ARIA EVANS: Welcome to Thrust, the dance: made in canada podcast. We're here to provide intimate insights into the perspectives of Canadian dance artists. We'll talk about why physical expression matters, what it does in our bodies when we experience it, and how it impacts our daily lives. This season we're looking at legacy, succession planning, and knowledge sharing. Change is inevitable, but how does one prepare for it when artistic organizations are built on an individual's vision? How do we pass along embodied knowledge and our artistic vision? Or do we? Let's ask some of Canada's prominent creators now. EDAM, which stands for Experimental Dance and Music is a contemporary dance company based in Vancouver. Founded in 1982 by a collective of seven independent artists, EDAM has flourished over the decades under the visionary leadership of Peter Bingham. Today, EDAM remains a presentation hub for contemporary dance and a center for the research and performance of contact improvisation. Over the last four decades, Peter Bingham has created innumerable choreographed works that highlight both athleticism and the graceful elegance of contact. He has performed in over a hundred improvised works with a multitude of national and international improvising artists. Today, Peter lives with Parkinson's disease. He continues to orally lead class three days a week and directs scored improvisations with the EDAM ensemble. Olivia Shaffer is the associate artistic director of EDAM. She has been performing with the company since 2014. Her role within the organization has gradually expanded over time. In 2018, she became Peter's assistant and as a resident teacher of contact improvisation, in 2023 Olivia Shaffer was announced as the incoming artistic director over a three year succession period. Olivia also works as an independent performer and choreographer, and as a certified practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method. I'm so happy to have you two here with us today. I'm gonna dive right in and ask if you two can talk about your history and relationship with one another.

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Yeah, so as you heard, we started working together in 2014

when I joined the company, but I knew Peter before that. I started taking classes regularly at EDAM in 2011. EDAM has a scholarship program where young emerging artists, generally dance artists, but not necessarily exclusively dancers, are invited to take training three to five days a week. And so I did that way back then and that was my first full-on introduction into contact. And then we just started working together. I was dancing in Peter's work. He was making a lot more choreographed work when I first started with the company, so very precise, which was huge learning for me as a recently joined company member. There was a big learning curve in learning that specificity.

PETER BINGHAM: I don't know when I met Olivia, I think she was at Simon Fraser University.

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Oh. Mm-hmm.

PETER BINGHAM: I was teaching up a Simon Fraser for, probably a workshop, two week classes or something like that. I didn't remember her name or anything like that, but it was a long time ago.

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Mm-hmm. And I often say I wasn't sure how I felt about contact way back then. It was like, 'maybe this is not for me.' I remember it just being so outside of my comfort zone. Coming from a background more in classical forms you could say, which is not about touch, not about weight sharing at all, it was just so far beyond my scope that it just was a bit disorienting at first. But then that was what was so beautiful about the three months of training that I did back in 2011. But the consistent exposure and becoming familiar with the form really opened up a whole new world of dance for me. Moving away from the external form base using mirrors as a way of learning movement, instead, it is really a form that creates a framework for discovery, a personal discovery through practices, puzzles. It really feels like a form rooted in research. It was totally illuminating for me and my dance trajectory.

PETER BINGHAM: Yeah. Like you'll spend most of the time in a class figuring

things out on your own or with a partner. It's not as singular. To learn things you have to try it with different partners, figure out the differences there in two bodies, how they coordinate together. And because it's an improvised form that we're playing with, at least now it is, I've been doing both for years. But, the notion of researching a piece in front of people, it's just exhilarating, basically. I miss it. Would be nice to be able to continue that part of the job. I remember being impressed with Olivia, and I also remember that I used her a lot in class as a demonstrator. She didn't know how good she was, I don't think.

ARIA EVANS: I'm curious, Peter, how contact improvisation became integrated into your artistic practice?

PETER BINGHAM: Basically I started dancing with a company called Synergy Movement Arts- I think it was movement arts. And it was run by a woman named Linda Rubin. It wasn't contact, it was improvisation and your basic Graham floor warmup type of thing. So it was more connected to the contemporary dance scene than contact, which is more of a postmodern approach to working with movement. I loved doing the partnering stuff, it was sort of like sports. I had to be quick on my feet, but not quick to think, just, you know, reaction time and instantaneous gathering of information about your partner.

ARIA EVANS: Olivia, i'm curious if you have any memories, like you've talked about the initial sort of discomfort, being outside of your comfort zone and then finding yourself in this practice that now seems like it's quite embedded into your artistic life, but do you have any memories in the company in those earlier days that you feel like sharing?

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Yeah, so many memories of really figuring things out. Like, as Peter mentioned, it's a form that's so innately collaborative. It's not just about getting the move, right? It's like you really have to work it out with the people you're dancing with. And this process of, we can all have different perspectives about what's happening, but finding a way, and

talking about it, and experimenting with it until we can find that gelling. And Peter on the outside as a director would really have this capacity to be able to see what's happening and be able to give verbal guidance to just help find that gelling. So it would just be so much continuous learning in the rehearsal space. And then it was also a space for learning more about the form and the history of the form and the history of the company. Peter's a great storyteller, and often in rehearsal there'd be these little impromptu story time moments where Peter would share memories from your history dancing. Because, I'll just mention that, EDAM has existed continuously in the same location since it was founded in 1982, and actually prior to that, Synergy Movement, Peter's teacher, Linda Rubin, she was running classes out of that space as well. So it's been continuously a room filled with dance improvisation, including contact improvisation and choreography since 1975? Or six? Or even before.

PETER BINGHAM: Yeah. Yeah.

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Linda started there, I wanna say in '74 or something, and then Peter started in '75?

PETER BINGHAM: Yeah, '75. Contact I started in '76. I started in '75 doing improvisation.

OLIVIA SHAFFER: So, it's like my memories are of Peter sharing his own memories of the space. And just to have one room as this container for all this experience, you actually feel it in the room. You feel it in the floor. You feel that history as soon as you walk in. And it really supports the practice, supports the continued learning and growing and developing.

ARIA EVANS: It's beautiful too, to think of that cycle in this succession plan that the two of you are on currently as well, that there's that feedback from the continuation of that. Peter, I'd love to give you a chance to talk about some of your other mentors and teachers and their impact on you.

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PETER BINGHAM: Well, there was Linda who ran Synergy Movement workshops. She was a charmer.

ARIA EVANS: [Laughs].

PETER BINGHAM: And that was in the mid seventies and she really had a huge following of people learning dance in that formal way and presenting it. And also she was really not interested in dancing around, get out and get your ya ya's off. We had to consider what we were doing and give life to it. Don't just repeat it. It's where the research comes in. Personal research. I was gonna say, it's important to remember the sensations of what you're working with, who you're working with, what you're capable of in a cold room or a warm room. Understanding what you're interested in artistically, so you can go ahead and give yourself permission to indulge. There's always something new to find out or something old to remember.

ARIA EVANS: You've mentioned a few other folks, and I am curious about their influence on you as well. There was Dianne Miller. Steve Paxton.

PETER BINGHAM: That's right. They all ran through my mind before you mentioned it. Dianne Miller is a ballet teacher

OLIVIA SHAFFER: And Pilates.

PETER BINGHAM: She developed Pilates during that period of time. But she started up as a ballet teacher.

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Okay.

PETER BINGHAM: And there was a bunch of us that were all dancing for Karen Jamieson, and Dianne Miller came in twice a week and taught us ballet. Which was the furthest thing from my experience I can even imagine. But I hesitated to bring in my teachers because two of the very important ones recently

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died. Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith. And there's certainly other people who've also fallen into aging that were dancing back in the mid seventies, early eighties. Yeah, so Steve was the guy that invented contact, or instigated it, is what he said to me. I would definitely say he was a friend in many respects, but he's much more a mentor, an official teacher, and I feel fortunate to have been able to spend some time with him. You know, one-on-one time, and research time, playtime. He is a very intellectually minded man and there was always something to discover, always something important to talk about. And I fell into that fairly easily because I'm maybe a little more intellectually minded. I'm not talking about being practiced, but I tend to like to talk to people who are intellectuals. And Nancy was part of Steve's original quartet or quintet of dancers that worked with him on the piece that he did fairly early on, they were performing and they had tumbling mats and they were throwing themselves around at each other, and the recovery was the contact improvisation. So that's its initial representation to the world, I guess. Dianne Miller transformed my body through Pilates. It was rough and ready, but it became fine tuned and ready after about six months of working with Dianne. And I had her teaching the whole company for probably seven or eight years. It was great alternative training to technical training because it was artistically nonspecific. It was neutral and so you could work from your perspective and not from some role. It was good to have a teacher like her who was open, but yet very specific in her teaching. And Linda was a Graham demonstrator in New York in the Graham company. And she was kind of formal. She was teaching improvisation, but she was kind of formal in her approach and she certainly opened up the doorways for exploration, group improv, and solo work, just practicing developing pieces in front of people.

ARIA EVANS: You mentioned mentors succumbing to aging, and there's something in continuing on a practice that is rooted through people that you had a direct relationship with. Do you have a response to the word responsibility?

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PETER BINGHAM: I've always liked that word. Respons- able. I like breaking words down. It could change your perspective on a word. It's good to be able to play those words out. It's like a tactic to spread the genealogy of language and give it value. In the dance world, I think talking and dancing is great. I don't hold the belief that you should dance or talk, but not both. So I worked with some theater people as well, voice work. There's a fairly heavy dose of all of those things through my years. The theater teachers at SFU (Simon Fraser) at the time, were very interested in mixing postmodern movement with theater, so I had a chance to do some research that way through theater. So there was Mark Diamond and Penelope Stella at SFU teaching in the theater department. I taught up there for a couple years.

ARIA EVANS: Well, that's perfect. I have another thing to ask [laughs] and it's tethering back to responsibility. And I'm curious, Olivia, can you talk a little bit about this three year transition in leadership? What that looks like?

OLIVIA SHAFFER: So in 2023, Peter gave me a call and said that he'd been in conversation with the board for a little while about some thoughts and some ideas about what the future of EDAM might look like, and asked if I would consider this three year succession plan, which I thought was really interesting. And I thought it was really neat because- three years. You know, I tend to be someone who it takes time for me to sort of figure out where I'm at and where I'm going. Some may call it ‘present', like really in the moment rather than thinking of the future. Whereas other people would just say indecisive or I don't know, there's different ways to describe what that is. But there was something about the three years that gave me comfort in knowing that I don't need to know where I need to end up. That we can be in this process of discovery together, which in many ways feels like lessons that we learn in the contact dance all the time. So, yeah, I was up for it. I liked the idea that there would be this sort of gradual transferring of information. Gradual transfer of responsibility. It would give time for that learning, that learning period, and that

Peter would continue to be around for as long as he would need and want to be around to support that process.

ARIA EVANS: And it's quite a unique transition the way that you've structured the three years that you two are sharing. What does it look like granularly?

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Yeah. Practically speaking, the transition is built in such a way that salaries progressively either increase or decrease over the three years.So it's sort of like this salary splitting scenario where, Peter in year one had two thirds of his salary, I had one third of that. And then in year two it's like a 50 /50 and then the third year it swaps, so then I have two thirds, you have one third. So it's this gradual transition of salary splitting, I guess you could say.

ARIA EVANS: It's so practical, but I love the value that is behind that.

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Yeah, and it kind of goes with our involvement, you know. 'Cause I've been working as a freelance artist, an independent artist doing my own work as well and working with many other companies. So that's slowly sort of refining over these three years as well. Doing more work for EDAM and less work for other companies and other artists, even though I still wanna keep doing that, 'cause I find it so rich working with a variety of different people. But yeah, practically speaking, EDAM is becoming something that I really wanna take care of and give it the attention and support to take on these next years of legacy.

ARIA EVANS: Do you have a sense of the things that you've witnessed that you're really excited about continuing forward with you?

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Yeah, I'm excited about the form of contact and that it is this very alive form that creates a space for continual discovery. I was teaching this morning at EDAM before coming over to do this podcast, and yeah, I'm learning things as I'm teaching. You know, it's like this reciprocal thing that I'm sharing something that I'm curious about, and then I sort of get a response from those in the room and their discoveries

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then inform my discoveries. And this exchange just makes the form feel like we also don't know exactly where we're going, but we're really living it in the moment together. So that's something that no doubt, I'd love to carry on with, something that Peter has been doing himself for decades and decades, teaching contact, teaching these EDAM offers. These morning classes Monday to Friday and probably for like 20, 30 years you've been teaching them in some form or the other, and so that just feels like such an important piece of this ongoing research and practice. But really it's a space for the company dancers to be in their practice. So we have rehearsals that are separate from these classes- these morning classes, but the practice then informs the rehearsals. And so there is that interconnectedness as well as part of the practice. Just continuing to share the form with both people- people who are practicing it regularly, professionally, but then also it's a form that's accessible and exciting for a whole range of non-professional movers. Artists that aren't necessarily dancers as well. So it's kind of this cross pollination of exchange and learning. Just even beyond our immediate dance circle. Other things that EDAM offers is performing. This performance of contact improvisation and improvisation, which in my career as a performer, I've worked with other artists, choreographers, who are working with improvisation, scored improvisation, but to work with one consistent group, we call ourselves the EDAM ensemble. So its members change periodically, but for the most part, we've been practicing together consistently since 2017. And so to have not only this like regular practice together in a class format, but to have this ongoing research and rehearsals, leading to performances, and every performance then leads into the next performance, that it's like this accumulation of knowledge and discovery and artistic queries that get to be expressed in these performances. So that's something that I'd also love to continue to nurture and develop and see where it leads us.

ARIA EVANS: One of the things that's been really interesting in talking to different folks who are going through transitional periods or who have just started new artistic leadership positions, is this

idea of if you are the one who has been the vision for a company, a festival, et cetera, et cetera, and you're passing it on to someone else, that that sort of letting go also has to happen. And I'm curious, I don't wanna put words in your mouth, Peter, but how is it feeling? Maybe today, in this moment, we can get really present about it for Olivia, get really present in this moment. [Laughs]. Does it feel like there's a letting go, or a giving over in any way from you?

PETER BINGHAM: If it is, it was years ago. I don't feel that letting go because I'm still involved. I feel a kind of longing for my body. Because you need your body to dance. It's a weird angle to teach now and not do anything physical so that I'm actually teaching the bodies of the dancers without directly accessing the dancer themselves, influencing their point of view. Like do you think about what you're seeing in your field of vision while you're doing that? Or can you have a steady point of view on falling? So that you can actually fully fall and not hold back? Create imagery that's specific to those physicalities? So you can have some control over your artistry.

ARIA EVANS: I really appreciate the way that you tie metaphor and imagery into the way that you talk about contact improv. And Olivia, as you steward this next generation forward, are there values that are embedded in contact dance that you feel like you want to bring into the organizational values of EDAM?

OLIVIA SHAFFER: We always say the dance is the teacher. And that you learn as you go. And I think that that's one thing that's giving me comfort in this process is that I don't have to have everything figured out, that I can have the direction that we are navigating towards, but that I can really learn as I go and every opportunity is a learning opportunity. I'd say that's a value that I'd love to keep alive in the organization and really promote as something that we can all be in this process of learning together. Learning more about each other, learning what it's like to see things from another perspective, develop more empathy through this quality of listening that we cultivate in the practice. I think the collaborative nature of the

form is something that speaks very clearly to me. That even though I step into this role it would be so disorienting to just be there figuring it all out on my own. So already, the role feels very collaborative. I work closely with EDAMs General Manager, Sierra Megas and we're in this process with Peter, with the ensemble members, with the teachers. Anne Cooper is a teacher and company member of EDAM, who's actually been with the company for 30 years, so she's integral, and she's another one of my teachers and mentors and supporters. So there's already so many people presently involved in the day-to-day learning and discovering and collaborating together that it just feels like that's embedded both in the form and in the culture that I would love to continue to create.

ARIA EVANS: Beautiful values. For our listeners who maybe don't know very much about the dance: made in canada festival, we are a festival that runs every two years and this podcast happens every single year. So we have an on festival year and an off festival year of the podcast, and this season is a year that the dance festival is happening and there's a choreographic work that's going to be presented by you, Peter. I'm curious if you can talk a little bit about Dead Weighting.

PETER BINGHAM: It's really about what it sounds like. It's about waiting to die. We're all doing it, so why not talk about it or express it. The challenge of this piece was really the stillness in it and trusting the patience of people to be intelligent and not have to interpret what they're seeing other than how it makes them feel, or makes them think. I really like to challenge the dancers to be personal and yet not give yourself away. So that doesn't tell you anything about the piece. [Laughs]. The piece I believe will grow on you if you watch it and it'll have an accumulative effect. One of the things that is important is that this ensemble of dancers have been working together probably for seven years or so. That extra number of years together really adds up to something when you're able to function from your senses and instinct to get what you want outta the dancers. So when we're making up concepts,

maybe some physicalities that can be repeated or acknowledged at certain parts of the piece, that becomes like a puzzle unfolding in front of you. That includes accepting the pace that things move at, that includes rocketing around the room, or feeling the tensegrity of a sponge in your body so you can have surface to land on. I dunno if that's the kind of information you wanted.

ARIA EVANS: It's exactly the kind of information, and I love the provocation of 'it will grow on you', so you'll have to come and see it. To circle back around to succession, Olivia, knowing the infrastructure that you're inheriting, that EDAM holds, do you see there being a space for your creative voice inside of the organization as well?

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Yeah, I feel like there's already a space for my creative voice. I mean, as an improviser and because Peter's working with these scored improvisations that give so much freedom to the performers to navigate within that, I feel just that in itself. My creative artistry comes through in every one of these works and so that's one way. And then I've also been experimenting a bit with stepping on the outside. So for an event that we just had in April, I was directing the ensemble. So I was on the outside and starting to shape and sculpt a score for them to perform. So there are these shifting of roles that it's hard to know exactly where it will land at this point, but I feel that it all feeds creatively. And then to create a space for other artists feels like a creative outlet for me as well. All the company members each create their own work as well. So there's this ongoing unfolding of where contact meets contemporary dance in different ways, in different facets. I guess in this process of things, taking the time that they're gonna take, it will all be revealed in time.

ARIA EVANS: As a final question, I'm curious, what pieces of wisdom have you discovered through this time of transition or that you have sort of picked up from each other?

OLIVIA SHAFFER: I've been learning a lot about the process of trusting. I guess

you could call it intuition or gut feelings. I think that's been a long time coming in my life in general, being someone who used to feel trapped with indecision, 'I have to have it all figured out', and then to move into this other space of just taking a breath and taking a bit more time for things to follow through. And I think Peter, as long as I've known him, but even more and more over the years as I get to know him, I just see that tuning in to some deeper knowing that has been an incredible support and inspiration for me to learn how to find that in myself. And it's an ongoing process, there's always more than seems visible at one time, if you just wait. Something might seem super intense right now in a crisis moment, but then it's like, that's just what's right in front of us right now, but what's just a little bit beyond that? What's just a little around that? So spreading our attention to the periphery. I mean, that's another lesson in contact is that we often work with the eyes and how we can move between shifting our eyes from pinpoint focus to this more peripheral focus and that we have agency in that. And how much information that we wanna take in in a moment can be based on this widening or narrowing of our field of vision. And I feel like that can be translated as well into decision making. We can either really just work with the stuff that's right in front of us or we can start to broaden and widen and just let the other information that's hanging out at the edges seep in. So that's one piece. [Laughs].

PETER BINGHAM: Tomorrow is just another day. There's a lot if value in the peripheral activity that we do with people from different forms, clowns, theater people, musicians, artists of other disciplines. There's a way for them to come in and appreciate and do the work that we do without being scared out of their pants. There's an avenue in for everybody. Don't get me wrong, we keep our training specifically enhanced, and how we use them in normal life to guide us.

ARIA EVANS: In all of these conversations that I've been having with folks who are in this state of change, it's so beautiful to see an example of time being given for how something evolves, and it's been such a pleasure to hear the two of you talk about

your deep, long standing relationship and I just wanted to say thank you for your time and your generosity with this conversation.

PETER BINGHAM: Thank you.

OLIVIA SHAFFER: Yeah. Thank you for making the space and inviting us.

ARIA EVANS: Thanks for tuning into Thrust, the dance: made in canada podcast. Thrust is presented by dance: made in canada/ fait au canada festival, a biennial dance festival featuring dance artists from across Turtle Island with unique artistic visions from diverse backgrounds. We acknowledge that this land colonially known as Canada, has been the site of dance for many millennia. We are grateful for the ability to dance and celebrate on Turtle Island. Thrust is produced by Mayumi Lashbrook and Taylor Zalik-Young. Editor and composer, Jamar Powell, sound engineer Chris Dupuis, and 1990 Studios, and cover photography by Marlowe Porter. And I'm your host, Aria Evans. Thank you to our funders, Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council, and our donors and individual donors, we couldn't do this without their constant support. Find us wherever you get your podcasts and don't forget to rate and review. Let dance transform you.

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