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In conversation with junk ensemble

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junk ensemble's Artistic Directors Jessica and Megan Kennedy
Ted Jones

In the first of a new series, "In conversation with" is delighted to be speaking with Irish dance theatre practitioners junk ensemble. With eleven productions in the past eleven years, junk ensemble have made a major impact on both the Irish dance and theatre scenes. Enigmatic yet accessible, profound yet playful, their work has been described as exciting, mesmerising and stirringly beautiful. With junk ensemble two halves make a pretty unique whole. The two halves in question being identical twin sisters Jessica and Megan Kennedy, who together formed junk ensemble in 2004 and whose critically acclaimed "Dusk Ahead" is set to return to the Project Arts Centre in November before going on a nationwide tour.

COR: So Jessica, Megan, how, and why, did junk ensemble get started?

Megan: It started because I was doing a dissertation at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh in Drama and Theatre arts in 2003. I was doing arts journalism actually. I wanted to do a practical thesis, in the end it was half practical, half theoretical. I was interested in Ionesco's "Rhinceros" and asked Jessica and another performer, Matthew Spencer, who were both living in London at the time, if they'd like to be in the piece which we called "Chocolate Rhino." We all worked on it

together and performed it first for the dissertation. It did quite well and then we got asked to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was exploring lots of different things, primarily human identity because Jessica and I have that dichotomy of identity, being identical twins. Wanting to explore being apart and being together, that began to interest us.

COR: So the transition from there to junk ensemble happened fairly quickly. Within a year junk ensemble were already performing their first show, “Watch Her Disappear.”

Jessica: From there we moved back to Ireland around the same time and began working together almost seamlessly. There was this choreographic platform and that was the start of “Watch Her Disappear” which was about identity, personality.

Megan: The whole twin thing.

Jessica: That thing of being so together and being so different at the same time. We wanted to explore that through dance theatre. We were interested in doing things we hadn’t seen on the stage before. We’d just been to the Edinburgh Fringe and seen tonnes and tonnes of really interesting work very much incorporating dance and theatre, with music, song and text. It was physical theatre. In Ireland at that time it was very much dance and very much theatre. This was something that excited us a lot.

COR: So was this a conscious decision or something that evolved?

Jessica: It was something that evolved, we weren’t really conscious of it. I trained in dance and English literature, Megan was coming from a theatre and drama background and it just sort of combined. We have a lot of literary references in our work, and then there’s dance and theatre. It all sort of just mixed in together.

Megan: I guess coming from a dance background, we both trained since we were five years old, there’s that, and there’s all these other layers on top. It’s not just bodies in space, we want to create pieces of art. And theatre. We do focus on work that’s not just labelled as dance or theatre, but dance theatre. We would love if it could just be called performance.

COR: But not performance art?

Jessica: No, I wouldn’t call it performance art. I’d say our strongest reference is film. We want to say something within the work, relay some sort of story. Or a multitude of stories. We like to bring an element of installation to the work, in the site work particularly because it’s promenade usually. You can see it’s like a work you might see in an art gallery. We’re really interested in photography and film. Particularly Swedish film maker, Roy Andersson. He’s done a trilogy of works based around what it means to be human. They’re often dark but they’re quite comic as well.

COR: When you first started out it was just the two of you doing everything, including performing. Then there was a period around the time of “Boy With Bird” in 2011 when you stopped performing. More recently it seems you’re at a place where you’re primarily choreographing. Was that a conscious choice?

Jessica: It was a conscious choice. It's difficult to perform in a piece and also direct and choreograph it. It's difficult to have an outside view when you're performing in it. It's also difficult for us to dance and choreograph together and be able to see it. Our relationship is better now because we have time to really plan, to really communicate what we want to see. It's just more focused now

Megan: Jessica and I differ on this. It is possible to work on and perform in our own pieces. I think we should continue to perform in some of our own pieces where she'd prefer not to. We just need the right outside eye to be in the space with us.

COR: **So why not bring in an external choreographer?**

Jessica: We haven't reached the stage where we would want to bring in a choreographer we commissioned. That might happen later on. At the minute we still really enjoy the devising process. I like performing, but right now I prefer performing in other people's works. Or film. Particularly film. For myself, it's more important and more enriching to create the work than be in it. It's just the difference between creating and performance. I don't think I'd be comfortable at this stage bringing in someone to make a piece for junk. We still have so many ideas and so many pieces we still want to make. Sometimes the ideas don't necessarily relate. Sometimes we make them relate but sometimes they don't. It's important for our craft to pull back, but if the idea is really, really strong to stick with it and explore it.

Megan: We've lots of ideas and lots of creations that have still yet to be developed.

COR: **So what is that process for you? How do you go from that initial spark to the finished work? Does it all happen in that six weeks prior to performance?**

Megan: It happens beforehand. It's usually a longer process from that first idea, which usually begins when applying for an application or something, applying for funding.

Jessica: At this stage we have a bank of ideas which we haven't yet created in the rehearsal space. We begin with the initial conceptual idea which would usually be around one or two things. We would pick out references, filmic, photography, literary, more than often. Not always. Then when we get to where the project is going ahead Megan and I would try to get two weeks of research. And that's sort of us just sitting down, or moving around in the studio, but often it's looking at a lot of different sources.

Megan: Usually about a week into the process we've brought all our references to it, brought all our ideas, but it's not till we start talking about some movement tasks that we get a real sense of what the piece will be about. Usually we have a good idea what the piece is about when we go into the rehearsal process with other performers. It's important that time being in the studio during R and D and not just in your flat together; it separates the work from the home and the business. And so much of the work is business, its admin.

Jessica: Of course the piece won't be formulated into what it is until after the rehearsal period.

COR: Are casting decision already made at this stage?

Jessica: Casting would usually have been decided, so we'd usually be thinking of particular movement tasks and movement ideas for particular performers. Sometimes the ideas can be quite abstract, but the dancers are also collaborators in the process and also help to create the piece. They transfer these sometimes abstract movement tasks into their own bodies and into their performance with other people.

COR: So how do you go about giving your ideas and themes physicality?

Megan: In "Dusk Ahead" we had three sections. We had our movement tasks, our images and we had text. Which included lyrics. Song lyrics. We came into rehearsal on day one with this list and usually we would try get through the list. Within two weeks most of those ideas were kept, but perseverance is a major header in the whole process.

Jessica: It think it's about knowing how those ideas make us feel, and trusting that instinct and knowing that if we get that feeling, and we push it, we really have to push it, and if we get say that connection between a movement or two people then something's happening. So take for instance the theme of co-dependency, of needing someone, being a monkey on their back, but not wanting to be that monkey on their back either, a sort of interdependency, this feeling of horrible attachment. When you get that feeling in the work, you hope the audience should get that too.

COR: So you start exploring, playing around with physical movement looking for a visceral connection?

Megan: Yeah. And that can spark of a whole lot of other ideas. In "Dusk Ahead" the attachment to the chair was an idea we had, but we didn't have the idea of being attached by the hair. Or the lip. And the rope came later as well. We soon realised that so much of what we wanted to say was coming out through the idea of attachment. The idea of wanting to have someone there, but also wanting to push them away. That then translated into the idea of blindness. The idea that you're really vulnerable when you're blind yet at the same time you need someone there, the comfort of the hand.

Jessica: Also a lot of the movement we're interested in starts out as restriction in the body. So many of these tasks involved being restricted, held back. We see much more interesting things and it's more interesting to us. People have said it's because we're twins we're interested in this and I think at some unconscious level it is. But that influences the process of physicalizing the performance. It's not just about doing nice dance for us. It's about trying to say something through movement. Telling stories through movement.

COR: *But not stories told through narrative.*

Megan: No. Of course we have a narrative in our brains and the show makes complete sense to us. I get that audience members have trouble with non-narrative work. I go and see work and I want it to make sense and I feel dissatisfied if it doesn't. So sometimes the audience want just a few connections. We really like connections as well, but I do think it's important that an audience

member works, they work watching, their brain is activated.

Jessica: And we do, with each work, try do it differently.

COR: **Two years on “Dusk Ahead” is set to return to the Project Arts Centre on November 6th. Why bring it back now rather than move on to your next project?**

Megan: Well there’s the practical reason. Practically it does take two years for a non-revenue funded company to bring back a work. It was the same for “Five Ways To Drown,” it was the same for “The Falling Song.”

Jessica: But it was also a conscious decision to bring it back for New York in May this year. We didn’t feel it had had the outing it needed, even though it was in two festivals. When we returned to it in May we really did revisit it and we looked at it with new eyes and I’m so pleased that we did.

Megan: We changed things. Whether you’d notice them or not it’s tighter. And lighter. We took out stuff we felt didn’t really work.

Jessica: We had room to breathe with it. We’d had a year and a half to think about it.

COR: **So what’s next for junk ensemble?**

Jessica: We just did a show called “It Folds” as part of The Tiger Dublin Fringe and we’re hoping to tour that. And we’re in conversation with a few people about another show too. We’re also doing a new show at the GPO as part of the 2016 festivities called GPO Witness History Commission. Dublin Dance Festival has been awarded this alongside some visual artists. It’s six female solos by six female choreographers and it’s all within the GPO, so it’s a site piece. Our response to the Irish proclamation.

Megan: It’s a physical proclamation created and performed by female artists so that’s exciting.

Jessica: And right after that we’re doing a UK tour of “Bird with Boy,” which was our first piece stepping out from performing, made in 2011. It’s with six young boys and it’s also a site piece. It’s supported by Culture Ireland as part of Culture Ireland’s programme for 2016.

COR: **But first there’s “Dusk Ahead”**

Megan: We’re really proud of it, it’s probably our most challenging work. After the first outing we realised we pushed the audience’s patience in places. We realised we maybe didn’t need to push that far and that we weren’t enjoying that push. So we went back and took a look at it before going to New York. And it got a very different response to Dublin. So we’re really looking forward to seeing how the audience in Dublin responds this time.

“Dusk Ahead” by junk ensemble will run at The Project Arts Centre on November 6th and 7th before touring nationwide.

Show begins 8.00 p.m. Tickets €18/€16

For further information visit [Project Arts Centre](#)

For information on junk ensemble's "Bird with Boy" UK tour visit [Culture Ireland](#)

For more information on their "Dusk Ahead" tour or on junk ensemble visit [junk ensemble](#)



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