

By Frances Byrnes

# 'YOU SEE EVERYONE BLOOM'

## MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE

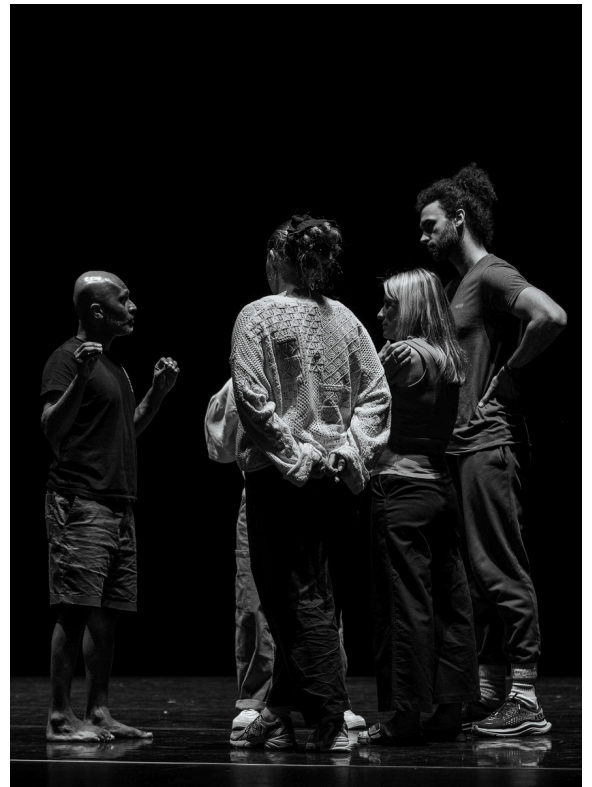
This is how it begins:

### CALL OUT FOR TWO EMERGING CHOREOGRAPHERS

*Dance United Yorkshire (DUY) a contemporary dance organisation specialising in inclusive arts, seeks to nurture and support the artistic growth of local talent by contracting two emerging choreographers to work together in a unique collaboration.*

The call out can only hint at who the choreographers will collaborate with:

*'In partnership with a world-leading and Olivier award winning Dance company..., this will be a ground-breaking new piece of dance theatre featuring an international cast of participants from Bradford's cultural engagement priority areas.'*



This was the risky vision of Helen Linsell, Artistic Director of Dance United Yorkshire, and of Akram Khan who agreed to join with DUY to make a landmark production for Bradford City of Culture 2025.

And what an adventure for two young choreographers, new artists with this task ahead: to make a dance for 70 participants of all ages, some with complex needs and many with no experience of being on stage, or of dancing, working alongside one of the most acclaimed dance companies in the world.

**Tallulah Shannon**, one of those emerging choreographers, says she doesn't show stress like other people, 'I worked in a Chinese takeaway from 13 -18, that was high stress – for no reason! I was shouted at on the phone, in person, food was late or cold, by customers, by staff – it was responsibility and no control – at age 13!'

In my memories of Tallulah during 'Memories of the Future' (I took part as one of the 'Elders'), she is always bursting out laughing.

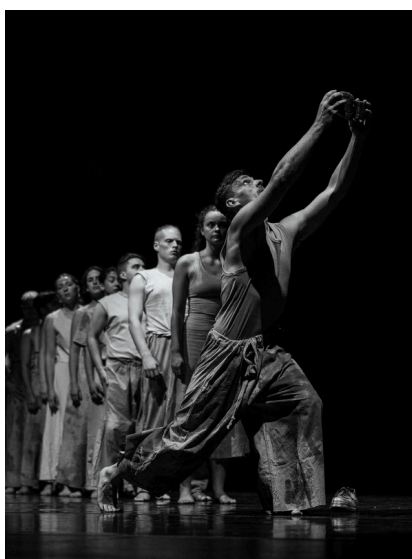


## "Everyone had to come away with a joyful memory but also each group being pushed, but not too far or too little"

Every week from January 2025, Tallulah and her co-choreographer, **Elliott Augustine**, taught us the dance in the upstairs studio at Kala Sangam, where DUY is based in central Bradford. Elliott is a gift with his gentle presence and Tallulah – all laughter and optimism. Then off they would go to do the same with primary children in Holme Wood, a deprived estate in the city. And on through the week: the women's group and the under 18s youth company, both in Holme Wood, the boys from Carlton Keighley and DUY's Gradient (more formal dance students, not much younger than the choreographers).

There were challenges. Most of the DUY groups were already established and 'to go in as a new person offering something different, there was pushback – they're going to test you,' remembers Tallulah. There were extremely mixed dance abilities in all our groups, so both impatience and anxiety in the air. Participants were unable to imagine how their section would become part of larger work: "This is boring" (said the women's group of their dance)! The choreographers felt pressurised until we combined at day long rehearsals at Bradford Academy, everything was knitted together and we saw the bigger picture.

**'This is it now!'**



The piece Tallulah and Elliott made for us is about belonging. Elliott still gets goosebumps and Tallulah wells up when they remember July 5th 2025, when we finally performed at the sold-out Alhambra Theatre. 'I cried all through the performance,' says Tallulah. She had graduated just exactly one year – to the day – before. Elliott felt nerves for us all, how much we were invested in the performance, 'And the beginning, when you walked on, it was a beautiful moment, so simple.'

[Akram Khan Company wanted to hear more from the two emerging choreographers about their experience of Memories of the Future and about their lives in dance]?? or something like that

### **'I was very quiet in school.'**

Elliott wanted to be a car mechanic. He only danced at weddings; *I can kinda dance* he felt but that's all. *Step Up* films amazed him and made dance 'cool' – street dance, body popping. Still, it was a 'massive shock' to his family when he started a Performing Arts course at Calderdale College in Halifax. Helen Linsell led a workshop there and when Elliott saw Dance United Yorkshire perform, something clicked.

Elliott credits the people who encouraged him to take himself and dance seriously, like Helen and a college teacher who advised him to try for dance training. He went to Northern School of Contemporary Dance (NSCD) in Leeds, from Foundation course to MA and he was apprenticed with Phoenix. By now his people thought of him as "Elliott, the dancer".

That someone with so much humility could help guide 70 community dancers through warm ups and run throughs and cool downs on our full rehearsal days at Bradford Academy (just as others had guided him) reflects what Dance United Yorkshire means to Elliott in general, 'They reach groups that don't have these opportunities ... people that are forgotten about,' Elliot says, 'They really care about these people they work with.'

Tallulah Shannon had grown up immersed in grassroots dance and theatre, because her parents run Big Theatre, a youth theatre company in the Derbyshire Dales and she loves quality smaller scale community arts. In her second year at NSCD she ran a mother and daughter project and found intergenerational work 'beautiful', 'I just love everybody. Every age is special.' She thinks this won her the job with *Memories of the Future*, against serious competition; that and her strongly held belief in access to dance performance for everybody - all incomes, all worlds.

Both Tallulah and Elliott are committed to good community dance.

### **'You see people bloom.'**

Over time, Elliott says, 'You can see the change in participants. Massive change, not just in movement abilities. Their confidence increases.' And in performance too. For Tallulah, *Memories of the Future* showed, 'how much everyone belongs and can be on the stage, everyone can and deserves to.'







## **'We're together - that was the magicalness of it for me ... togetherness.'**

Tallulah and Elliott are most proud of the boys from Carlton Keighley school in Utley, a quite isolated suburb of Keighley. Early on, Elliott remembers, their dance sessions were 'chaos!' How would they ever win the boys' attention? Persistence led to little shifts, Elliott says, like when they took the boys to Bradford to work alongside the trained, older boys from Gradient.

In the final performance, we all gather on stage, pulsing together, the music's stirring, and the Carlton Keighley boys come out of the clump and, in Tallulah's words, 'do their duets alongside a Gradient boy's solo, in juxtaposition and in unity....The image of the boys, the no-dance-experience-ever-at-all boys, side by side with the same commitment and passion as the professionally trained Gradient boys - no "I'm not good enough" or "I'm too good to dance with these schoolchildren" ... was so beautiful and everyone feeling we all belong on the stage.'

Dance United Yorkshire came together with Akram [Khan] who, despite his intense international schedule, cared deeply about this unique community project.



In March 2025, in a big circle at Bradford Academy, Akram shared his passion for story with us, the whole cast; how storytelling in theatre is like a ritual.

Like ritual, *Memories of the Future* was an emotional journey not a traditional plot. (The scenario had been developed by Tallulah and by John-William Watson who withdrew at the end of the development process). The community groups moved in sections that evoked hope and joy and unrest, each group witnessed by a different outsider who wished to belong. Towards the end, everyone came together, powerful and soaring.

In the final days of rehearsal, Akram threaded a single witness through the different sections, 'bringing the narrative together' as Elliott puts it, 'I'm big on that ... the narrative behind the movement.' He admired Akram's idea, 'The way he connects the dots to movement. Given it was a last-minute change, the narrative of the piece felt like it had a thread from beginning to end. I know his work is very narratively driven, so to see it placed onto our work was really interesting.' Tallulah also valued Akram's contribution although she would have liked it earlier!



On the day of the performance, Elliott accepted Akram's invitation to Jujitsu: 'What a morning that was! .... It was strange to have been so personally close to a huge name as himself, however, I didn't feel nervous about it, in fact I really enjoyed it. It got me thinking about potentially doing some sort of martial art myself.'

Early on, Akram had introduced Tallulah to Jujitsu too and to Kathak, to movements and patterns that are integral to his work. Tallulah felt, though, that Memories of the Future couldn't be like an AKC dance: 'We can't make an Akram Khan piece because he's not making it and they're not Akram Khan dancers. It's not going to be like Giselle. It's magical and incredible for its own reasons, not the same reasons.'



The rehearsal director, Amy Butler, brought the flavour of the Akram Khan Company and what Elliott calls 'a bolt tightening' to later rehearsals, 'refining everything'. Elliott says he 'envied' how Amy's simple alterations made huge differences, 'the way she creates things - the textures,' such as giving some dancers different phrasings of the same choreography or realigning movement to the diagonal rather than facing forward. When we came into the theatre for tech and dress rehearsals, Amy became what Tallulah calls her 'safe place.'

Tallulah really values how Akram Khan Company shared their production values and skills, and both emerging choreographers learned a lot.

### **'I loved Ryan.... I was inspired by his confidence, knowledge and vision.'**

Ryan Dawson Laight, the costume designer, was inspired by Bradford's world famous fabric tradition, including the rag trade. Tallulah loved him and Ryan's 'stern' vision made him a role model to Elliott: 'He knew what he wanted and had the knowledge and facilities to make it.' Ryan was flexible though too - adapting to dancers' varied bodies and cultures, our need to move in certain ways; Elliot never saw Ryan question what he wanted yet, 'He was very on everyone's side, he tailored to everyone.... There was no outrage about costumes.'

## Dancing together means 'You always walk away good. The endorphins, the achievement'

The Lighting team, Zeynep Kepekli and Imogen Clarke, also impressed the young choreographers.

Their musical journey was immense: 'I'd never made a piece on the Alhambra so I didn't have an understanding of what it'll sound like on the main speakers,' Tallulah says of the newly commissioned music by Vincenzo Lamagna, 'and it was amazing - but hard to understand before it was there.' The composition was being written whilst steps were being set and the choreographers needed to learn how to brief Vincenzo - to describe the 'shell' (as Tallulah puts it) of what they wanted, eg. what the beat was and 'how fast or slow it's going to be'.

Elliott valued how open Vince was, listening to the choreographers' feedback about cues (for nervous participants!) and how Vince offered them a range of musical choices for each section including, temptingly, 'a wildcard option!'

The whole project was full of learning and it would be wonderful to hear how the AKC Production Team feel they learned, too, from the Memories of the Future process and Bradford 2025.



It's been 'Crazy mental,' says Tallulah; so soon after her graduation, it 'set the bar very high for what to do next.' Tallulah and Elliott remain with Dance United - Elliott on a project with men who are in recovery, Tallulah on the staff. Elsewhere, since MotF, she's worked hard in Derbyshire and South Yorkshire making dance shows and running a choir with children and Elliott continues his work as Bradford ambassador for Sir Matthew Bourne's New Adventures. He loves their 'on the nose' storytelling.

Dance can transform us all - from Akram to Tallulah and Elliott, from Elders to the Carlton Keighley boys, who couldn't imagine a dance show because they'd never seen one. How can we be what we haven't seen? Tallulah remembers, 'I told them at the end of it people will cheer and clap and there will be this thing called "a standing ovation" and they'd get one. And they couldn't get their heads round it.

And the audience reaction to them was unbelievable. They couldn't believe it was all for them.'

