

Interview with Justin Sears-Watson by Emily Leiserson

Interviewee: Justin Sears-Watson

Interviewer: Emily Leiserson

Date: September 28, 2020

Transcription Software Used: Otter.AI

Edited by: Emily Leiserson, Victoria Clark

Byline: This interview was recorded as part of The COVID-19 Oral History Project, a project of the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute associated with The Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive.

Abstract: Justin Sears-Watson speaks about being an artist, dancer, creator, entrepreneur, teacher, and business owner during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indianapolis.

0:00

EMILY LEISERSON (INTERVIEWER):

Okay, so we are recording. Hi, I'm Emily Leiserson. I'm here with Justin Sears-Watson. Thank you so much for being here, Justin.

0:15

JUSTIN SEARS-WATSON (INTERVIEWEE):

Absolutely. My pleasure.

0:17

EL:

It's awesome to talk with you. Today is Monday, September 28, and it's 1:35pm. We're recording this remotely, but we're both in the Indianapolis area. I'm going to start off by briefly reviewing the informed consent document for these interviews. So that just goes through all of the background of what we're doing. So, this is for the COVID-19 oral history project, which is associated with The Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive, which is an online archive/database that anyone can access. And the COVID-19 Oral History Project is a rapid response oral history, focused on archiving the lived experience of folks during the COVID-19 pandemic. This phase of the project, our research group, which is based out of the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute, is focusing on collecting oral histories about the experience of the racial justice movement, and racial justice during COVID-19. And we've designed the project so that professional researchers and the broader public, anyone, can create an upload their oral histories to this open access, open source database, and anyone can take out what's in there.

And the study is intended to collect narratives and understandings about COVID-19. To help us better understand the impact of the pandemic over time.

The recordings, demographic information, and transcripts are deposited into The Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive and the Indiana University Library System for the use of researchers and the general public. So basically once it goes into those systems, we don't really know exactly - you can't guarantee what it's going to be used for.

2:35

JSW:

Gotcha. Okay.

2:38

EL:

Do you have any questions so far?

2:42

JSW:

I don't. I read the document that I signed, and I think I'm pretty clear about what it's for.

2:52

EL:

Thank you so much. Two other little parts of that that I have to go through. I just want to emphasize that this is totally voluntary. So you can choose not to take part, or you can leave at any time, and leaving the study doesn't result in any kind of penalty or loss of benefits. And it won't affect any relationship you have with IU, IUPUI, or the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute. And then participation means that your interview will be recorded in digital video and/or audio and there'll be a transcript. The recording and transcript, and any other supplementary documents - if you had like photos or something you wanted us to include with it - as well as your informed consent document, will be deposited in the online database, The Journal of the Plague Year. So they'll be available to the public, and then it'll include your name and other means of identification. So it won't be confidential.

4:09

JSW:

Okay.

4:10

EL:

Do you have any questions on any of that?

4:12

JSW:

I do not.

4:14

EL:

Awesome. And then one last part of this. In addition to your signed document, could you please offer a verbal confirmation that you understand and agree to these terms.

4:28

JSW:

Yes, you have my verbal conformation.

4:30

EL:

Thank you. And I am also asking that you verbally confirm that you have agreed that your interview will be made available under the second license that was in that informed consent. And I'll read that one. So that says The COVID-19 Oral History Project, The Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive, and the trustees of Indiana University or IU, acting through its agents, employees or representatives, has an unlimited right to reproduce, use, exhibit, display, perform, broadcast, create derivative works from, and distribute the oral history materials in any manner or media now existing or hereafter developed in perpetuity throughout the world. I agree that the oral history materials may be used by The COVID-19 Oral History Project, and IU, including its assigns and transferees for any purpose, including but not limited to marketing, advertising, publicity, or other promotional purposes. I agree that IU will have final editorial authority over the use of the oral history materials, and I waive any right to inspect or approve of any future use of the oral history materials. Moreover, I agree that the public has the right to use the materials, under the terms of fair use in US copyright law (section 107 of the US Copyright Act). So, could you please confirm that you agree to allowing us to share that?

6:08

JSW:

Verbal agreement. Yes. It's okay.

6:12

EL:

Thank you so much. And then you also agreed that your interview will be made available to the public, immediately is that still okay with you.

6:25

JSW:

Yeah, that's fine. Yeah.

6:26

EL:

Awesome. Awesome. Okay, so that is done, and now we can dig into the real questions. So, we'll start off with just general. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself: that could include things you do on a day to day basis, and how those things have changed since COVID-19 hit?

6:50

JSW:

Sure. So, I am a dancer, artistic director, choreographer, creator, like an artist. And I have a dance company, and a dance studio, a not-for-profit dance company, and then a for-profit dance studio. And I guess that is what my title is about who I am. But who I truly am is an artist and a creator at heart. And I try to live my life as such, as an inspiration as an inspiration to others. And before COVID, I spent a lot of time, of course working on art, choreography, dances anything like that. That dealt with my studio, that dealt with me and my husband's studio, and then a dance company that we co-founded together, as well as a teaching artists with Arts For Learning. And I'm a volunteer at different community centers around town. Also, a lot of teaching in schools.

But then, since COVID, that has been, let's call it, refined, to being mostly at my studio. Because we are now open since we are in phase five. We opened I think in phase three, opened back up at phase three. And I'm mainly now at my studio, either dancing or trying to stay fit and inspired, in yoga and lots of meditation and journaling and anything that deals with helping me therapeutically. So that's what I'm doing now, so it looks very different. Before COVID it was go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go. Probably every day. Probably 12 to 16 hours a day. But now it's less. And I'm actually grateful for the opportunity to kind of step back and take some time to reflect on what I really want my legacy and how I want my creativity to affect the world. And then more immediately my like local surroundings. So I think I'm probably in more reflective place now.

9:36

EL:

That makes a lot of sense. And so what are you, as you reflect, what are you thinking you would really like to be doing?

9:44

JSW:

That's a great question. Before COVID, our company had just finished a show called Nina Simone. We were at the Phoenix Theatre. And it went really well, and it was very instrumental for me as an artist and helping me realize that there was a lot of momentum behind the production. And so before COVID, we were very- we a company that was progressing. And we had a lot of forward momentum behind our impact on arts in the city, I believe. We were doing a lot of outreach and education with school shows; we also have children's shows that we do as well, that really speak to embracing SEL, Social and Emotional Learning. And so all of that momentum, I think, was building for a reason, but what I've found now is that I want to focus on telling the stories of those who inspire us, but focusing on shared human experiences. And also activism and dance as protest.

And so that might seem like very kind of like wide, but really they're similar, because you know, as people even in our differences, and generally why there's protest, it usually deals with conflict, but the only way that for me that conflict can actually be resolved is when we find commonality, and we realize that really this is all a shared experience to us. So right now, my reflections is just involving that and how that will look at in my art. And in the way that I

inspire other dancers who dance with our company. And also children. Yeah, so that's what I'm focusing on.

12:26

EL:

That makes a lot of sense. That sounds amazing. And I want to get back to the dance as protest element later. We'll definitely circle back to it, but do you- does that mean that at the moment you're focused primarily on choreography, or are you still doing some teaching; is it a combination?

12:51

JSW:

Oh, I'm doing right now a lot of teaching in our studio. It is two-sided, because on one end, we have a for-profit. I say for-profit, but when you're in the nonprofit sector, I have to sometimes let people know that our dance studio is separate from our dance company. Because they sometimes just assume that it's all not for profit. But in our dance studio, I teach quite a bit. We have staff. We have- my husband and I, we have staff, and then we are we have quite a few- well we have around 100 or so students. And then we also have like a youth performance company. And so I spent a lot of time creating in that sense and inspiring children. We do a lot of- in that work we do a lot of, the vision for our studio is using dance to build confidence and character, and to ignite their like spark of creativity within themselves to help them become their best artist self. And really that's just helping them become better humans, and moving out of fear, affirmations that help them feel whole and confident in any space that they're in. And so our programming and our culture around our studio is very much intertwined into all of that, in this long vision for our company. And in our, in the education within our, sorry, within our studio. I'm making sure- I want to answer the question. Oh yes so I'm doing a lot of teaching. And you'll find that I kind of talk things through. So I'm doing a lot of teaching in my studio. I am also right now also, at an E-learning site where I'm teaching. And right now that's through Arts For Learning, but I'm going to stay on and volunteer my time after that contract is up. It's only like a month, but I'm going to stay on there, because- we can get into that later, but I need to be in the community and helping. And then I'm also doing other zoom classes and stuff like that for Arts For Learning as well.

15:23

EL:

Awesome, thank you for explaining all of that.

15:27

JSW:

And I didn't answer this question. And still dancing in the studio with dancers, but it's more of trying to create like content for videos and stuff like that - so trying to re-focus how we are reaching people, since we can't do mainstage performances.

15:44

EL:

Yeah, it still sounds like quite a bit, even though you describe it as less.

15:50

JSW:

It is. It's hard for me to be still. Sometimes. And also I believe that my life has led me to be able to deal with struggle, and any kind of, well, what would- to deal with what some people would call struggle very well. My experience up until now has had moments of intense pain and struggle, just because of the my background and how I grew up. And so therefore when COVID happened, although, yes, I mean we are in a pandemic, and it is a hard time for a lot, struggle is struggle and uncomfortability is uncomfortability. And so if you've gone through traumatic events in your life, sometimes it can set you up to handle any other trauma or what some would say is trauma, quite easily. And you learn to just move through it and figure out what's next.

17:06

EL:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I have a couple other just kind of basic background questions. When you think about general demographic categories like race, gender, age, socio-economic status, how would you describe- how do you prefer to describe yourself?

17:27

JSW:

Well, I guess I'll just checklist. I'm Black or African American. I'm gay, or homosexual. And it hits those. As far as- do you want any other image demographic info?

17:48

EL:

Whatever you like. That's plenty if you want to leave it at that. Great. And then what zip code and neighborhood are you in? And city?

18:02

JSW:

I'm in Indianapolis, Indiana. I am in the Broad Ripple area; that's where my husband and I reside now. And our studio is actually about eight minutes away, so a little north of Broad Ripple.

18:17

EL:

And what do you kind of observe in your neighborhood or your studio's neighborhood, day to day? Has it changed since the pandemic or not?

18:29

JSW:

Yes, I would say, initially, pre-pandemic Broad Ripple, like driving through Broad Ripple was actually becoming quite- it is an area that is growing very rapidly- new condos, new businesses. The market, the market value on real estate is going up and going up, and actually even during the pandemic is probably still going up. And so it was becoming very busy, like as far as traffic. And when I say traffic, Indianapolis traffic. Not LA traffic or New York traffic. But traffic for

the Midwest. And then post pandemic, it's interesting because you can tell that that's stopped; a couple of businesses as have closed in Broad Ripple. People are not going out as much; Broad Ripple's an area that there's like lots of bars. Students from Butler University go out there. People all over, younger couples live in our neighborhood. Well, the area that we live in is probably been around since like the 1950s. And so there are older generations who are passing away or moving out, and so a lot of younger families with small children are moving in. But that has, as far as traffic and everything, like that that slowed down. What's interesting is that right now what I'm noticing is that it is a great time to purchase a home in our neighborhood right now. And so that, actually, there's a lot of buying of houses and changing of hands and real estate and stuff like that. And I don't, I'm an artist, not, you know, not in real estate, but I think that is interesting that there's still an economy happening, economics right. There's still, it's interesting in that way. So that's happening in that neighborhood.

20:44

EL:

Yeah, isn't that interesting? I totally agree.

20:47

JSW:

Really interesting.

20:49:

EL:

So, there are many, many issues that we could talk about in 2020. But I want to know what issues concern you the most since COVID hit.

21:13

JSW:

So, clearly, the systematic racism. And before COVID actually, what's something that was really, really on my mind and that I was kind of becoming more aware of, is gentrification. And so with that, the fact that that was really on my mind before COVID, and then, now that the movement is- you know the things that that are on my mind that I try not to completely dive into, like, you know, completely all the time - I would not call myself like an activist, an outright activist. But those things do concern me. I'm a Black man in America. And so, what concerns me the most is the trauma that is shared amongst Blacks in this country, but that for so long, it has been ignored. And when you've grown up, the way that I have you- I think there was a part of me that maybe believed, or wanted to believe, that "okay this is, it's not isolated, but this is my experience, and as long as I do what I can to come out of this experience, everything's gonna be okay." And so I have lived by that and I have may manage to be successful because of that. But at the same time there is definitely trauma, shared trauma around being Black in America, and how much I've had to work twice as hard just to have the same experiences as maybe someone who's not Black. Those things matter to me. Bow I can how I can use art and dance - more specifically dance - but how I can use art to as protest is really important to me right now. How I can use my art to be an activist, and maybe help people who maybe don't have ears to hear, hear, because you can do that through art. But also, children, and children of color, in particular, our children of color, and what's happening right

now as far as you know them not being able to go to school. And that no one's really talking about that. I mean I'm sure there's conversations about it. But that in this time that we're trying to have a movement to defund the police and trying to change you know systems of racism and systemic injustices that they're right now are so many children who have voices, but who don't have the voices to like really speak to what they're going through. So that's been on my mind a lot, but I also deal with children every day, and I love early childhood education. And we have students ages 18 months through adult but my heart really lies with - lots of things - but children right now, and Black and Brown children who are not getting art, who are not getting all those things that could help them maybe break familial curses. And in traumas of different families and generations, and being able to come up out of that. Because art helped me come up out generational curses, my family would call it. And so yeah that's what's important to me right now.

25:42

EL:

Yeah. And so the pandemic is- your worry is that the pandemic is kind of amplifying the trauma.

25:52

JSW:

Yeah, amplifying the trauma. Separating them even further from possibilities of success. Closing them off from the resources that they would normally have because they can't, maybe, go to a community center. Luckily now, I think, there are some community centers, and I know that kids are going to E-learning sites. But yeah, just different things different things like that. If we, you know, during Christmas- because what is it, today's September 29. If we shut down again. Which I do understand to keep people safe. Still, that shuts those children off from the resources they need. And outside of that stuff, I mean food, shelters, homeless shelters, food clinics, I mean, all these things that I grew up with and that were why I'm alive today. Because I lived, I went through homeless shelters with my family, and food clinics and stuff like that. So, yeah, that just concerns me.

26:56

EL:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, the things that, to the extent that they do provide a safety net, are less available.

27:06

JSW:

Absolutely.

27:08

EL:

Yeah. Have you seen people around you changing their activities or relationships or opinions in response to the pandemic?

27:28

JSW:

Yes, I have. I'd say more changing behaviors. I see shifts in behaviors. Attitudes, I think that's still to be determined. I know what I see in some children becoming more isolated and more inward. Children who maybe started that way and then would become more - how do I say? Become more outward or more extroverted in times and were doing better socially - I've seen them go retreat back in. I can only assume that there are adults going through the same thing. But I haven't thought too, too much about that. I without saying exactly who it is, but I know that I know initially during COVID, I knew people who were shut off and who were so fearful that they did not leave the house for months at a time. That was painful to see, because I understand fear, but I also think that fear can cripple us. And so I think that there we there's a thin line between caution and then also complete helplessness.

29:23

EL:

You've talked a lot about kids, and I'm wondering, are there any specific examples of kids that you're willing to share? You don't have to share their names but, you know, an illustration of how it's impacted a kid or a group of kids?

29:50

JSW:

Well, what I notice more are kind of generalizations. We have, well there's one student who I know who's, she's a pretty shy. And before COVID she was more bubbly, and initially started out shy but through dance and interactions with other students became more animated and joyful and talking to other students. And then COVID happens. And then there was separation from the student, although there was zoom, we did do zoom. And so there, the student was able to still interact with students, but became very fearful based on Mother's information but then also seeing about being close to people, and even being around people at all. And so it took her, although we open back up in phase three, and I understand like I said cautiousness and helplessness and all that. But even after we opened back up, when students came back into the space with COVID practices in place or, you know, social distancing, masks, temperature checks, lots of hand sanitizer, cleaning the studio down with certain products. She didn't come back, not because parents were not okay, but because the student was kind of terrified about being back in the space and being around other people. And so even today, that student is even more quieter and less verbal than she used to be. And so I think that in isolation and in the separation, there's that happening. That this sense of social and emotional skills and cognitive skills that happen with children who are able to go to school and be around other students; that's where they learn a lot of how to interact with people. Right. And so if they're not having those experiences, what's to happen when they come back into those spaces at this point that is very pivotal in shaping a human being, you know. And so what I'm seeing also is attention spans in the space are very, very, very different. It's lots of shyness, but then also like focus is like, all over the place. And so it's a lot harder to focus if you're not training, those, you know, those nerves and all that kind of cognitive stuff and so those are the things that I'm seeing right now.

33:02

EL:

How old is that particular student?

33:05

JSW:

Six years old. Six years old.

33:10

EL:

Oh yeah, yeah.

33:12

JSW:

And was turning six probably right before COVID or right during COVID if I remember correctly.

33:23

EL:

Yeah, yeah. That's such a critical age.

33:26

JSW:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, and most of our students actually are around four to 11 years old.

33:33

EL:

Okay yeah so they're all in that.

33:36

JSW:

Absolutely. Yeah.

33:38

EL:

Yeah. Well, to respect your time, I want to move us to [phone rings]. Ah, sorry!

33:45

JSW:

No, I'm going to turn mine on Do Not Disturb.

33:47

EL:

I know, I thought I had done it. Now I'll make sure. Okay. This is our life, right?

33:58

JSW:

Devices and all the things.

34:05

EL:

Yeah. So yeah, I'm going to switch gears to talk a little bit more about racial justice movements. Can you or would you please share any thoughts you have about the current movements that are focused on racial justice, such as Black Lives Matter?

34:22

JSW:

Absolutely. I think that it is absolutely necessary. Although, I, myself, I've gone to protest. And I think it is necessary because I think it's necessary. I don't I guess I don't even- I don't even have to explain. It's necessary. I do believe, I honestly do believe, I do believe it's a hard thing. Because although I think lots of us, although I believe that, what do they say, it's easier to get a bee with honey, right, than vinegar. It's one of those things that those whose minds need to be changed. It is unlikely that they're going to change their minds based on delivery. I think that if I'm having an argument with someone, right, and we're screaming and shouting at each other non-stop, chances are neither of us are going to hear each other. But generally, you don't learn how to communicate until you go through that. So, it's kind of a catch-22 because the thing is that not until people who are in places of power are ready to listen and hear will they hear. Chances are they're probably not going to hear. That's maybe a negative and pessimistic way of looking at it, but we've seen that they're not hearing. And protest with violence only fuels the other side's thoughts about the movement. It's one of those things that's hard but it's like shared experience. As a world where, you know, it has to happen, there's not going to be any change without struggle. So, it's necessary. I guess that's my, that's the short answer. It's necessary.

37:17

EL:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. What do you think is driving the changes? What changes have you seen in 2020, in the racial justice movement, or the movement for racial equity?

37:43

JSW:

I do, but I have seen that people, one thing is that people are aware that there's a racial inequity. That's a huge thing. I mean, the fact that people we're not talking about racial inequity too much before the movement. That those who are willing and ready to hear, those who are willing and ready to self-reflect, are realizing that there's change that needs to that needs to happen. Changes I've seen: equity statements. That's great. More- I'll speak to myself, personally, I've realized that there has been more recognition for maybe work that I've done that, you know, just on a personal level.

In the past, it was very easy to get down on myself, be thinking about my work or the things that I was doing was not good enough. And, if I'm feeling that way, think of all the other blind people who are feeling that way. That you have to work 10 times as hard just to get the same

amount of respect in your field, or just to get the same opportunities in your field, as someone who maybe is not working as hard, or who maybe is not as talented, but that you just look at them and you have all these certain biases based upon the color of their skin.

I get treated differently when I go out in a hoodie. I get treated differently when I get in a nice shirt, and I put on nice pants, and I have to fix up a certain way. These are the things that I lived with every day. And so, just based on those things alone, the fact that there's equity statements, the fact that it feels like after this, there may be more opportunities for me and for the work that I've done as an entrepreneur and artistic director, and someone who's the leader of an organization. It's, that's hopeful, that's for sure hopeful.

40:11

EL:

Yeah, absolutely. I'm glad to hear that you're receiving that much deserved recognition.

40:22

JSW:

Somewhat. Still work to do, right. But it's. Yes. It's changing and so that that feels good. Yeah, opportunity.

40:36

EL:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Do you- what do you think about the role of art in the movement for racial justice? And how- I'm sure you've been participating in this in some way. Can you describe that and, you know, how do you, how do you feel about it? What can you tell us about it?

41:04

JSW:

I think that it's, I think that it's necessary. Again, like, you know what I was saying earlier. I think that art has always been protest, in some way, shape, or form. The same way, modern dance was in protest to ballet. You know, they may not say it specifically, but it evolved out of something that was very stringent and tightly wound and it needed- dance needed to be this way, the dance of the elites. And out of that then you have, you know, modern, you have Ruth Saint Denis, Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey, Paul Taylor, all these different artists that come out of that who created work in some way that thought beyond what was already there. I think that art reflects the times that we're living in. And so, the same way can reflect the times that we're living in in a good way, and it can provide entertainment, and it can speak to what's happening in the now, it can also speak to what's happening in the now based upon someone else's experience. If they don't like it, if they're finding that there are, there's not, you know, there's inequity. But not just that.

Art can speak to anything, right. It can say the things that sometimes there are no words to describe. It's the same thing as emotions. Yeah, I call anger "anger," but my anger is not relegated to the word anger. It probably doesn't really represent the anger that I have. The same way happy, the word happy on a page doesn't really represent the feeling of elation. So, art

speaks to - through people's visions, ideas - speaks to the emotions that people are going through. And so it makes sense that art would be protest, or activism, or entertainment, you know. The great thing about art as well is that it can be protest, but in that it also awakens people's consciousness. Because it's creative.

One, in essence that's what we really are is just creation. It also- any time that you have ideas and visions, and you take something that is not, that's inanimate like an idea or a vision, and you bring one or more together to bring something that's not reality and make it reality, whether it's an idea, whether it's dance, whether it's visual art, whether it's media, whether it's music. And it's gone from this gestation of being an idea to manifestation, that's something that's so beautiful that people respond to that, on every level, because it's creation and action. And I think at the essence of us, that's all we all really want, to create. I really think that. Whether you're a banker, doesn't matter who you are, we all really want to create. But then we all really want our voices to be heard. And if we can't have our voices heard, we at least want to find someone who can speak to how we feel. And who can identify with us. So it kind of rounds back to that shared human experience. And so, to me it all relates. It all makes sense, you know. Art is protest, art is shared human experience, entertainment, you know.

45:18

EL:

Yeah, that makes so much sense, going back to what you said about trauma. It's a place where people can heal from trauma. While also opening up spaces for someone's voice to be heard, someone else to hear something they might not have realized they needed to hear.

45:40

JSW:

Yeah, creating like conversation, but the conversations are easier, right, because it's being met in this common ground. Like right, there could be someone who is complete, white supremacy, with someone who is complete, and, I mean, not just anti-white supremacy but, like, opposite in the sense that I don't even like white people. You know, I don't like anybody, you know. Yeah, there's, you know, just racist mentality. But they can still find common ground within this art or music or this painting and still see the same painting and find beauty. Then you already have a commonality, but it's just those, it's just the fact that we don't remember those things when we're like, I need you to hear me. Interesting.

46:36

EL:

That's beautiful. To think about it that way. Do you in your work, try to push past that? Are you mainly focused on creating that space where everyone can create and be heard, or are you trying to push toward a specific goal or objective, or is it some balance?

47:00

JSW:

I think that when it comes to the conversation of- I'll just speak to this conversation of Black Lives Matter and white privilege. When it comes to those things, I think that when, for instance, when we did Nina Simone, that I'm kind of poised, or the company was kind of poised.... No,

what I wanted to do was to tell my truth, but in a way that was honest and factual and real, and not necessarily forcing opinion down your throat. Here is what it is, and you can take it or leave it. I think in truth and honesty, that it's more palatable. Right. And so even if you don't come from that experience, you can understand emotion, you can understand, pain, happiness, frustration, dreams, hopes. And so, we tend to- the work we try to do, we want it to be palatable. Right, because if it's not, then you're not setting it up for all ears to hear. That's really what the goal is, right, when you feel like you are on one side, you don't need that same side to hear your voice. They know your voice, they know, they have the shared experience. So you have to make it palatable for the other side to hear. And then you sneak out the vegetables, you know.

I would hope that as I move forward, and coming out of COVID, that I can create art that creates conversation, and work with different perspectives. So that, because when you have shared perspectives, of course, it's not one sided. And so the hope is that we're doing work that creates conversation. And that actually leads, lends to conversation. You know, programs that have that our artworks, dance-works, and dance concerts that are combined, almost like a lab right, or a conversation before it and a conversation after it, so that you can see the growth and you can kind of see how it's working to really change them, because I believe that dancers and choreographers and artists are really scientists, if you think about it.

50:04

EL:

Yeah. I love that about conversations and shared perspectives being the goal. That's amazing.

50:10

EL:

You have an interesting perspective as an artist and a business owner or nonprofit leader. How do you see how do you see the relationship between artists and arts organizations right now? And is it easier to do this work as an organization or with an organization or just as an individual artist?

50:38

JSW:

Oh, I think there's I think there's pluses and minuses for both. I think as an organization, because we're still a small organization, that what's good, is that it can exist outside of you. So that, in the sense that some people may know who Phoenix Rising Dance Company is, or our company is, because they know this dancer, or they know this dancer, or they heard about this show, or they saw the show, but there's not necessarily an attachment to this, to this me as an artist. Of course speaking from my perspective. And so I think that the one thing that's great with that, is that if you have the means to create an organization and get funding and create networks and things, you know, administrative things, all those things that are involved in having a not for profit, or leading a non for profit, it's good because the hope is that it outlives you. And you leave behind a legacy, you know, and something that- yep, that's just it.

As an individual artist, you can do that the same. The downside of being an organization is that sometimes when you speak, and you do things, you have to look at the fact that you are part of

an organization, so sometimes there's some guard there for it not reflecting others outside of me than myself. I think as an individual artist, you can do the work, and you can say what you want to say, it reflects on you, and there's not that responsibility of how it's going to affect someone else, or affect the organization or anything like that. So sometimes I think that that can maybe be- Yeah, that's the two sides that I can talk about right now anyway.

52:56

EL:

Thank you. We are running short on time. I wish I could ask you a bunch more questions.

53:00

JSW:

You were like leave an hour, and I'm like, we're just getting into the conversation!

53:07

EL:

I know, I know. Is there anything else you want to share? Any other thoughts that are important to you before we go?

53:17

JSW:

I don't think so. I think as long as I did answer like your questions or the crux, the meat of the questions that you needed. I think I'm okay. I think I said what I needed to say. Or what you wanted to, you know, hear from me.

53:37

EL:

Yes, absolutely. Yeah, so let me see. I have one closing question. Is there anyone else you think I would, or we should, talk to? To be getting answers to these questions, whether it's around racial justice, art and racial justice, any of it.

53:57

JSW:

So are you just, are you speaking to anybody, regardless of race or anything like that?

54:03

EL:

So between now and December, the next few months, mainly talking to people of color here in Indy, but then it's broadening out, so I'll have a few more months where it could be anyone.

54:22

JSW:

Well I do think, what would be really good is. Do you know who Manon Voice is?

54:25

EL:

I've heard that name.

54:26

JSW:

Yeah, she worked with us and provided some of the artwork for Nina Simone. She actually, like, created all the poetry. And Matt Davis worked with me on that. If you want a different perspective and maybe how other people are handling COVID, there's also a guy, his name is Andre Williams; he's one of the dancers in my company as well. And if you need, if you want to, you know, talk to them more or whatever I can just shoot you their emails. But yeah, any of those people. Matt Davis, he's actually huge activists in the movement here. He's like one of the lead activists. Manon Voice is actually, she's now at the Kurt Vonnegut Library curating banned books. She would be really interesting.

55:26

EL:

Yeah, very interesting. That's great.

55:28

JSW:

Yeah. So any of those people. And Andre Williams is choreographer, another choreographer.

55:40

EL:

Got it. Awesome. Thank you so much. Okay, well thank you so much, Justin. I'm going to turn off the record. And then we can stay on for a couple more minutes.