

Horizon Radio: Female Bodies Transcript

Hello and welcome to Horizon Radio.

Horizon is a new international performing arts showcase at the Edinburgh festivals. Horizon Radio is a chance to delve deeper into the practice of the showcase artists and get to know them better. What you are about to hear is a conversation between artists Sung Im Her, and RashDash co-directors, Abby Greenland and Becky Wilkie; Co-hosted by Horizon Consortium members Kate Craddock and Kate Yedigaroff, exploring the representation of female bodies.

We hope you enjoy listening.

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Kate C: Hello and welcome to Horizon Radio. Today we're going to be joined in conversation by Sung Im Her and RashDash. Horizon Radio is an opportunity for us to get some more insight into some of the artists who are going to be presenting their work as part of the Horizon showcase. My name is Kate Craddock, and I'm the festival director of GIFT and we're one of the consortium partners who are delivering Horizon. I'm going to pass you over to my co-host today, Kate Yedigaroff.

Kate Y: Thank you Kate. Hi, I'm Kate Yedigaroff. I'm co-director of MAYK producing organisation based in Bristol and also one of the consortium partners.

So this conversation today is looking at bodies as our kind of starting point and specifically representation of the female body.

And to kick us off I'm going to ask the people here to introduce themselves. And if you can say you are and a little bit about who you are as an artist and your practice more generally.

And then also if you can we thought it might be interesting to hear about what your relationship is so far to Edinburgh Festival. Abby would you like to start?

Abby: Yeah sure. I'm Abby. I'm one third of RashDash. We're a physical theatre company based in Leeds. We've been working together for years now and Becky who is also part of today's podcast joined us in as a more permanent member of RashDash, before then it was just Helen and I. Helen is directing the show that we're presenting as part of Horizon, but isn't here today.

And Edinburgh Festival is where we started. So it seems like a very precarious model financially speaking, but we got a small grant from our University and we took our first show in to Edinburgh festival and then we took a second show in which won some awards and that was how we got to stop being a company. So it felt like we actually probably wouldn't

have got to start making work like we do and writing applications to the Arts Council if we hadn't had a load of programmers show up at Edinburgh festival and see our work. So although it doesn't feel like something that lots of people can make work. We were lucky enough to make it work for a few years and it's, it's how we got to make a few shows and and get out there.

Kate Y: Great. Glad that happened! and Becky, do you want to say hi?

Becky: Yes, I can say hi. Hi. I'm another one of the three members of RashDash. I've always been a musician and a songwriter and I started off those first two shows that RashDash took up to Edinburgh I was there playing music and then over the years sort of been in and out of the company, but got more and more involved and now just make theatre, that is what I do. And yeah Edinburgh, I've been up the same, well, actually not as many times as Abby. But yeah, it feels like somewhere that, I mean I also have family in Edinburgh so as the city I know it quite well and it's very different when the festival is on but the festival is is a kind of wild chaos that is exhausting and brilliant in equal measures.

We're looking forward to dipping our toes in rather than going for the full month this year. A week seems like a reasonable ask of the body and mind of the Edinburgh festival the month is a lot.

Kate Y: And finally welcoming to conversation Sung Im.

Sung Im: Hello. Hello, my name is Sung Im Her. I'm a dancer and choreographer. I started my career in Korea. I am at in Korea at the moment and so I have a one foot in Korea and then I had been living and studied in Belgium for years. Last years. I have one foot in in Belgium. And now I'm living in UK in London since six years with my child and my husband so my one another foot is in UK, so I've been traveling in between these three continent back and forth back and forth. Um, yes, my practice my work is mainly about the feeling that how I've been feeling as the Foreigner or as an Asian person, as an Asian female body living in Europe in UK far away from home.

So my work has been a lot influenced by this kind of feeling foreign body I would say. My relationship with the Edinburgh festival is this the first time. I'm really really looking forward. I know it's gonna be chaotic and storming but I'm really looking forward to put my toes.

Kate Y: Great. Thank you

Kate C: Yes, thank you so much for those introductions and really really exciting that you're all going to be presenting your work in the Showcase. So one of the one of the questions and one of the reasons we thought we'd bring you together was that we we really felt that maybe there was a sort of connecting thematic perhaps between your work or between the works at your presenting. And one of those was really the way in which women are represented or perhaps not represented and perhaps that that's a sort of connection between the two pieces that are going to be part of Horizon and just wondered if you could

say something about how you use your bodies and or voices, perhaps in your work, to maybe challenge how women are represented how they're portrayed or understood and that can be both in relationship to your shows that you're presenting as well as your practice more broadly. So do feel free to talk about other works as well if that feels appropriate. I don't know who might want to respond to that first. There's a big wordy question.

Sung Im: Maybe I start?

Kate C: Fantastic. Yeah, please do.

Sung Im: So um, so what, how, I so I studied about make it, so this creation started from where I feel like, a female body has been objectified and how it's not equal enough with the you know, how we see female body and what we want to show as a female to the words. Like the K-pop is it's everywhere now, like everybody's learning k-pops and when you see how they move do they really know what they're doing or you know, like I've get sometimes be confused. I mean, I'm very proud of K-pop which is like, you know, but still yet that I feel like that as a female how we looking at our body.

It's sometimes are we really looking at our body in that way or it's been forced by the society or male gaze?

So it's it's mainly my trip has been and not crush itself. It shows long hair. The key of the movement is probably the long black hair with a naked back with a lot of hip movements.

So the beginning part of the whole show starts to where where they're standing back and just shaking their hips endlessly. They're shaking their hair endlessly showing their naked back endlessly. Until it gets really brutal or yeah. And then how it it transforms into turn. They went these figures turns and and show their like blast of the joy where we can drive ourselves by ourselves. Yeah. And that's the key movement of the show and then voice wise.

That I have been not using any sounds for about like half of the show. But just the count by ourselves and this this military sounds of the of the pressed voice count and we have to be in the system that it kind of impressed and then it gets faster and faster until you cannot hold anymore. Yeah, it sounds very harsh. And and it is very tough a show. But yet there is the kind of like a blast of the enjoyment of how we can take the charge of our own body and blessed about it. Yes.

Kate C: And you're performing in the work as well, is that correct?

Sung Im: Sorry?

Kate C: You're performing in the work as well as choreographing?

Sung Im: Yes.

Kate C: Yeah, okay. Yes. And so there's something there. That's also interesting about you're putting your own body in the work alongside other bodies and. Yeah, I didn't know if you wanted to say something about that too?

Sung Im: It's a lot. It's really a lot. It's like constantly you have to think of that. Okay the music. Okay, the sound okay the light. Okay the choreography the relationship with me and the audience the relationship between me and the other dancers and the space. So it's a lot. But yet therefore I think the the joy is also really double.

So I was doubting, could I erase myself or to put another body and then just be outside?

But I think I want to be fully engaged and fully enjoy the trip this time. So yes, I'm here I go again.

Kate C: Right endlessly, endlessly, endlessly! Okay and great and just handing over to RashDash as well. I don't know whether one of you wanted to either respond maybe just something that you just heard or go back to that question or prompt that kind of introduced us.

Abby: I was just thinking about putting your own body in the work because I realized that our bodies are always in the work. So we're always in the work that we make and I think usually and across the body of our work we've been interested in strength and power and vulnerability and in kind of working out how our bodies can be all of those things. I feel like often people talk about RashDash as making shows about women and I always get very anxious about that because we're not making shows about women generally because that's too kind of multiple and various to talk about, there are so many women who are so different with so many different perspectives and experiences, but we're often talking we're always talking in the small part or a large part actually about our own experience of being women, but that is a very individual experience and it feels like it's all about using our bodies and our voices to show the wholeness of the experience of being a human it feels like lots and lots of the work that I engage with when I was growing up and I still engage with is about men being full complicated human beings and so allowing, so putting shows together in which women are full complicated human beings that are wonderful and mean and cruel and joyful and mundane is really important and and yeah physicality plays a large part of how we try and represent that.

But what I was just thinking when you were talking about your show was that although our shows are often about strength and kind of showing some kind of strength some kind of muscularity and that there is something hugely vulnerable about being in your own work because once I've got off stage once we've come off and we've finished doing this thing that we've made that we are either sure of or not sure of depending on how you feel after any given show.

You've decided to put yourself in this work that you've made and that is a hugely vulnerable thing to do because it feels quite exposing and that was never more true than when we

made 'Two Man Show' and we would deciding to be naked on stage for the first time and trying to take control of the context in which we were naked. So trying to say we're not here to be objectified that we're trying to be naked but without a male gaze. Trying to be naked and and you to see our bodies rather than you to see whether we're attractive or not, essentially. That felt that felt like a really big first step for us. I mean, I think you'd agree Becky because we had lots and lots of conversations about whether it was the right choice and in some ways we were very angry about those conversations we were having because we were like why is nakedness any more of a choice than genes but it just feels like it is obviously, but it feels like since we made 'Two Man Show' which we made in and which we did take to Edinburgh festival. It's freed us up, it's freed me up. I feel much more relaxed about getting my body out and just being a body on stage because we did so much thinking and talking about what it means to be a body on stage in front of people and to try and control the context within which people are viewing your body.

Becky: I also think that going even further than being, you know comfortable with the body being a body on stage. I think doing that show the first few shows that we did in Edinburgh where we we were naked for the first time we were kind of really terrified because I think it's a lot of people's you know nightmare is kind of a classic nightmare setup is, I'm in a room full of people naked people who know me and then doing that and you know, it being a little bit scary initially and then because of you know, how we how we'd made it happen in the show.

Growing into the confidence in that and then touring it and growing just yeah, it means that in life now. I just feel like I have a bit of a superpower having had, because once hundreds of people have seen you naked then then that is not fear anymore because that's literally happened. And so yeah, there's a real weird strength and body confidence that comes from that, despite there being reviews about what you know pubic hair we did or didn't have or how, what size we were or which did happen and and I don't know if any woman can get naked on stage without that happening which is telling in a way. But yeah.

Sung Im: I think once, once my husband even mentioned like I think the whole world have seen you more naked than I have. just free myself, but I think it's, I think it's, I wish so this performance I'm also topless - what I wish to audience go through is to see the genderless body in the end. It's not about female body is not about the size. It's not about what we do. It's about just a body the pure body. I think that would be yeah that I think that would be the goal of yeah, the performance that I will touch you.

Becky: Yeah that felt like what we were that's going for as well 'Two Man Show' Abby and Helen were both playing men in scenes. And so there was a yeah, definitely a, we were trying to represent a spectrum of gender. That was not binary.

Kate Y: So it feels like you've all, there's a conversation here about. So firstly I'm kind of interested in the fact that this notion of joy came up so soon and I wondered if you could speak a bit more about the presence of joy and kind of enjoyment around bodies in your work. And then also we were thinking about power as a concept and how that exists in your in your practice sort of how it runs through things or how you understand that in relation to what it is you're saying in your work.

As in who has it and yeah those dynamics.

Abby: The show that we made after 'Two Man Show' was 'Three Sisters' and we had this, we had this guiding principle, which was that when we're making our work it was stronger in that process than in any sense, but it's really affected my whole life since making it, is that we should take radical pleasure in what we're doing and we should make sure choices that bring us pleasure in terms of how we assemble the structure of the show, but also in terms of what we're choosing to do with our bodies and our voices because rather than talking about how squashed or how sidelined we feel it felt more interesting to just take space in a joyful and confident way and that has yeah influenced everything that we've made since then, radical pleasure.

Kate Y: And what do you mean by radical pleasure? Is it are you meaning that the act of seeing pleasure is radical in that way or is there something else there?

Abby: Yeah, I think so. I think it means rather than thinking about how to communicate. What we want to communicate and how to structure a show. So that you will think what we want you to think. We will make pleasurable choices and hopefully that choice of to take pleasure in our work and what we're doing and what we're putting in front of you and to take pleasure in singing the songs that we are deciding to sing. It will be an infectious gift of a show because I mean, I remember I have one person that I mentor she came to see that show and she said that she watched it and she thought how dare these women take this space, how dare they be so self-centred and so self-obsessed. I wish I could do that. And I think that felt like what we wanted to be doing we wanted to be saying we're going to do this we invite you to do this too and it feels very particular because when you're making a show you are making work you are at work and to take pleasure in your work feels like a radical act and to take pleasure in your body feels like a radical act and to do those both together for like a really important idea.

Kate Y: Yeah.

Kate C: Does that resonate with you Sung In Her that idea of radical pleasure?

Sung Im: And so yes, so the yeah, so in 'Nutcrusher' they say we I kind of like really put this his three figures in a really strict. How they move or how they it's like a puppeteer. So for example, like you imagine the chess board and you have to move one two and the other go sideway and it has to be like a measured. A very perfectly and that it goes very easy. This this kind of like a measurement goes even more rigid and stronger and then there's kind of like a transform into head banging Rock and Roll Party. You see head banging is more of a rock concert or male with the guitarist with a machoist thing. But how it is small female figures like rocking for like minutes of head banging with a pleasure like and then it's to be honest it's really really tiring but I always like I ask my dancers and I tell myself I scream to everybody: Smile! And then because we smile we have more fun we have more joy And that is very important that we have to have fun as Abby said. We need to have fun on the stage. Otherwise, why do we do this? There's no no reason we do it. So yes, it's extremely physical but yet my goal is is whenever we are on the stage we need to have fun.

Even if it's, it doesn't matter how hard it is the physically the demanding and the concentration is very high, but we need to have fun and that's always the the most important part of our journey. To talk about power I think in how I play the power in the show is the Gaze, how we see you.

Or how the audience is seeing you or how, where we show you or where we want you to see us. It is kind of game, gaze game, that we play. Yeah.

Kate Y: Gaze game. I like that.

Kate C: I'm quite excited for you to experience each other's works. I think there'll be a lot to talk about after that's happened after we've gazed at each other. And I wanted to kind of just go back a little bit to something that RashDash mentioned earlier on around kind of in those reviews like the things that were picked up about the naked body maybe being on stage. And but just to sort of think about that as one among many things that might be different in terms of how your work is received in a UK context as opposed to maybe another international context potentially or whether we feel like that's the sort of thing that might be picked up anywhere. I don't know. So just as a sort of final reflection, I just thought it'd be nice just to hear a bit from both of you around how your sort of ideas around power or the choices that you've made in terms of the way you present your bodies on stage is sort of, how's that received in different contexts where you've presented your works before? Sung Im Her maybe do you want to start and having talked about feet in different places?

Sung Im: Yes. I don't know if it's really related to the naked body. But if I can talk about the international context and so I have been presented in Korea and Belgium, Luxemburg, Amsterdam, UK. I kind of wanted to give the end of the show a little bit of open. So I didn't want audience. Just give applause and just leave. So there's a yeah, I don't I kind of like I don't want them to clap. So they kind of have a little bit of confused time when they have to exit or go or not go. it's a choice by them and each country has really different reaction. For example in UK I feel like okay I think it's done. We need to go out as soon as possible so they can rest so they just go even in five minutes and in Korea they were very polite. So they stay as long as they can. And then once one person go everybody leaves. In Belgium, it was very interesting. minutes. they did not go. They went out get the beer because this Belgium and they came back to see the end. They're like ongoing process because we don't leave until audience leaves, you know, like we are on the stage as they're like broken body. We just stays there we slow we move very slowly, but we are just like in sculpture, you know. So by the country, we had a very, very different reaction the end of the part and it was very interesting and I'm looking forward to receive in Edinburgh what kind of end there would be.

Kate C: Yeah, especially within the Fringe context with the tight turn arounds and the next show getting ready to come and the audience refusing to leave. It's gonna be fun. And Abby or Becky. I'm not sure that you've got anything else you wanted to bring into that.

Abby: We haven't done lots of performing outside of the UK context. I guess with 'Two Man Show' which was the show in which we were naked for a lot of the show we couldn't perform it. There were lots of people, well, some people were interested in programming it outside of the UK, but they actually said I don't think that that would be safe necessarily where we are. So I know that that actually being naked stopped us from touring to some places where it might have been nice to take the show and I guess my only other thought around it is that when we made 'We Want You To Watch' which was a show about violent pornography, we made that show with and for the National Theatre and we make it like we make a lot of our shows. It's kind of formerly not very conventional and I think that seeing a show of ours at the National Theatre, lots of people who had different expectations of what theatre should be and so were really surprised by what we did and how we used our bodies because we deliberately completely exhausted ourselves and drove ourselves to the very edge of what was possible in one scene in that show. And rather than kind of sitting with that and being interested in what we were doing what we were saying people just thought, I think this is my impression of it. Who knows what they thought but the reviews and what and my experience of being on stage was that people thought. Oh, these poor girls don't really know what they're doing, they seem very tired. And actually it felt like something that we were trying to, we were trying to make a very powerful gesture and since then lots of our work has involved a moment in the show where we try to let the audience know that everything you're seeing, everything they were doing is deliberate and we did this on purpose because I find that being women and when we were younger women that people thought oh, I wonder if these women have meant to make what they've made and as we get older and I'm more and more sure that we meant to make what we have made, I feel like UK audience often needs telling we meant to do this. It's okay. We're safe, you're safe. You can respond to what we're saying rather than wonder if this was an accident. So I would be very, very interested to take it outside of the UK and see if that's similar or not.

Kate Y: Well if only there was an international showcase or something? That could sort of support that. That's very, that's very interesting. Yeah, what you've just said there about is this on purpose. and funny.

Kate C: Thank you so much for sharing all your insights. As I said, I think that it's gonna be fantastic for you to experience each other's work in Edinburgh and for us to continue these conversations and see where they go and also just to see what other contexts this work might end up being presented in and think it's super exciting for all of you. And so let's just see what unfolds. But thank you so much for being part of the conversation today and really look forward to see you in person very soon.

Kate Y: Yes. Thank you.

Sung Im: Thank you very much. See you very soon.

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