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## Interview

Dani Abulhawa | Joanne 'Bob' Whalley

Not pressure

# Not pressure: A conversation between Dani Abulhawa and Joanne 'Bob' Whalley

### ABSTRACT

This is the record of a conversation held on the morning after Dani Abulhawa premiered her new piece Concord. At her kitchen table she sat down with Joanne 'Bob' Whalley, who has worked as dramaturg on the piece, and together they reflect upon the generation of the work, and also the experience of encountering the work with an audience. Questions of collaboration and voices emerge over morning coffee.

Dani Abulhawa is an artist-researcher and lecturer in Contemporary Applied Performance at the University of Leeds. She is an ambassador for skateboarding charity SkatePal. In 2014 she co-founded Accumulations: a network for experimental and site-based movement, dance and performance. She is also a founding member and organiser of the academic strand of Pushing Boarders – the first international skateboarding conference. Much of Dani's work is concerned with political participation, community and skateboarding culture. A persistent strand of her practice reflects on her Palestinian heritage and the Israel-Palestine occupation-resistance. Dani is the author of *Skateboarding and Femininity: gender, space-making and expressive movement* (2020, Routledge). She has published articles and book chapters on spatial politics and power dynamics, artist interruptions of space, and the creative-research process. Dani has presented commissioned and independently produced artworks since 2006, including most recently 'Concord' (Holden Gallery, MMU, Manchester, Friday 22nd October 2021), which was performed with her dad, Jamal Abulhawa; *Bring Yourself to the Table* (a performance score in collaboration with Sara Spies and Christian Berger, presented alongside Avital Raz's theatre show *My Jerusalem* as part of the Manchester Festival of Belonging, 2020), *Free Time in the City* (an audio work for Sheffield Migration Matters festival, 2019), *The Slide* (a short film commissioned by the Helena Kennedy Centre for Human Rights to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the declaration of human rights), and *Looking After Freedom*, a residency and series of works created in Cape Town, South Africa (funded by the British Council, 2017).

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Joanne ‘Bob’ Whalley is a lecturer in dance at the University of Roehampton, where she teaches postgraduate dance and choreography students. She makes performances, installations, performance texts and objects for international audiences. In 2015 she completed a BSc in acupuncture and she specializes in infertility and palliative care. Her book written with Lee Miller, *Between Us: Audiences, affect and the in-between*, published in 2017 by Palgrave Macmillan, celebrates spaces that cause an affecting and bodies affected.

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Joanne ‘Bob’ Whalley

University of Roehampton

In writing this introduction, I find myself trying to balance what I thought I would be doing against what I am actually doing. A few weeks ago, the editors of *Choreographic Practices* asked if I would be interested in entering into a dialogue with Dani Abulhawa to discuss her piece *Concord*. Dani had asked me to work as dramaturg on the performance; and having seen various iterations and knowing I would be seeing it presented as part of the *Interruptions* series by Word of Warning and the Holden Gallery, Manchester, United Kingdom, I was keen to extend my engagement into a written form.

Since then, Dani has agreed to become part of the extended editorial team of *Choreographic Practices*; and what started as a simple way into a conversation has instead become a moment of introduction. Dani is a British–Palestinian performance-maker and academic, and I have known her for nearly twenty years. Her performance

practice (as we discuss below) is rooted in skateboarding, and *Concord* is informed by this training and has developed from her ongoing exploration of political borders. By placing her own and her family's lived experience of the wall that separates Palestine from Israel, she has created a piece in dialogue with broader narratives of politically enforced separation. Dani's voice, her perspective, much like Amaara's who is introduced elsewhere in this issue, offers a step change to the editorial voices that have held this space over recent issues. In some respects, the handover of editorial responsibility, from Vida and Jane, to Simon and Lee could only ever be a placeholder. This sense of shifting ground, the uncertainty of the times we occupy finds articulation both in the work Dani makes and in and through her body. I am curious to see what impact her voice, and her presence on the editorial team, will have on *Choreographic Practices* moving forward.

This conversation happened at Dani's kitchen table. We had just finished breakfast on the morning after the performance. Thoughts and reflections were fresh, and I am writing this introduction only a few days after the conversation. It feels certain that I will want to return to the richness and generosity of the space opened up by Dani; so consider these words a placeholder. To be continued ...

*Joanne 'Bob' Whalley (BW): I was thinking this morning about Deborah Hay and her Cheap Thrills workshop, which was held in Austin, Texas, in 1988. In that workshop, she asks each participant to constantly attend to a state of being open to the idea and reception of nourishment. She asks each present to 'experience being both as a giver and a receiver, for oneself, others and the entire environment' (Drobnick 2006: 44). And she says, 'I dare you to see my attention' (Hay in Drobnick 2006: 43).*

*I really like that dare.*

*And I was thinking about this framing and us holding this kind of dare in both our bodies, thinking about tending to nourishment. In Concord, what you present, these are your narratives. While they are clearly something bigger than yourself, they are also inevitably tied up with the personal, those small intersubjective moments that lead to multiple emergences, both acute and stubborn, but I don't know whether that's the way you see it.*

**Dani Abulhawa (DA):** When you said multiple emergences, I heard that as multiple emergencies. And I think that was because I was also connected to that idea of nourishment and growth as well. And I wondered if... what I am curious about is ... What sort of ... let me just see if I can frame this for myself, whether you have any thoughts about the creative process as being ... or like, let's say, the dramaturgical process ... as being kind of connected to finding emergencies in some way?

**BW:** *Yeah, I like that idea of both emergencies and emergences, and the idea of attending to something which is pertinent. And I felt that very much in your body throughout this process. And there were things that were both emergencies and emergences, that kind of bubbled to the surface, if you like. And there were moments which needed to be attended to. And they might have kind of come up to the surface, but they also might have been something that you dug for and uncovered rather than waiting for those moments to arise. And for me, the dramaturg is in that process of being, while acknowledging the other bodies involved. I remind myself as I look at you when we are in rehearsal that this is about you and your piece, you are at the centre of it. But still there's a sense that ... at least the way I articulate those ideas of dramaturgy to myself ... the dramaturg is also*

*kind of at the centre of the process The idea of holding those moments that bubble up to the surface and attending to those, while remaining aware of those things that still need to be uncovered.*

*But it is never for me to say what needs to be uncovered.*

*That is absolutely your storied way through this. I can't say what this piece 'needs' in any given moment, but I can create an environment and ask questions that hold that process.*

**DA:** That's interesting because I want to talk about the first meeting that we had when I properly ugly cried [laughter].

**BW:** [laughing] I love an ugly cry. In my body there is nothing but an ugly cry.

**DA:** [laughing] Yeah! And I remember how unexpected that was and how, at the time that that happened, it was really helpful and like a release. And it made me think of you as an acupuncturist. It made me think of you as someone who had applied pressure in a particular way, and I don't mean that in like a ... what's the word? Not in a bad way. Not bad pressure, but like pinpointed something in an acupuncturist sense, through your words and your insight into the process, which at that point you were on the edges of very much, that just created this release – and that was really fascinating moment to me.

**BW:** *What do you think was happening for you, was that a particular question, or a tone, or a sense of general enquiry or ...*

*I'm interested in that because we don't have a therapeutic relationship, but obviously that is part of my bodily and professional narrative.*

**DA:** Yeah. But what I wonder is like, I'm not sure exactly what it was that initiated it, but what it made me think about was, I wonder if you're training as a medical practitioner in

that sense informs the dramaturgical practice that you have, maybe on an unconscious level, maybe on a conscious level, like, do you ...? Yeah. What are your thoughts?

*BW: I think that sense of 'applying pressure', I think that's something really interesting there. But I don't really see it as a pressure point. It's not something I am prodding. No, no, I'm not prodding at all. It's almost like shining a light. Hmm. But it's a little bit more. It's a little more than that. And I think it's through suggestion. Yeah. I'm finding the words that you're using in the process of making ... I'm working through and off those into kind of an imagery that can work between us. And getting a sense of what you want in any given moment, because when you make work, things shift and change constantly. And there's that sense that you attend to those things in front of you in the moment. And then you kind of shift back, pull the focus back and say 'what is this about?' 'What did I think this is about?' But also kind of going there, and recognizing that this is only what it means in that moment. So, I think that that idea of needing you to guide me, in order that I can then apply pressure ...*

*Although I'm still not comfortable with that word 'pressure', because it sounds like a kind of coercion, but ...*

**DA:** Yeah, yeah I know what you mean. It's probably not the right, quite the right image, but I think that word attending is also really ...

And I want to say as well that the idea of pressure, maybe, is that it's more about releasing pressure. It's like pinpointing something to release pressure or to sort of find a pressure point more than it is about applying pressure. And it was more of a diffuse sense of you just listening to what I'm saying and what I'm showing and then finding those points of emergence in that process.

**BW:** *Particularly in the beginning, that sense of finding the words, I think is absolutely something I do.*

*In preparation for our conversation today, I was reading a recent book called Becoming Palestine by Gil Z. Hochberg, and she writes about the moment before the moment (2021: vii), and that really stuck with me as a kind of a creative way through something. And maybe that's where my clinical training comes in, because I am looking at breathing, and looking for changes of colour in the face and in where the shoulders lie in the body, the amount of pauses, where silences are. And all that comes before the substance of the words. That's the moment before.*

*And I don't think that is something I have thought to articulate before, but it's probably an approach I use all the time, in both my practices. So, in those dramaturgical moments, I absolutely draw on that. So that's a real discovery for me, thank you.*

**DA:** Yeah, that's really interesting, the idea of the dramaturgical practice coming from the body and from an attention to the body first.

**BW:** *And it can't be intrusive, which is why the idea of applying pressure is not something I'm comfortable with, it has to be a light touch. I will always remember that in my training we learned a technique called palpation where you run the fingers across the muscles, to find the joins and where the seams are, the origin and insertion points. You're taught to reach through the skin, through the layers to find the anatomy underneath the skin. Usually when we touch bodies, we're engaged with that skin-to-skin contact. But I remember in training being taught to extend beyond that. And I think that the dramaturgical process for me is the equivalent of feeling through the skin.*



**DA:** I think that's really interesting, and it makes me think about metallurgy, maybe because it sounds like dramaturgy [laughs], but that it might be working through the material of the body. And I just think that's really fascinating, like the idea that it might come from, from that kind of material connection to the body.

*BW: And what about 'between bodies' for you? Which bodies are you between in the piece?*

**DA:** I mean obviously me and my dad, but also between me and my dad and then my mum. My sort of extended family, there are lots of ghost bodies in there. I think there is also some sort of a collective body in there as well, maybe sort of a collective Palestinian body, although I guess that's a really difficult thing to say, just because of the political context, having such different facets and different Palestinian people having ...

I mean Palestinian people having such different experiences of the occupation, and the politics, depending on their location and so on. So it's I'm not sure how ... I mean, in some ways it is accurate to talk about that and I think that there's a place for that as well. But I also recognize that it's much more complicated than the collective as well.

*BW: Yes. Yeah. I was thinking about the Larissa Sansour's piece A Space Exodus, and in that film it feels to me as though she finds a kind of a nationhood. That idea of the symbolism for the collective through the openness of space, kind of ... Do you know the work?*

**DA:** Yes!

*BW: I'm really interested in what you make of it, So, the film is her as a kind of astronaut. In the narrative, she's the first person on the moon, so she's using the Neil Armstrong narrative. And also in dialogue with Kubrick's 2001 A Space Odyssey,*

*because she reuses Strauss's The Blue Danube. And she's in this beautiful costume. She's on the moon and drifting through space. And she's wearing these embroidered slippers, and she just sort of drifts away. It's really both beautiful and kind of heart-breaking and full of hope, and hopeless at the same time. There's this strong sense of being suspended, and being disconnected ... 'Jerusalem, we have a problem'.*

**DA:** Yeah, that idea of floating and kind of being disconnected, I think it's really interesting in relation to the politics of the West Bank and Palestinian nationhood as well.

**BW:** *We talked about the idea of being between bodies; do you see yourself as floating, or are there moments of anchorage for you?*

**DA:** I think it's really interesting last night when I was performing the work I really recognized how much skateboarding is an anchor for me. I very much feel like I occupy an in-between space in lots of different ways in my life and my sort of sense of self and so on. In the performance, there's quite a lot of references to skateboarding and there are lots of references to people that are connected to skateboarding, which is my network. And they are the people that I gained a lot of material from and who've led the research in lots of ways and led to the practice and the process. And also, I think that skateboarding is the primary performance activity that I do, I suppose. And I was thinking in those sections of the performance that are quite improvised, and I was thinking last night how much I keep going back to skateboarding imagery, and that connection to skateboarding as a way to anchor myself when I feel like I'm in that space of floating. And I know it's kind of weird to say skateboarding is an anchor.

**BW:** *No, I felt that absolutely came through in the piece. And even though I've seen different iterations, last night was the moment at which I really saw that narrative come through.*

**DA:** Yeah, I think it was, maybe, the first time I really saw it too actually [laughs], which is interesting. Obviously, all the work that I've made about Palestine in the last few years has been related to skateboarding. I made a short film which was called *The Slide*, which was about a woman going from the West Bank to the beach at Tel Aviv to collect sea water, and then passing back into the West Bank to boil it down into salt. It was related to the politics of water there, but was all about the idea of sort of sliding and moving between. And that included imagery of a skateboarder that I know who works a lot with SkatePal and him performing a boardslide, which was central to that whole concept as well. And then obviously, in the last piece that I wrote for *Choreographic Practices*, that obviously enters into a discussion of skateboarding as well, that kind of filters in the connection with SkatePal. So yeah, so it's all there as well in this space. And yeah, and the idea of smoothing is something I've written about before, the idea that the way skateboarding operates might sit within that conceptual framework of smoothing space, after Deleuze and Guattari.

**BW:** *I think for me, there's something really interesting about 'the between' of skateboarding, because it's a strange sort of anchorage because you are both subject to and submitting to gravity in an extreme way. But also you are not connected with the ground. You are not grounded. You're in constant movement. Even if the board is still momentarily (which you may not think it ever is, I don't know how you feel about it), there's that sense of the body having been in motion is continuing to move, being*

*propelled, and your body is negotiating that. You are working against gravity, so the idea of skateboarding for me is a really beautiful but strange anchorage.*

**DA:** It is a strange anchorage, and I always think of it as being constantly labile like constantly off. Yeah, potentially always off.

**BW:** *And is this piece a strange anchorage too?*

**DA:** Yeah, it is. It is. But I think also the whole process, and maybe this is just a process of making all the time, is something that I struggle to envisage and get my head around. And again, that's part of the need for having people kind of connected to the work that can help you to give insights. The work can't be made on its own. I suppose it's contingent all the time, and that relates to skateboarding as well, like you're never fully certain of where you are. So you're never fully certain about how something is going to work, but having all of these people that are related to the project that can give you different insights on it is just so important.

**BW:** *I saw that sense of contingency, almost constantly in the space last night, in that there's a correlation, a tension, a negotiation of your body, which is expert in performance training and holds skill and knowledge. There is expertise in your body and then there is your dad's body. That was his first time performing and watching his body negotiating – it was compelling to watch him move through those smooth and striated moments, I could see him in the negotiation 'I'm here and I'm here and I'm here'. But then those other moments between when he's working things out, in a kind of a fluctuation where he's really working out what is happening to him in this room, in this moment. I mean, it was the first time he'd ever performed. And holding that against the expertise in your body. But I also want to be clear, that his is not inexpert and yours is*

*not expert. There are moments where you undo each other. There was a particular moment of meeting where you stood together, where you are at the top of ladders together, and another beautiful moment where he holds the ladder for you, and he supports your weight. He holds you. He becomes kind of expert in those moments.*

**DA:** Yeah, absolutely. And it's just making me think as well how much we're all on different pathways in the piece, I don't just mean me and my dad. I mean everyone that's contributed to and connected to the work. The idea of the journey through the piece, and what happens from one moment to another is very specific to each of us. And there are those moments of crossover, but it almost felt like a processing of his experience. And last night, just before we did the performance, I said to him, 'I'm really grateful for you doing this, and I'm really proud of all the work that you've put into it'.

And he said that it means more to him than it does to me. It means more to him than I realize. (There is a brief pause for both of us to cry here.)

And I asked why is that? Like why? And he said because this all happened. There are so many points in the work that were his. And I'm like 'Oh, God' he's mining the trauma that he's experienced, and I realized in a much more grounded way how risky all of the work we do is, you know.

**BW:** *And that you dared him to make the work, it was a dare for you both. So, was this a piece for you, or for him, or Palestine? Who is this for? You might not be able to answer that, it might not be a simple question.*

**DA:** You know I really think that since I reconnected with Palestine, which is something I've written about in the last article as well, I feel like almost all of the decisions that I make about what I want to do creatively are happening below the level of consciousness.

Like, everything is just like, I kind of know it's the right thing to do, and making the work is like when you really meet something that is important within your body, within your experience; the idea of what you're going to make just comes out of that. It's just sort of flows out. Almost like there is this idea of what it has to be and what it's going to be, so in terms of who it's for, I think it's more that it just has to be. I think I still have to process that, and this is a way of me doing that, and it's sort of for ... I'm not sure.

***BW:** Maybe it will always remain a question, but there's power in that.*

**DA:** Yeah, but that question is important and to come back to performance and dramaturgy as well, it's like why show this? You know I keep asking myself that as well. Like, why would people want to watch this? What is this all about? And, you know, I still don't really know or understand, and I wonder what your thoughts are about that just on kind of maybe just more of a general sense. I mean I understand, obviously, from my own training and knowledge and experience and everything, I understand why we make performance, [laughs] Schechner's seven functions and all of those things. But on another level, why and who? Who is it for? Why do we still tell the stories we want to tell?

***BW:** I think my response comes to you as a question. Instead of asking who it's for, I'm interested in you. What it does for you? Is this a collation? You have talked about the collective? Is this a collection? Is it curation? Is it mutation? Is it an archive? And it may be all or none of these in any given moment. You know we can always ask in terms of an audience, what does this thing do for them, how are they connecting with material, but I think that's different. I would be interested in you reflecting on what you think this is doing for you.*

**DA:** I really like that idea of curation because I think of the connection to care and caretaking, of looking after. But also that idea of like selecting and bringing certain things into dialogue with each other. I think that definitely speaks to what I was trying to do with the piece. I think that's a really nice way of framing practice as well.

***BW:** There's an interesting curator called Robert Cozzolino, who provides a list of nearly 100 descriptions of 'the curator as ...'. They're a confessor, collaborator, coroner, they're a magician, they're a provocateur, they're a trouble-maker, they're a canary in the coal mine. So, in these terms, with this expanded notion of the curator, what kind of curator are you in this moment? Or perhaps in this moment before the moment? Are you the midst of the thing? Are you a satellite, are you like Sansour, adrift? And I'm not thinking of that image in kind of a negative because there's something very beautiful in that moment.*

**DA:** I definitely feel like what I was; what I wanted to do was to ... and I've always been quite conscious of this ... I think throughout the process is the idea of like layering together something that is in the midst of things, something that is in the past as well, with something that is about what might be envisaged as a future, and how those things might be like squished together into some kind of plane.

***BW:** Like a mesh?*

**DA:** Yeah, like a mesh.

***BW:** I guess that's how the wall in your piece works, being both a horizontal and vertical space. I kind of like the idea of the wall being both smooth and striated.*

**DA:** I was just remembering one of the references that you sent me. And I can't think of the name now. But we were talking about the slash, the forward slash between Israel and

Palestine in terms of the way that the ‘conflict’ in inverted commas is like articulated Israel / Palestine.

*BW: How do you hold it in your head? I’ve seen the hyphen, used the other way around, with Palestine first. Is there a way of articulating the tension on the page that works for you, and then how does that ‘sit’ with you – well perhaps not in your body or maybe through your body. Is there a preferred way in which you would articulate that?*

**DA:** Yeah, I mean, my perception is that that normative is the sort of slash with Israel / Palestine. Yeah. And I often play around with that and how to present it differently. Really it’s different at different times. But for a long time I would use the phrase Israel–Palestine conflict, which has been critiqued hugely in more recent years, because obviously conflict suggests that there’s some kind of symmetry of power or experience, which is not the case. So, I have tried to avoid using that, which is why I like inverted commas on the word ‘conflict’. I think it’s like just constantly shifting thing how you represent something on the page. It’s not fixed, it’s just a consistent negotiation of what. Of how we write it. Yeah, and how we speak it.

*BW: Which makes me think of the title of your piece: Concord.*

**DA:** Yeah, the idea of *Concord* being agreement and that idea of like making an agreement between people and that negotiation was like always present in the idea of the work.

*BW: And a concord for me is kind of tentative thing and perhaps a thing in flux. It’s something which needs to be attended to and nurtured and watched and you need to be with it. Yeah, to see how to watch and see how it settles and feels in the body. A live and present negotiation.*



**DA:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's definitely something that I wanted to explore in the piece in lots of different ways. And now I come back to what I was thinking about as well and how much the wider creative circle, including yourself and other people that I've been involved, how much they're also part of that negotiation, too. And the mesh of the work.

***BW:** We came into this conversation thinking about that idea of the 'moment before the moment'. So, now, I find myself what's the 'after after the after?' Is it too early to tell? I mean this is brand-new, not just in your body, but your dad's body as well. That, you know, you're still chiming and fizzing and resonating from last night, there are things that are still ... swirling. And have not had the moment to connect.*

*But, if I were to 'apply pressure' [both laugh], in this moment, what is the after after the after? What knowledges has this revealed?*

**DA:** I mean, so many, just not in ways that I can necessarily articulate very clearly. But all sorts of things about my relationship with my dad and about the performance making creative process and how that operates, and the ideas of trained and untrained or expert and 'inexpert', and experienced and inexperienced. And maybe something about the audience performer dynamic. I was thinking earlier today about the audience's role in the work, and yeah, that's really fascinating to me, but also the deepening of understanding of a particular political context and of my relationship to that. And of the way that I suppose spaces kind of create and take hold of certain activities.

***BW:** I was very much struck in terms of the way that the audience met your piece with silence. There were a hundred people in the room, and I could hear them all breathing. And there was something quite exquisite and devastating about that; it became a*

*soundtrack to what you were negotiating live, you and your dad. Held in this space and then healed by the offering of your mum's biscuits afterwards. We ate the biscuits and held them in our mouths. Through that silence and holding biscuits in our mouths. It stops the words.*

*Maybe that's the 'after after the after'. At least for me, encountering all these people where their borders meet. And maybe there is always some benefit to stopping our mouths, of chewing over something and swallowing the words to see how they work out through the gut as well.*

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