently reset it on an intimate group of teenagers, less than what I had this summer. And I worked with two bodies of language: "When Death Comes" by Mary Oliver and then this book *Lessons from the Dying* by

Rodney Smith, and basically used those two things to create movement and create phrase work and get into sensation.

One thing I really think that poetry holds is a movement with the five senses. It has full-body experience, and I'm wondering if it's the same for you actually. Does it have the potential or do you believe that it's a full-body experience just the way that movement is? You often say that in dance training that no matter how small it is, it is a full-body experience. I think that poetry can bring the same thing, and wondering what your insight is with that with creating movement as well.

Maurya: I'm such a fan of sensation in movement, and I feel like that's again how we feed ourselves as movers. It has to be deeply and pleasurable embodied, and for me I find that with sensation. It's interesting, I haven't thought about poetry in terms of a physical sensation. That's interesting.

So when I use language as sort of an infrastructure for movement, I started doing that because when I started choreographing, I was pretty severely injured and wasn't able to just sort of move. And so I relied on language, which has been something that I've loved ever since I was little, as a pretty literal transcription of "this is a word, or this is a phrase, or this is an idea, and this is how I'm going to manifest it in my body." I also don't necessarily trust my body to do interesting movement [*Alaja laughs*]. Because we all have our habits and our defaults and I feel like my go-tos aren't necessarily going to be interesting or sustainable for a piece. So I use language to get me out of my habits and my predilections, and I feel like it's been really good at forcing me to create new language in my body. I continually rely on that. I mean I just made a piece for a school in Berkeley, and I also really relied on a piece of text at least to start me in a direction. It's been invaluable, and I feel like it's a piece that I use consistently, whether it's really literal or it's more imagistic, in terms of that transcription. I'm curious to hear more about you: the sense of sensation with language.

Alaja: I think that poetry has this, what you represent for Black people as a sense of wonder, and I think for me, I'm always someone that has a hard time connecting to my imagination, and I always thought that was weird. Like something happened in my teenage years, maybe that's just society itself or me evolving, but I became, and I still am like this, I become more interested in sensation rather than imagination, just because I have a hard time imagining. But I feel like poetry brings this place where the language lets me imagine and have a sensation at the same time. It's the closest thing to feeling like movement is a full-body experience, like our body is our medium, and I feel like in poetry, language is its own medium. Poetry is its own medium because it can make language come alive.

[music]

Andréa: We're back with *In Conversation* with Maurya and Alaja. Thanks for listening!

Maurya: You had mentioned in an email to me, I think last week, about imagination. You feel like you've had fear of it, or I forget the exact language that you used. But just feeling like you haven't gone into that space. Like you said, because something happened or... Which is interesting because I find that you as a dancer, I feel like I see a lot of imagination in your body. Which, it sounds like, for you is sensation which we could say are correlates in different entrances. But I feel you as an imaginative creature in the world [*both laugh*]. Maybe it's just an issue of semantics or maybe it's an issue of just allowing yourself. I do feel like wonder, which is something that I talk about a lot in work, is very closely tied to imagination. Again, those sorts of limitations have been put on people of color, Black people, Indigenous people, around, like, fairy tales. When have you seen a Black person in a fairy tale? Never. And so there's that lack of representation in this world of wonderment that children are brought up in, which I feel like can really limit us in seeing ourselves as rightful heirs to that kind of legacy. So, I'm going to be your imagination cheerleader now [*Alaja laughs*] in the background.

Just in terms of the poem "When Death Comes" by Mary Oliver, I'm just going to read my favorite lines from it:

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

(Excerpt from "When Death Comes" by Mary Oliver)

So amazing! I feel like that is very much about wonderment. To be a creature "married to amazement." And just opening, being aware of the delight and the joy that is around us all the time, in equal measure I hope to the sorrow and the horror. I think they're sort of inevitable twins. Do you have a favorite line from that poem?

Alaja: Yeah, it's actually the first...

*When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering...*

(Excerpt from "When Death Comes" by Mary Oliver)

I feel like that for me is very descriptive of what death is, or similar to the feeling of when you walk outside on a gloomy day and it had just freshly rained, it reminds me of that sensation of the way you would describe the way that you're feeling without the words "sorrow," "grief," or "sadness." It's describing it, and without those words.

Maurya: That's beautiful. And it does seem like, I don't know your experience with grief or death, but it seems like with your brother dying this year was a huge event that I'm sure has really colored, obviously your life, but your choreographic and creative output as well. I'm imagining this poem also feeds into that.

Alaja: It does.

Maurya: You also talked about a poem by Rupi Kaur, do you want to speak about that a bit more?

Alaja: Yeah, it's very short. I'll just read it here:

Maurya: Great.

Alaja:

*representation
is vital
otherwise the butterfly
surrounded by a group of moths
unable to see itself
will keep trying to become the moth*

("representation" from *the sun and her flowers* by Rupi Kaur)

This speaks to me on whole other levels. Rupi Kaur is a woman of color as well and I recently bought one of her books called *home body*, her newest one. This excerpt I just read is from *the sun and her flowers*, but she just talks about the world progressing in a way that sometimes leaves out what we see as women of color or people of color. One of the most recent things I read too, relating to this, is you can't have a feminist movement without Black trans women—those things don't exist. And really what is that feminism? A lot of feminism carries that white supremacy. I see a lot especially with "I'm a feminist!" People are so quick to scream that without fully representing what that truly is. I feel like that poem speaks to this. I also just feel that it reminds me of this exercise at LINES that we've learned where we flock together. We have a person that leads the movement. It reminds me of being in that flock and really representing that person, so that they feel heard and seen, and also just growing up in the dance world as a Black woman, I don't see myself that often except when I came to LINES, or at least see that it's possible to even succeed in my medium/what I love to do as a

choreographer or as a professional dancer or dance educator. It wasn't until I came there that I really had the "Oh my gosh, I can do this."

Maurya: Right. And again, we say "Representation matters," but it truly, truly does. And I think it can kind of light the flame. Give it the juice that it needs. It's been there but it's been dormant and just waking that up with seeing yourself in your teachers, in your peers.

I mean obviously, the feminist movement is very problematic. I think we know that all the pink-hatted, Blackout Tuesday-posting white women who voted for Trump—I think a lot of them would consider themselves feminists. And obviously intersectional feminism and the Womanist Movement—there is no feminism without Black women. I think that's really critical.

But I love that. I know of Rupi Kaur, I think someone gave me a book of hers for a gift last year that I haven't delved into. I have so many poetry books that I need to read and I keep buying them. I think that's a COVID happening that's going on—I keep buying books.

Alaja: I guess I have a question for you. We're talking about language, and does it inspire quality of movement? Or is that something that comes later? I know you were talking earlier about how it gets you out of yourself and brings you into something new, but as far as quality or dynamic or pace, does the breaking of lines [of a poem] describe it? Do the words describe it? Or are there some words that you repeat?

Maurya: So I'll actually read this poem. I just created a piece for the students of Berkeley Ballet Theater. We were going to rehearse outside obviously because of COVID and protocol. And so this is a poem by [Donika Kelly](#), who I urge you to look up. But it's called "Love Poem: Centaur." I'm just going to read it because this completely fueled both idea but also quality of movement in a very specific way.

"Love Poem: Centaur" by Donika Kelly

Nothing approaches a field like me. Hard gallop, hard chest—hooves and mane and flicking tail. My love: I apprehend each flower, each winged body, saturated in a light that burnishes. I would make a burnishing of you, by which I mean a field in flower, by which I mean, a breaching—my hands making an arrow of themselves, rooting the loosened dirt. I would make for you the barest of sounds, wing against wing, there, at the point of articulation. Love, I pound the earth for you. I pound the earth.

So amazing!

Alaja: So amazing.

Maurya: Yeah, so I actually made a piece about horses galloping in a field [*Alaja laughs*] because of this poem. And I really tried to find that sense of hard hoof and hard chest and hoof and mane and flicking tail. Those qualities are so specific and are not innate in our human bodies, and so really trying to find that sense of freedom and force in new ways and also this possibility—I mean we rehearsed in a park—so there is this possibility of flicking tails and galloping and pounding the earth. And so I feel like I approach processes differently, hopefully—it's sort of a goal to process things differently all the time. But language can figure into my imaginings in really different ways. And for this, because of the time that we're in and because of COVID and because of that lack of physical closeness—even in the field we were socially distanced—trying to create something that has a little bit more... I don't know if aggression is the right word... but I'm making this hoofing-the-ground motion as I'm thinking [*both laugh*], but that tactile sense of dirt and body.

Donika Kelly is a Black woman. And I think I am so in love with non-stereotypical representations of Blackness. To be a Black poet or Black choreographer or Black dancer doesn't mean writing about protests or writing about struggle. And again, I mean I've talked about this sense of needing to galvanize ourselves—and by "ourselves," I'm really talking about white people—but we need to galvanize around Black life, and not Black death. This poem for me is so full of life, it's so saturated with that experience of just being alive in the same way that the Mary Oliver [poem]—what you read about and what I read about being "a bride married to amazement"—I feel like it has that connective tissue of "Oh my god, you mean I am a human living in the world and Blackness is part of my humanity and part of how I live in the world, but it is not the crowning, defining identity marker that I hold."

I think [Ross Gay](#) is also a really amazing Black poet who speaks to a larger human experience in thinking about joy, that I feel like is so valuable in that joy is an act of resistance. I think that's super important to remember amidst how much society is focused on the spectacularization of Blackness and Black death and Black sorrow and Black oppression. Which is incredibly real and endemic and part of this nation's birth story, but I also feel like we need, I need, those different stories that speak to the other parts of me and my Blackness.

[music]

Andréa: We're back with *In Conversation* with Maurya and Alaja. Thanks for listening!

Maurya: And also, we haven't talked about this much, but I am also curious because both of us are both rather light-skinned Black people and how that has figured into your reckoning around this time or just into your identification as a Black woman.

I know that's a big question.

Alaja: Yeah, dang... [/laughs] I personally have experienced a majority of things I thought I never would experience during this civil rights [movement]. I've been yelled at on the street, I've been just harassed for no reason, and maybe I'm Black but I'm also a queer woman and that just becomes so much to unload. It's a shame that I have my own friends/people I'm not friends with anymore because they are darker than me and they don't think that I'm experiencing oppression, but that's what's happening. It is what it is, but I also would rather fight on the same side than try and get into it that much. But knowing that I've experienced the same harassment, maybe not the direct same, but I've experienced levels of harassment just for walking on the street. It's ridiculous.

What about you? I could ask you the same question.

Maurya: Yeah, it's such a big question. This year I feel like I've been trying to reckon with this. I definitely have proximity to whiteness, and I have proximity to white privilege. And really owning that. I feel like I've had probably less experience than you of being harassed on the street for my Blackness. I had much more incidences of that as a child. And I've had a lot of incidences in the last couple years, and particularly this year, of being harassed by darker Black people questioning my Blackness. It's gotten to the point now—it has made me cry, it has made me question, and I definitely want to own my privilege—but I'm also just over it. And it's actually taken this year of being questioned so many times that I'm like, "You know what? My Blackness is not up for conversation! It's not a conversation piece and I'm not going to defend it." And that feels really amazing to get to that point of not having to justify my Blackness. But it's definitely been a personal journey, which I feel like a lot of mixed-race people have to come through. It's a very rich and complicated and painful question for a lot of people.

I feel like I'm going to totally misquote Caroline [Randall Williams]... She wrote an article in *The New York Times* opinion section about her Blackness. She's also a light-skinned Black woman. Just about the reality that her skin color is the product of rape. And how potent that was to read that and recognize myself in that. It's an op-ed by Caroline Randall Williams and it's entitled "[You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument.](#)" It starts with saying:

I have rape-colored skin. My light-brown-blackness is a living testament to the rules, the practices, the causes of the Old South.

If there are those who want to remember the legacy of the Confederacy, if they want monuments, well, then, my body is a monument. My skin is a monument.

(Excerpt from "You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument" by Caroline Randall Williams)

And it helped me feel really empowered in my own experience of Blackness and [I wrote a poem](#) that was published this year about my great-grandmother on my paternal side, which is the

Black side of my biological family, who actually killed a white man who raped her. That's the rumor.

Alaja: Oh, wow.

Maurya: I know! Talk about an emboldening family history. I am descended from Black women who *killed* the white men who messed with them. [Alaja laughs] To think about the different legacies of that and that even in my proximity to whiteness and white privilege, I do have a history with my skin color.

Alaja: It's a double-parallel and it just shows that I think mixed people are looked at in such a way of "You're not one or the other, so you're just whatever," and I really feel like Caroline adds that realness to what it's actually like and to what it actually is with language describing it. It's amazing to me to describe something in a way where it feels exactly the way it is, without using direct words like, "Oh, you're just feeling left out or excluded and not inclusive." No, this is the feeling that I'm feeling 'cause this is the woman that's experienced the same thing as me. And not often do I get to have conversations about what it's like to be light-skinned or have that 50-50. I grew up in a white household and my father didn't have the best upbringing so his life was completely different. I'm lucky now to have a connection with him, but I still have privilege and then I also don't have privilege.

Maurya: Right, right. And I also grew up in a white household. I think it's interesting also to talk about biological Blackness, cultural Blackness. There's so many different threads of how we piece together that question of "What is Black?" knowing that we never talk about "What is white?" Yeah, so I'll leave that there. [both laugh]

[music]

Andréa: We're back with *In Conversation* with Maurya and Alaja. Thanks for listening!

Maurya: And I wanted to read a little bit of this poem by Rita Dove that I added to our conversation because I used this poem as the inspiration or the building blocks for a duet that I performed of Alonzo [King]'s many, many years ago. It was a pas de deux in a piece entitled *Ground* that he actually choreographed on Dance Theatre of Harlem. It's just this amazing duet that was so regal and I was actually second cast to the amazing Christina Johnson.

Alaja: Oh my gosh.

Maurya: I had a lot of regalness to live up to, but the line that stuck out to you is the line that I used as my base for this duet. It's the end of the poem, it says:

*The mystery is, you can eat fear
before fear eats you,*

*you can live beyond dying –
and become a queen
whom nothing surprises.*

(Excerpt from "[THE NARCISSUS FLOWER](#)" by Rita Dove)

That helped me quell my anxiety around performing it, but also this sense of queenliness and regality that felt so deeply embodied and rich in Rita Dove's words. It's definitely a moment of dancing that stood out to me, and the fact that I really relied on the words of that poem to ride me through, it felt like it added such a different dimensionality to who I could become in that moment. Powerful lines, definitely.

Alaja: That's a direct way to really embody choreography and any sort of movement that you have to do that you're feeling nervous about. I always tell my students, and one thing I really took from LINES, is that you just have to eat it. [laughs] You just have to eat it up!

Maurya: Yeah!

Alaja: That's sometimes a really hard task to be asked to do, to just enjoy and lather and rinse in the moment, the present! That's one thing I feel like dancers and movement artists share is that they kind of stop time for a second, like poetry. They stop time in a way that you're living in the present, you're experiencing this sensation of what's going on currently in the imagery/descriptive language that you're reading that captures the now, rather than what's going to happen next or what just happened. You can only live right now.

Maurya: I mean I think that's definitely something that's a challenge for teaching students right now, because everyone's so worried about the future. Just like with a meal—Alonzo often relates to eating and food—in your meal that you're eating, you're generally just thinking about that meal! And hopefully enjoying it—masticating, digesting, getting fuel from that moment and that meal—and we often don't do that obviously in life but also in dance. I feel like dropping into sensation and the possibility of deriving joy and food from that sensation is so crucial right now in terms of surviving this time. And self-care and again that sense that taking care of the self is political, especially for BIPOC people. That to enjoy your own body and the sensations in your body in doing what you love, whether that's writing or reading or dancing or taking a walk, that *is* political. I feel that it's important that we acknowledge that and also just take that on. Like I am going to read this poem and this is going to feed me in ways that a lot of people don't want me to be fed. And similarly with movement.

Alaja: Yeah.

Maurya: Any last thoughts or questions, Alaja? Comments?

Alaja: I've been really encouraging my students to use their throat chakra in a way of being able to speak or say "Yes, I got it," or stuff like that, because I feel like in our culture, dance culture,

we're told to not to speak in a way, and I agree also with not being distracted, but to respond in a way of "Yes, I can hear my voice. Yes, I can hear myself saying this. And yes, I'm tuned in." And I think poetry brings that same experience of what I said of being tuned in but also when you're writing it, you're tuned in to what's going on in your surroundings and where you are, and I think it's just really important to give the next generation, and this one too that's upcoming and taking over, that voice in poetry and language and movement.

Maurya: Yeah, definitely. Have you ever had the students read the poem that you're referencing out loud?

Alaja: Yeah, I actually taught last night on Zoom. I created a phrase from a poem and they created their own phrase from the poem, we ended up putting them together and this week we'll create a whole phrase together from that one poem. So really stemming back to language again. There's this part that goes "Snap, crackle, pop" and we do this soul sensation of that whole in-the-full-body-experience movement of what those words would feel like and even saying them while we're doing it.

Maurya: Right, awesome. Well, it's been a delight.

Alaja: Yes, it's been wonderful.

Maurya: Thank you for speaking about language and movement and Blackness. And like I said, I'm going to be your imagination cheerleader [*Alaja laughs*], so expect some emails from me.

Alaja: I appreciate that, and I appreciate this opportunity and I was manifesting to hear from someone that experiences what I'm going through, so it was good to hear and good to experience this.

Andréa: Thank you both so much for joining us for this audio experience. For additional content that reflects our dynamic dance community, please visit the *In Dance* article archive at dancersgroup.org.