Lenses on Leadership

Episode 3: Safe Space, Brave Space | Dance Leadership with Kristina & Sadé Alleyne

Sadé Alleyne (00:00): Me and Kristina never give a hundred percent in our work. We always give eight eighty percent and keep twenty percent to look after ourselves.

Kristina Alleyne (00:09): In athletics, in sports, that's called fatigue where your performance starts to actually, the more you work, the more your performance starts to decrease. You know, the curiosity starts to get less.

Sadé Alleyne (00:21): Imagine you're giving a hundred percent, hundred percent, that's all of you, everything of you, and it's not celebrated or welcomed. But if you just keep that extra pocket for yourself, it's not all about you.

William Spencer (00:35): Welcome to Lenses on Leadership, a Stopgap podcast by the Future Leaders, a podcast exploring leadership, creativity, access and change across the arts, dance and beyond. Presented by Stopgap's Co Assistant Artistic Directors and Future Leaders, Will and Kajsa. Through conversations with artists, leaders and change makers, we discuss, investigate and explore what diverse leadership looks like in the arts and beyond.

Kajsa Sundström (01:03): My pronouns are she / her. I am a white Swedish woman with blonde hair. I am a standing dancer and today I am wearing a black jumpsuit and a red scrunchie.

William Spencer (01:16): I'm Will and my pronouns are he/they. I am a white male presenting medium height person with blonde highlights in my short mullet, pink blue glasses with a pale blue tee and a white waffle textured oversized shirt. I'm wearing in-ear defenders around my neck.

Kajsa Sundström (01:33): Today we are joined by Kristina and Sadé Alleyne, artistic directors of Alleyne Dance. Alleyne Dance is an award-winning contemporary dance company that works with rhythm, texture and powerful physicality across a range of dance styles. Their practice spans teaching, choreographing, performing and mentoring. Kristina and Sadé, welcome to the podcast! Would you like to do a visual description for our audience?

Kristina Alleyne (02:01): Hello, I'm Kristina. Thank you for having me. I am a Black British dancer. I have sisterlocks that are just below shoulder length. I'm wearing an orange long sleeve top with a necklace that has my August pendant on there.

Sadé Alleyne (02:17): And hello, I'm Sadé Alleyne. I'm the identical twin sister of Kristina. So I am also a Black British Caribbean woman. I have an athletic build. I'm wearing a blouse with green and gold African print. And I have a St. Christopher silver necklace on.

William Spencer (02:38): In this episode, we'll be discussing your journey, the many different strands of your work, and we'd love to hear your thoughts about both inclusion and rigor through your leadership.

Kajsa Sundström (02:49): We're gonna play a quick game of This or That. Kristina, set choreography or improvisation?

Kristina Alleyne (02:56): Improvisation.

William Spencer (02:58): And Sadé do you prefer coffee or tea?

Sadé Alleyne (03:00): Coffee.

Kajsa Sundström (03:02): Kristina, working in the UK or working abroad?

Kristina Alleyne (03:09): I cannot answer, I like both!

William Spencer (03:12): So valid. Sadé, do you prefer podcasts or music?

Sadé Alleyne (03:17): Music.

Kajsa Sundström (03:18): Kristina, are you a morning person or an evening person?

Kristina Alleyne (03:22): Evening.

William Spencer (03:24): Sadé, do you prefer indoor work or outdoor work?

Sadé Alleyne (03:27): Just any work.

Kajsa Sundström (03:28): Hehe.

William Spencer (03:29): Just work. I love that.

Kajsa Sundström (03:31): Kristina, cardio or strength training?

Kristina Alleyne (03:34): My goodness, these are hard ones. Cardio?

Kajsa Sundström (03:39): So your work has spanned across many different settings. Recently, you've been working as the Artistic Directors of National Youth Dance Company. You choreograph for your own company, work across community settings and teach internationally. Is there a common thread throughout your practice that's always present, no matter who is in front of you?

Sadé Alleyne (04:01): I would say definitely. I think it's the human connection, I guess. It's trying to really meet the participants regardless of their age or where they are on the professional ladder. It's just about looking for the truth in movement, the generosity and the connection. We want to offer opportunities through movement and to encourage everyone to know that movement is accessible for everyone. But definitely the human connection.

We try to infuse curiosity as well. and curiosity in subjects, subjects that can be impactful in the world, that dance can create conversation. A lot of our work is about storytelling, so it is trying to produce work that inspires people to talk after and share after.

We do try to create spaces where people are seen and heard. And then we try to bring light to stories that haven't been told, people's voices that have been quietened. We try to highlight those voices and celebrate them.

Kajsa Sundström (05:06): Thank you.

William Spencer (05:08): You said something interesting about trying to bring things to light and trying to celebrate those voices. Could you talk a little bit more about the way in which you do that, that you use your leadership as a tool to highlight those things?

Kristina Alleyne (05:21): I think it can be divided into two stems. I think if it's about choreography, then it'll come out in the story that we are creating, the theme that we are creating work on. And we like to make pieces that are about true stories or true events, things that are impactful to us or to the people watching. So we try to create work that is meaningful and stories to be said and told.

In terms of the people that we work with, it's very important for us to work with the people. We try sometimes to stay away from dancers and we say the word movers just because the word dance can be terrifying to people that have never danced

before. But movement is, it's there, whether it's in your heart, whether it's in your body, whether it's in your mind. And we try to – connect with the people that we're working with. And then that kind of allows us to create opportunity and be creative with the collaboration that is presented in front of us.

William Spencer (06:22): I think that's really interesting. There's something that I find similar about language and using the word dance in— compared to word movement. There is a certain association with dance, right? And I have this kind of idea of what dance is. And I think a lot of people do, and it's not always an accessible word or an accessible idea.

And I think particularly when you're talking about where people are on the kind of the professional ladder, where they are in their dance journey, it's so interesting. So I often find that I'm having to, what I call like... decolonise my language from what I've been told dances as opposed to what feels right for my body or what feels right for the bodies of the people in the space.

Kajsa Sundström (07:00): Yeah, and I think language is so interesting. We're going to investigate language a little bit later as well, because that's one of the big strands of the work that we do and the investigations that we've had through our journey with Stopgap is really think about language and what a difference it really, really makes.

So we're all, you know, leaders in this space, or if there's another word for that that you would like to use, we're very happy to hear. We're always learning from other leaders around us. And is there anything that you learned or witnessed early in your journey that inspired you to maybe lead differently?

Sadé Alleyne (07:39): In most workshops I try to say I'm a travel guide. and just take people through an experience but not necessarily I'm leading them. I'm just like a guide.

Kajsa Sundström (07:48): I'm really curious, was there a moment in your journey, both of you, where you realised that you wanted to be the people in front of the room or where you were like, 'oh we can be leaders and makers too? Do you feel like you were encouraged to explore that or was that something you had to carve out for yourself?

Kristina Alleyne (08:07): I think Sadé and I have always been energetic people. As a young age, we wanted to do everything, hence why we did athletics so young and then we went into hip hop dance so young. We just wanted to do anything and be busy. And we had an opportunity when we were younger to teach dance in a

primary school. And we were like, yeah, we'll do that. Never done it before. And just from that experience of working with young people that have their own opinions, their own mind and in a way they were cooler than us. They were the best trainers and they knew the most popular music out there. We had to work on kind of our strategy of how can we get these people to follow us? How can we get them to think what we're doing is cool as well? You know?

So I think... that was kind of the starting point and we realised there's an art to leading and there's an art to guiding and there's a lot of research has to happen and by teaching at the primary school and then having an opportunity to teach training youth group dance group, we realised that it's a completely different strategy because the dance group wanted to dance, the primary school just danced because it was part of their curriculum. So we started to understand that there's an art to creating, there's an art to guiding.

And there's a lot of research that needs to happen and you have to connect and understand the people that you're working with. And I think that experience from the primary school has kind of helped us to how we've decided to get more curious and wanting to have more experience of working with different types of people. And that curiosity led us to become choreographers. We didn't dream of becoming a choreographer. We just had the curiosity of telling stories and bringing these shapes and images together.

Sadé Alleyne (09:56): I think a good example for that would be I started off as an apprentice performer and then moved into a professional performer, then moved into dance captain, then rehearsal director, and then education officer. And that was all within two contracts that I just through curiosity I started to just develop my role. That's kind of been our journey in life, is just being curious and okay, what else can we do? Who else can we meet?

William Spencer (10:23): Yeah, like it's so interesting to hear you talk about the curiosity, because that's something that I hopefully is reflected in my practice and something that I think is really important in a room is to like question things and to pull everything you can from that room and discover what you can.

Kajsa Sundström (10:40): We would love to talk to both of you a little bit more about the ethos of inclusion and rigor, both in terms of leadership, but also in terms of artistic practice. So within Stopgap, two of our most important strands across all of the work that we do is the ethos of inclusion, rigor, and equitable culture. And as Future Leaders, these words and language around them and these practices are something that I want to develop when I leave this program.

And having had the opportunity to experience your work both as a dancer in the studio and as an audience member, I really feel that your work also encompasses an ethos of inclusion and rigor. And I was really curious how these words feel for you and if you would agree or yeah, if there's other words that feel more aligned.

Sadé Alleyne (11:33): No, we definitely agree and we like we want our work to be. I feel like we want our work to touch everyone. And I think with the words that we've used in, we just always say we just want everyone to succeed. And that would be whether they're in the dance or if experiencing the dance. We want to make sure the doors are open for everyone. I guess what we try to do is I think it's the challenging, that we are trying to bring the best out of each person we work with.

So it's not just going to what they're able to do right now. We're looking at what they're capable of doing and make them hungry to do more. So I guess that's where the rigor comes in because we want them to think highly of themselves in order to produce excellent work and to be proud of themselves.

Kajsa Sundström (12:18): Kristina, is there anything you'd like to add to that?

Kristina Alleyne (12:21): I agree, think Sadé explained it. I think it is important to challenge whoever we are working with. We like to work with different people. I think that's very important and that's one of the reasons why we volunteer at refugee centres and we work with different families. I think it's just important that we connect with people that maybe don't know movement and how dance and movement can bring hope and give you the opportunity to fly, I think.

We always use the word flying, but it's through the challenge. We push people to a limit where hopefully they give themselves goosebumps, like they surprise themselves, they are blown away by themselves. And I think that is the rigor, the hard work, the challenge.

William Spencer (13:09): I think you've touched on something that I've discovered as part of my leadership journey as well with Stopgap is I always want people to be in a safe environment, but I want the work to continue to push boundaries. Like I don't want the artistic choices to be safe. I want the practice to be brave and exploratory and curious. That's something that I'm really pushing for is to find more language to be able to say, yes, we're in a safer space, but artistically we're not.

Kajsa Sundström (13:37): Yeah.

Sadé Alleyne (13:38): I totally agree with that. I think that's beautiful, like the safe, safe and brave space. And we want people to have the permission and feel free to

fall, to ask questions, to take risks, feel vulnerable in their movement, but that vulnerability is power and be ambitious as well, not be shy about being ambitious. So it is making a space that people feel brave and encouraged and they can be playful and generous, but also take accountability. Safe and brave space are great. I feel like me and my sister probably just used every word to describe that topic, the subject.

William Spencer (14:13): I think you said it really clearly and I think you saying how you like to work with lots of different people, that's something again I'm learning is like I want to work with people from a really broad range of places but what is the thing that unites them and I think it is that curiosity. It's like I want to work with people who are always going to push.

Kajsa Sundström (14:30): I think it's also something that we really consider when we work with people who maybe have different experiences. I think it is interesting how also, yeah, maybe these words are quite broad, like a brave space, a safe space, like inclusion, rigor. Do you ever feel that you need to be more specific or do you think that it's actually better to have a much broader sense or a broader language that can bring everyone in?

Sadé Alleyne (14:57): Sometimes you need to know what you're getting yourself in for, but also what your company stands for. What are your values as a company? Like it's basically when you're going shopping, you need to know what's in the box. And I'm not just gonna spend this amount of money on a box. I need to know exactly what's in it. So I think there is a part of it informing people what is our package.

But at the same time, meeting people where they are, actually it might be rather than having the big titles of safe and brave space, we actually say this is actually what we mean. We want to create a space where you feel valued and you feel comfortable to make mistakes, but we encourage you to go further. And I think you have to know the right time to actually speak to people and say, this is what we're offering.

Kajsa Sundström (15:40): It is a pretty big question. guess where this is sort of coming from is something that we've also are always working towards is actually the word inclusion. And when something is inclusive and other people in the company and Stopgap have different relationships to that word. And that word actually maybe doesn't always feel like it fits and it suits.

William Spencer (16:05): Can feel like it can feel like an add-on, can't it? Inclusive. It's like, we're going to include you, but that's coming from the perspective of people who are already part of that. Exactly. That world, you know, and like to be, to have an inclusive work means that the work is otherwise exclusive.

Kajsa Sundström (16:18): Yes.

William Spencer (16:20): We do work with inclusion in Stopgap, that is part of my practice, but I'm trying to redefine what inclusion is and be like, okay, why have you not been included in this from the beginning? Like what is it that excludes you and how can we deconstruct that?

Kajsa Sundström (16:34): Yeah. Are there any words we've already spoken a little bit about, you know, that maybe the word movement is better than the word dance, but are there any other words that you feel that, or maybe that your company has been labeled as and you're like, actually we don't like that label. We would like to be called something else.

Kristina Alleyne (16:54): Good. I used to... This is... I don't know if this is going to answer the question, but it's the first thing that came to my head. When I was a young mover, young dancer, I used to get the word strong. She's so strong. She's so powerful. And I used to see it as such a negative. And the reason why is because, like, Sadé and I were very different in... When we started to take dance seriously and we went to vocational school... our bodies were very different to others in terms of our muscles we had from coming from athletics to enter dance, just the sheer power that we had. We never saw muscular dancers before. We're not even thinking about the color of our skin, we're talking about just the shape. I'm just not used to seeing that.

So I felt very like an outsider. And anytime that someone said, strong or powerful. like, can you look deeper than what I look like? Can you see I'm trying to be more graceful? I'm trying to be soft. It took us a long time to kind of get to know ourselves and understand that we have strength, but then understand that we have something else to offer and be comfortable with how people see us. I think the moment that I got confident with myself, It didn't hurt me or didn't offend me what people said about me if they used the word strength or powerful because I created a different meaning for that myself. And I am strong and I am powerful, but I do have other things, but it doesn't harm me anymore because I believe in myself in a different way.

Kajsa Sundström (18:35): How do you both navigate that? Maybe if you work with people who maybe prefer different language or different needs, different things in this space, do you feel that now you're able to read them and be able to... Something that we talked a little bit is about like as a leader or maybe a teacher, you almost shape shift a little bit to like the people in front of you. But yeah, is that also something that comes with practice and being in a lot of spaces or...

Sadé Alleyne (19:00): quite interesting there's a lot of things there. I think one of the things is not to me and Kristina never give a hundred percent in our work. We always give 80% and keep 20% to look after our look after ourselves. In our workshops, in our performances, we will give you so much but there will always be a percentage that gets left for us. So saying that with what we offer are if we're thinking workshops or performances that we do I think it's important that they meet us, if that makes sense.

I'm not shape shifting and changing my personality to suit who they are. But I do allow common threads to come in. So it's like, okay, we need to lighten up a bit. I might let my goofy side out a little bit more than I would do in a corporate meeting. I'll be like, okay, let me just hold back my goofy side just so we can be serious for a moment. So there's like little things like that in our characters will shift to make sure there's comfortability in the room. There is something that we do because you're all you're gonna make a mistake one day.

You're gonna say something that it might affect someone in a deeper way than others. There might be a certain action you do that reminds someone it there's loads of things that you can't protect because you don't know everything about each other.

But I do now start to explain to movers that you have an opportunity to experience this class in four ways, and you can decide if you want to. And that could be: Yes, today I need to use my personal experience and like dance out my worries, fears, or excitement. So you use your personal experience.

Or the second one, you can use something of the world that you've heard a story from a friend that's like you're holding on to, or something you read on in the newspaper, heard on the radio. If people still listen to radio, but if not, the news. So you can use something of the world that you're holding on to to help your dancing.

You can also invent. So the last week I was teaching and I think I had nothing left of the world or me. So I started to imagine that the world was covered with rainbow clouds and the sea was purple and it was like shooting stars. So you can invent your surroundings.

And then the fourth one, I'd say people can completely use the physicality to create emotion. So just allow the body to move and how the body is in position, you will feel something and that's your fuel for today. So sometimes we already have that disclosure, so then they have the opportunity to take the class or the show or the

sharing or how we talk in their own way. It's like they are the masters of how they should experience the class.

William Spencer (21:44): That's really–

Kajsa Sundström (21:45): Yeah, that's amazing. I'm stealing that and I'm putting it in my pocket. Yeah, I also just want to reflect back on what you said about like keeping 20%. I think that is a good tip and a good thought. How did you reach that conclusion? Is that something that you decided that you're like, okay, we need 20 % because I would love to be able to do that. But I feel like for me, there's a barrier to to access that thinking. And I'm also curious, Will, how do you feel? How do you relate to that?

William Spencer (22:20): I'm someone that struggles with burnout a lot because being autistic means that I really struggle to say no to things, to opportunities. So yeah, I burn out a lot. So I'm definitely going to keep that because I've learnt being a good leader means also leading yourself and like checking in and taking care of yourself, which is something I don't do enough of. And I'm definitely going to use that. So thank you for that.

Kajsa Sundström (22:43): And yeah, how did you find that? Okay. I'm going to save 20%.

Kristina Alleyne (22:46): It was through exhaustion, actually burnout, exhaustion. was, you know, how can I share with others if I don't look after myself? I cannot give you a good version of myself if I don't feel good. It came from exhaustion and realising that, I need to take care in order to take care of other people.

And also it came in a different way of when I was a dancer for other choreographers and you're, you know, I'm creating for someone's vision that I believe in, but there was a moment where I felt like I was giving so much of myself, but not getting the reward that I imagined. So that was another realisation of like, I cannot give someone else everything if I have a different vision. So I have to protect myself in order to be available in the space, to be present in the space. I need to, you know, hug myself as well.

William Spencer (23:40): I think that's a great, that's a really great piece of advice.

Sadé Alleyne (23:42): I think it's very important that because imagine you're giving a hundred percent, hundred percent. That's all of you, everything of you, and it's not celebrated or welcomed. But if you just keep that extra pocket for yourself, it's not all about you. It could be like, think it's very important that because imagine you're

giving a hundred percent, hundred percent. That's all of you, everything of you, and it's not celebrated or welcomed. But if you just keep that extra pocket for yourself, it's not all about you. It could be like, okay, given what I can for the work, but it's not about you. It's not about your personality or anything about your lifestyle. It's just that part of the work, okay, that doesn't work. Let's go with something else.

I mean we use this a lot in the art but also in everyday life as well. But always having check-ins, like to make sure I'm looking after myself. And likewise, Kristina, make sure she looks after herself. I think it's really important just to enjoy your life because there are intense periods. I would say we're in one, me and my sister right now. But it's okay. Just take it one step at a time, keep checking in, make sure you're enjoying the process.

Kristina Alleyne (24:37): And I'm a mum, you know, so I have to be a good version of myself, otherwise I'm going to be a cranky mother that's impatient, you know? So I have to make sure that I'm OK so that I can be the mum that I've always wanted to be for my kids.

William Spencer (24:51): Yeah.

Kajsa Sundström (24:52): Yeah. Thank you again, something to keep forever. Thank you for sharing that with us.

William Spencer (24:59): So we're coming to the end of the podcast. I'm going to ask you, like, is there a question or provocation that you would like to put out into the industry or out there to the world?

Sadé Alleyne (25:10): I guess like one of do–

Kristina Alleyne (25:11): Go, Sadé.

Sadé Alleyne (25:12): –what you I've got I've got three, but I'm gonna do one. I think one is a good one.

Kristina Alleyne (25:16): We can do this. We can jump. Sadé, me. Sadé, me.

Sadé Alleyne (25:21): What are we doing today to leave the dance sector stronger than we found it?

Kristina Alleyne (25:29): And what are you doing for yourself that allows your curiosity to grow?

Sadé Alleyne (25:37): I wrote this one. What would happen if we valued artists not just for what they produce, but for the communities they built?

William Spencer (25:45): That's a really good one. I mean, we again, we talk at Stopgap like something I've learned to talk about is like how we measure success. Like do you measure success by the metric of the capitalist world and like what it tells us success is and the world we grow up in or is it success something completely, completely different like the measure it has on your community. That's a really important provocation that I'm going to keep mulling over.

Kajsa Sundström (26:07): Yeah, thank you. And also just to reflect back on everything you said and especially about curiosity. I think it's really hard to be curious when you're burnt out. I think you can have it, like you can really aim to be curious. And I love that word. I love being a curious person. I think that's part of what drew me to dance in the first place that there's so much to discover. But I think that when I
noticed that I'm not as curious is probably a sign that I am also quite burnt out.

So I think it's just something that I'm taking with me and maybe something that I can take with me as my journey as a leader as well, or in whatever room I'm in. It's like, are people able to be curious or are they overworked and over worried?

Kristina Alleyne (26:53): In athletics, in sports, that's called fatigue, where your performance starts to... Actually, the more you work, the more your performance starts to decrease. You know, the curiosity starts to get less. So it's definitely tiredness and exhaustion burn out. But in terms of curiosity, that can go elsewhere. You know, to get rid of fatigue, it's to be like, okay, I'm going to cook something new. I'm going to go for a walk. I'm going to sit... in silence with nothing in my face, or I'm going to play Hot Wheels with my son, you know, like just something else that is different from what you're working on. I think that that can restore you.

Sadé Alleyne (27:36): Yeah, I think sometimes when people feel fatigued or burnt out, they feel like, okay, I need to stop. But it's not that you need a change. you need a break from the norm. And that is when you need to look at what else are you curious about. It doesn't mean that your passion for movement is less than. It's just that you're growing where you need a change from the scene. I mean, Alleyne Dance is as
busy as ever and yet I've decided to go back to athletics. You know, 'cause my curious Curiosity in sport hasn't shift– it hasn't changed, but it's been a big calling. So now I'm sprinting and running and racing and yet I'm still performing as a dancer. So my physical activity has grown and I am tired from dancing, but I feel energised because I've exercised in something else I'm curious about.

Kajsa Sundström (28:25): Thank you. That's, yeah.

William Spencer (28:28): there's something I'm going to take away from this podcast that you said about leaving the dance sector, the art sector, in a better place than when we found it as a provocation. And I definitely feel that through your work that I've seen that you have done that. And that is something that I am sure both Kajsa and myself aspire to do through our work with Stopgap and beyond.

Kajsa Sundström (28:48): The final thing we have is to say thank you so much for joining us and sharing so generously with us and all of our audience members.
William Spencer (28:58): Real pleasure.

Kajsa Sundström (28:58): It's been such a pleasure. And for everyone who's either listened, watched, or maybe have read through of this transcript, thank you for taking part in Lenses on Leadership, a Stopgap podcast. Join us next time for another conversation about leadership, creativity, access and change across the arts. Bye.

William Spencer (29:19): Bye for now.

Kajsa Sundström (29:20): for now.

William Spencer (29:23): This episode was recorded and produced by Creative Kin podcast studio. To find out more, visit creativekin.co.uk/stopgap. A special thank you to our funders, Arts Council England and Abderreheim Crickmay Charitable Settlement, without which the Future Leaders Program and lenses on leadership would not have been possible.