



Interview with Aleksandra Nikolajev Jones

19 March 2020, Cardiff

Interview conducted by Emily Underwood-Lee

Interview edited by Georgina Biggs and Emily Underwood-Lee

Aleksandra is a classically trained ballet dancer, choreographer and founder of the Gravidia Project, a multimedia dance-theatre experience exploring pregnancy and maternity through memories of the body in movement, body-scripts, and emotional heritage, using the CODA methodology. The base of this project is the belief that creative movement has the capacity for self-healing, generating awareness and wellbeing that is necessary for supporting future generations. Using multimedia there are standalone installations and 'coreo-dramaturgical' units that the audience experience. These include the Bombarded Body, Creative Womb, Infinity Movement, Breastfeeding The World, Tree of Life, Lullaby for Mother, Stones and Dreams, Dive, and Placenta Dance.

[Gravidia trailer](#)

[Gravidia on BBC Cymru / Wales](#)

Emily Underwood-Lee: I wanted to start by asking a bit about your background, and how you came to work with maternal performance. I am particularly interested in how you came to work with the pregnant body or, as you describe it, the body's memory, desire and empathy around pregnancy. So, how did you come to be working in that area?

Aleksandra Nikolajev Jones: That was through being a classically trained ballet performer. I came to Wales ten years ago and I became pregnant for the third time. Dancers' brains are a little bit different because, for us, our bodies are our instrument. If we lose that body then we need to repair the instrument, and if we lose it again, then we need to repair it again and again. Of course I was really happy to be pregnant, and absolutely I can't imagine my life without my kids, but it was just like, "Oh my God, again!". However, this time I didn't want to go into the heaviness of that body again and be weighed down by the idea that it's changing and the fact that it is going to slow down a little bit. At that point I was forty, I was an older mum. I didn't want to feel trapped. I was also having these artistic visions in that I could see pregnant bodies in a space. I tried to think about pieces of choreography that could celebrate the pregnant body. I had moved from ex-Yugoslavia, from Serbia, from a post-conflict area, into the UK with my Welsh husband and my two Serbian children so everything was already very new for me, and now there was a new unborn child as well.

I had an amazing team with me. Frances Medley was a big part of my early work around the pregnant body. She was quite ill at the time, but she understood the ideas that I was sharing with her. Now everybody's talking about these things but then, eleven or twelve years ago, everybody was looking at me like, 'What is this woman talking about?' (*laughs*). Sadly, Frances is no longer with us anymore, but all the materials from all my maternal projects, everything that I'm giving out now, is also really dedicated to her in honour of those beginnings. I was lucky in many respects because back then I went to the Arts Council of Wales with Frances. She was my producer. The Arts Council of Wales supported me to do the *Woman in Pregnancy* project. That was in 2011. Through this project I wanted to make an intimate space, a community. So we had, I

think, five pregnant community participants, five professional dancers, and two midwives. So with this group of people, and as part of the *Women in Pregnancy* project, I created *Pregnant Bolero*.

Emily: There's a movement there, from the point at which you realise that you're pregnant, and experience that as a challenge to your status as a dancer and your body, to the point where you want to celebrate that instead of seeing it as a problem. Then there is a practical process which includes applying for Arts Council of Wales support, getting a producer, gathering a cast, and working with a venue, all of which has to be done during the limited duration of a pregnancy.

Aleksandra: Yes, thank you for asking about that one because that was always tricky. How do you explain to the Arts Council of Wales, or any of our sponsors or donators, that somehow this funding process needs to mirror the timing of a pregnant body? How do we manage the project and communicate it to others so that it captures the body at exactly the right time? The Arts Council Wales were actually very flexible. They were curious about my work and they asked me, 'When do you need this to happen?' and I said, 'Now, I need money now - I'm pregnant now'. In that moment the *Gravida Project*, which includes all my performances concerned with pregnancy and the maternal, as well as my community work around the subject, was born.¹

Emily: Later on the timing became a big problem for you, didn't it?

Aleksandra: Yes it did. Two years ago [2018] we did something huge with the project, a major show at Chapter Arts Centre.

¹ For a case study of the methods, outputs, participants and impacts of the Gravida project from 2011 to 2018 see Westwater, C. and Jones, A. (2019) 'Case Study: Gravida' WAHWN. Available at <https://wahwn.cymru/knowledgebank-gravida> (Accessed 4 June 2020).

Previously we had just done smaller projects - as soon as I finished *Pregnant Bolero* we began the next stage, which was talking with the fathers. We invited some people to watch that and it was really powerful and very, very emotional. This is when I realised that the kind of work I wanted to build on was really around emotions. It's about emotional heritage, but at the same time about going back to your body. It's about saying 'This is what I have, this is the body that I have and it's changing, but this is my body'. After *Pregnant Bolero* we did *Pregnant Tango* [2013]. This was because one of the dancers, actually two of the professional dancers, were pregnant. So, I approached Tanya Raman, one of the dancers. I went to the Arts Council of Wales and again asked for urgent funding. They were only small grants that I was requesting, not very big, but they enabled me to feel we could work together. So, Tanya and I, we



started and it was at that point she told me that Lara Ward was also pregnant. Both had been a part of the first piece of work, the *Woman In Pregnancy* project which led to *Pregnant Bolero*. We created *Pregnant Tango*, which was about their stories and mother journeys. Tanya was already a mother and this was her second child. Lara was a first-time mother. This was a little bit different because I was also different now, I was not pregnant. I had my child and sometimes I brought her with me. From this early research and development I

knew that I wanted to do more, so then we went on to make the production. We did two performances. Just two, because Tanya was already nesting and Lara's energy was becoming a little different.

The very last project, *Gravida*, was much bigger. We got money to work for almost one year which was great, and is longer than a pregnancy. Obviously I'd indicated in the funding application that I wanted to work

with dancers across nine months – the term of pregnancy. So I did that with three to four professional pregnant dancers. It was not easy. We did open calls all over the UK across six months. We had some international artists and two dancers come forward, but it was mostly people who were just starting dance, so more like pregnant people from the community. What I was really looking for was people who had been trained. So whilst these expressions of interest indicated that there was a community need for this kind of work and, of course, I wanted the project to also attend to that, I was aware that this was not why I was doing it. I was primarily seeking to work with professional dancers. I knew what I wanted to work on, and I didn't want to compromise with that. In the end I worked on reflections of pregnancy, and that was actually a really wise decision. It was so creative to bring these people that I had now known for eight or nine years, all of whom were mothers and professional dancers, to create and reflect on pregnancy. I created a showcase comprising eight pieces and we had so many audiences see the work. There was so much visibility of the work, including involvement with the BBC. It just gave us this platform. Everything just started to be much more visible.

Emily: Can I pick up on something you said there? I've been looking at the documentation for your work because I didn't see the original shows, and I've been looking at work by other artists who are pregnant when performing. I've been reading this work through the lens of Julia Kristeva who writes that the pregnant body is not representable. She's using psychoanalytic terms, and saying we're outside the symbolic, that we can't enter into language because the pregnant body is too corporeal and too much in time. So, she argues, that you have to freeze the pregnant body in order to make it represent, that you have to artificially freeze a moment of pregnancy rather than being able to represent pregnancy in any way.² Is that something that you considered in your reflection on pregnant women?

² Kristeva, J. (1985) 'Stabat Mater'. *Poetics Today* 6 (1/2): 133-152.

Aleksandra: Yes, but I have to say I don't agree with that immediately. For me, working very closely with the pregnant body for the last ten years, I experienced it to be more about that memory of your body. You know, it's already there, so you don't need to freeze. You close your eyes and go in that space. You use your creativity and imagination to go back. When you're a professional dancer that is much easier.

Emily: How do you go back? Pregnancy is so transient and so changing. My experience of pregnancy was that I could never catch hold of myself. Every time I thought I understood what was going on something else would happen. Every time I looked in the mirror I looked different, and I felt different - from minute to minute. So where do you go back to?

Aleksandra: I think first you go to your own authentic body, the you which is not visible for anybody else.

Emily: You're going to have to help me with that because I'm not a dancer (*laughs*).

Aleksandra: This is why in communities we need time, with professionals it's a little bit easier, and this is why the methodology is very important. The methodology is like changing your code, changing your patterns. It's almost like through the process that you become so connected with your authentic 'you', and then through this authentic body you transform yourself. For dancers it is much easier, as I said (*laughs*).

Emily: You live in your body.

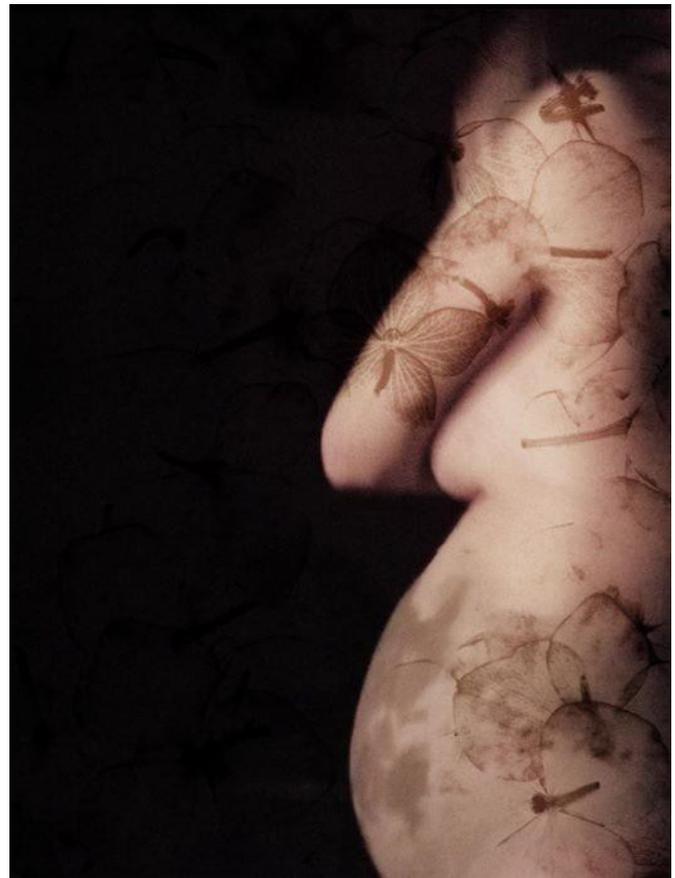
Aleksandra: We do. We feel every cell and every small change there. Even when we go to the doctor, you wouldn't believe the explanations that we give. I can see certain people thinking, 'Oh my God, I only need to know

how you feel, I don't need so much detail' (*laughs*). So, we've got that about us and I always go to the authenticity of that memory.

Emily: So, can that be a memory of transition then?

Aleksandra: Yes, I think it's a memory of transition and then you follow that.

Emily: You have said that there's an inherent difference in working with the pregnant body of a trained dancer compared to working with a pregnant body in community. Can you expand on that a bit?



Aleksandra: I love working with community groups. It is absolutely incredible when you see the moment that they start to unpeel, when you start to move that body with more awareness, and with communities that work is so powerful. We also had, particularly with the first *Women in Pregnancy* project, the partners of community pregnant participants involved. Partners were watching and were absolutely engaged emotionally on another level. They said, 'I didn't know' or 'Oh my God'. Some of them were going to be fathers for the first time, so for them it was even more like 'What is this now?'. This is what I call staging the pregnant body. With communities, staging the pregnant body is very important because the feedback that we got from them was that they felt that they were definitely in some transition which enabled them to feel more connection with the baby. Feedback suggested that they would continue to use music and movement, and remember how good, peaceful, and free they felt.

With professionals, they know their body. A dancer knows what she can do. So you can play with these energies. With professionals it's a performance and we can sell tickets and wonder who our audience will be. It was good, really it was. I felt it would be good to work and have a permanent funding stream - the *Gravida* fund (*laughs*). I thought it would be great to have the *Gravida* fund and more support, or some kind of foundation, so that every time professionals approached me the money would be there to work together. For example, there was a third pregnant professional dancer who lives in Ethiopia and the UK. She called me and said, 'Shall we do something together? Would you like to co-choreograph?'. Of course I wanted to, so I suggested to her that this could be part of the *Gravida* production stream and came up with the idea of the *Diary of Pregnant Artist*. We needed to be very, very wise and especially clever time-wise. So we started something and we said if we don't get money we're still doing it because this is so important. We only had the now and we had this journey of a pregnant artist, Jessie Brett, a pregnant professional dancer and choreographer.

Emily: You've talked a lot about your work as a choreographer, but you haven't talked about performing yourself when you were pregnant or working with your own body.

Aleksandra: That's because my focus was, well, I said goodbye to my body when I was pregnant the first time! (*laughs*) Now I'm reflecting on that as well, but then I didn't know that. I couldn't imagine myself stopping performing because in Serbia it's very different. There are so few of us in the country who are professional, classically-trained, ballet dancers. So, you go, take a job, and that's it, you are cast in *Swan Lake*. I didn't see myself as a classical ballet dancer though. It is amazing, like a base, but I didn't see myself so much on the stage. I tried and I got the job in the *National Theatre* in Sarajevo, in Bosnia Herzegovina. Now, I understand that it was war that stopped me. It stopped my career, my classical ballet career. So, that was the first thing.

Emily: So the war would have been when you were in your late teens?

Aleksandra: Yes, I was seventeen. It was when I finished school.

Emily: So at the point at which you were beginning your professional career?

Aleksandra: Yes, at seventeen or eighteen. My colleagues and I called it absolute death - the moment when you lose your body. When you can't... I mean who will watch a pregnant swan, you know?

Emily: I would watch a pregnant swan (*laughs*).

Aleksandra: Me too (*laughs*), but also there is the gravity of the other there, the child, and you need to respect this new world that is coming. Later on, when I was using my body, if I can say using my body, I was balancing in between these two. So war stopped me doing that, and war is in lots of the *Gravida* work. In the most recent piece there is a section of choreography which is about the bombarded body. When I was pregnant with my second child, we had NATO bombing. So, there is lots of trauma from war there because at the time I was worried that would impact my child. However, my daughter, who is twenty now, saw the piece and said, 'No, I didn't think about it. I was safe. I was inside' (*laughs*). We lost some people in this war. We lost ourselves or we lost our careers. Something was lost in some way.

When you're pregnant the first time, it is totally, absolutely different. People think every pregnancy is the same, but the first time is different. It is different because you are not a mum yet. You don't know, you don't know. All these changes start happening. You just disappear.

Emily: Andrea Liss talked about it as a moment of surprise. She talks about the 'surprise of the Real'.³

Aleksandra: I think it's a huge trauma and especially with me because I was told I couldn't have the birth I had expected, so I was preparing myself for an operation.

Emily: I had a C-Section with my first after imagining I'd give birth in a pool with lovely music (*laughs*).

Aleksandra: Yes, yes. Then there is the breast feeding. Nobody tells you anything about that. Nobody says how painful it can be, so you need to figure out all of that, and then take care of the baby. Yet it's supposed to be about the beauty of the new arrival (*laughs*). It's absolutely, well, you're just so overwhelmed because there are lots of things happening there. So for me that was always difficult. I noticed that I was reflecting on that, and that I would put that in a piece of theatre or a piece of film years after the experience. This is why I think we are always moving, but we can freeze the moments, segments and memories. We can freeze the memory of our bodies.

Emily: Were you also able to work with your own physical memory when you were working with other people?

Aleksandra: Yes, it is an authenticity that you are calling from. There is also the other technique that I'm using which is Forum Theatre - the *Theatre of the Oppressed*.⁴ So I feel that you can empathise, but not with your brain. You don't use logic. In the first twenty to thirty minutes of a

³ Liss, A. (2013) 'Maternal Aesthetics: The Surprise of the Real', *Studies in the Maternal*, 5(1), p.1.

⁴ Boal, A. (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto.

session we do some exercises and slowly get into the space, slowing down a little bit and giving us an opportunity for our thinking body to connect more with this memory, connecting us with this thinking body and emotions as well - the emotional and social body together. It's really not easy to explain that creative space. Some of the dancers and communities said, 'Oh, I felt like I was in the womb again', or 'I'm re-birthing through this'. You are so connected, and then with that you are using certain kind of exercises to go there.

Emily: I'm particularly interested in two things you speak about. One is that when you're working, when you're choreographing for a pregnant body, you're choreographing for not one but two. Secondly, you also talked about the difference in gravity.

Aleksandra: The gravity of the other.

Emily: Yes, you're working with two centres of gravity in one body.

Aleksandra: In *Pregnant Tango* I was playing with these two energies, these two worlds, but then we also had four roles, two dancers and two unborn children. There is also a connection to mother nature, and the planet. We were connecting the belly with the world. Connecting with this idea that again a new world is coming. In other work I have been working with people who had mental health issues in pregnancy. We would talk a lot, and then we would start to use imagery rather than the idea of heaviness or gravity. It is already a heavy experience, and you are waiting and waiting, so instead we focussed on waiting for a new world to come in a poetic way. We wanted to use movement, mindful movement to express what was going on inside, and then start to be more aware about ourselves and this new world. You connect with yourself because you are new as well in this moment, and then with this unborn child. There are a lot of layers there. So we were talking to people, using the sensory, as well as using immersive theatre experiences.

Emily: In one performance you created a womb that the audience moved through, didn't you?

Aleksandra: Yes, yes. So for people it was immediately powerful when they were passing through the birth. I just saw this tunnel that people needed to pass through, a vision of the bombarded body that came from my experience maybe twenty years ago. We put an audience first in a very, very dark room. Only five people at a time. We created a small waiting room because we were thinking about what this waiting is all about. We put curtains all around, used projection, and put notifications up about health and safety. We wanted to ask people to take their shoes off, that is a part of the sensory experience in all the *Gravida* work because you can feel more.

Emily: Oh, that's interesting. Tracy Breathnach Evans has done a lot of work with taking shoes off.

Aleksandra: Yes, yes, I talked to her a lot. It is interesting because it is like we are all on the same journey, but it would be great if we were working to unite. We have lots of people who want to talk about pregnancy and birth and maternity.

My main concern, because I was choreographer and director, was how to put all these pieces together. I needed to talk with the composer, and I needed to talk with everybody all the time, and then there was the drama element. Jelena Vuksanovic is the Godmother of *Gravida*. She is an amazing drama practitioner. She said to me, 'You have to be in this piece'. That was two years ago, and so I went into performing again.

It was quite interesting when we did the bombarded body in *Gravida*. When people came in, they saw nature blossoming, everything was so beautiful, and then suddenly we introduced the sound of the NATO bombing. By doing this I was saying, 'I am here in Wales, I'm funded by

Arts Council Wales, but some people are in war areas. We used red threads, a thousand red threads. People needed to bend down and sneak through this channel of birth. Then six of us were already on stage covered by white cloth, just swaying like trees. We wanted to say 'You are safe now, just breathe in'. This was to prepare the audience to slow down. We had a lot of men in our audience, and one of them said, 'I don't know if it's good that I'm not a mother'. We had really strong performers to work with, and we had done lots of surveys and research with new mothers as part of our development of the show. From the surveys, it seemed that lots of mothers were full of rage. So we were inspired to create a placenta dance where we ran and went crazy. Then, at the end, we just gathered together. This was kind of my message as well, that only when we are united can we succeed in bringing this planet, this world, to a healthier place where we support each other. We didn't even plan it, but somehow, at the end, we knew an audience would join us, and we would just sit in a circle. This would be the answer to our question.

Emily: Gorgeous. I want to ask about the word '*Gravida*'. All your projects are brought together under the title *Gravida*. What does that word mean to you?

Aleksandra: We are all gravidas, we are all creators, we are all proactive in a way. It comes from the Latin word *gravida*, which is about pregnancy and the expanded body and linked to gravity. Later *Gravida* came to mean anybody who is creative in the sense that we are the creators of our lives. So it's almost like taking the possibility to live in our full capacity at every moment, but also realising that you can't do that all the time because it's not possible. Nobody can. No, you have to stop and watch something rubbish on the telly! So, *Gravida* is also about the balance between two worlds. There is this pregnant world, when you are creating ideas, when you are full of, kind of breath, where you wake up and it's just like the world is an amazing place, then there's the 'gravida' because you also have that dark, negative part. The costumes for Tanya Ramen and Lara Ward were black and white. Those two worlds.

Emily: Those costumes are so striking because they reveal the dancers' pregnant bodies in such simplicity. In dance we see bodies all the time, but it's not often that you just get to look at a body in that way.

Aleksandra: I felt so sexy when I was pregnant the first time.

Emily: Me too.

Aleksandra: When I was showing, I was used to covering myself. I don't know why. Then, bang! I really wanted to show this blossoming (*laughs*). I don't know why, but you felt the same?

Emily: Completely, yes. I mean the second time was a bit different because I'd been through quite a lot of surgery, so I was already getting used to a different body. I had a double mastectomy before my second pregnancy. So I was really oddly shaped because I had a concave chest and a huge belly. I was trying to get used to that. I didn't show off my body so much with the second one, but with both pregnancies it's the best I've ever felt about my body. Even though I felt sick and all the other stuff, aching, tired and unwell. Even with that, I still felt amazing in my body.

Aleksandra: Yes. I was working with a man around this topic, and I think male side of the planet needs to understand and engage with this more. I also did campaign with the Welsh Government and Caerphilly Council on the *Period Dignity Project*.⁵ We were talking with young girls about that awareness and then I said, 'Okay, but we need to have boys in the room as well' (*laughs*). I think the world is changing, moving, but what I always

⁵ Caerphilly Council (2019) *Scrutiny presented with update on Period Dignity*. Available at <https://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/News/News-Bulletin/November-2019/Scrutiny-presented-with-update-on-Period-Dignity> (Accessed 1 June 2020).

want to say is that we really should keep up with our creativity, and imagination, and how that connects with our body, whatever that body looks like. I feel that all of us have this inside body that we don't talk about, we don't show it, so some people never know it. When I see that inside body, it is so magical. When we are not pregnant we are channelling lots of things that are happening in universe, and all around the world with other people. We are like antennas. If we practice creativity and imagination we become this amazing channel that can contribute to the creation of a healthier, and more proactive society, where we empathise with each other more, and use each other's gravities and gravitas to be more creative. We are talking the expanded body, we are talking about the expanded mind and expanded heart.

Emily: All of this you've been saying about creativity and about generating is, for me, maternal regardless of whether you've been pregnant or not.

Aleksandra: I think it's good, maternal. I will use it now for my website and intentionally write 'Maternal Artist' because I have spent twenty years doing this work. I think I should reference it so that people know. So that they can see that. I think it's very important - maternal. I was also using, 'Mature Body'. Now when I'm talking to my colleagues who are professionals as well, we use, 'Mature Body', kind of like, 'Wise body, mature body'.

Emily: That's really interesting. So I suspect mature means something different in a dance context because, for example in your background of classical ballet, there is a cult of the young body.

Aleksandra: Yes, you are more aware of your being and it is more about presence rather than just technique.

Emily: Dancers often retire at about thirty, don't they?

Aleksandra: Maybe thirty. So this is when I start to talk about 'absolute death'. So, for us when you stop your classical ballet career the first time, whatever is there, you feel like you died. It's like an absolute death of something that you had. So you need to re-engage and re-do yourself again. So term 'Maternal Artist' or 'Maternal Art' is right, as opposed to 'Mature Body'. What I was doing was affecting lots of people, like Marega Palser, Lynette Margerison, and Deborah Light. Lots of dancers started to make work around pregnancy, or when they were pregnant they thought, 'I can do it'. I think it was this feeling of, 'We can do it, we can do this' as creative mothers. I would like to do some more workshops, and more training. We had a conversation with NHS Wales and they were very interested for us to work with staff, working with mid-wives who are on the frontline.

I would like to create Gravida Collective with mothers performers and to raise awareness around maternal mental health and wellbeing and to do special thanks to Jelena Vuksanovic, Jessie Brett, Lara Ward, Tanja Raman, Deborah Light, Carrie Westwater, Mary Anne Roberts and Carys Lewis to continue this wonderful creative journey to the JOY of existence and the art of existence - DANCE!