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Hip-hop dance artists announced for new 'Roaming Dance' commission, for Birmingham International Dance Festival

- Dance artists **Joseph Toonga**, **Emma Houston** and musician **Bellatrix** announced to lead 'Roaming Dance', a co-commission by DanceXchange and Punch Records for Birmingham International Dance Festival.
- Birmingham-based **Omar Spence** will take up an artist-development opportunity as part of the project.
- 'Roaming Dance' is one of six large-scale commissions through the Gallery37 North initiative.

DanceXchange and **Punch** are delighted to announce that Hip Hop artists **Joseph Toonga**, **Emma Houston** and **Bellatrix** have been commissioned to deliver two projects for '*Roaming Dance*', one of six large-scale commissions through **Gallery37 North**.

'*Roaming Dance*' is planned to culminate in summer 2021 with a performance in an outdoor place or unusual space in North-West Birmingham, as part of **Birmingham International Dance Festival (BIDF)**. **Emma Houston**, **Bellatrix** and **Joseph Toonga** will be joined by early career artist **Omar Spence** who will take up an artist-development opportunity offered as part of the project.

Lucie Mirkova, Head of Artistic Programmes at DanceXchange said: "We are thrilled to be co-commissioning these three inspirational Hip Hop artists to work in North West Birmingham for BIDF 2021 and the Gallery37 North initiative. This partnership with Punch Records supports our curatorial priorities for the festival, taking inspirational dance out into communities to make meaningful connections with local people. We're excited to see where these collaborations lead us!"

Commissioned artist **Joseph Toonga** originates from Cameroon and was raised in East London. Rooted in the Hip Hop culture and form, he has established himself as a forefronting change-maker for the scene. Through this commission, Joseph will develop a new Hip Hop outdoor work, ***Born to Protest***, bringing real life stories from black British men, challenging unconscious bias of black culture by countering stereotypical images of danger and intimidation with references to sensitivity and vulnerability.

'Roaming Dance' will enable Joseph to curate a crucial engagement strand as part of ***Born to Protest*** that provides the opportunity for young ethnic minorities to tell their stories and share their experiences as well as becoming part of the professional performance that will travel to a range of locations across Birmingham as part of BIDF 2021.

Joseph Toonga said: "I'm very excited to be able to work with artists from Birmingham and look forward to sharing experiences together and seeing how we can express that through dance. Hopefully through this commission I can give not only myself but the dance community in Birmingham a chance to showcase our talent and build a network together for future work."

Dancer Emma Houston has joined forces with **musician Bellatrix** for a new interdisciplinary collaboration project. Both artists are prolific in their fields, with the shared lived experience of being queer womxn operating in heavily male dominated spaces, and through challenging societal norms at large within their work.

Emma and Bellatrix will be working in collaboration with local communities in Birmingham to devise the narrative of an interdisciplinary performance using music, speech and dance. The artists will facilitate workshops that explore themes of identity and personal relationships, to conformity and pleasure, through a movement and sound journey. The stories and conversations that arise will be woven into a live soundtrack and inspire the movement process.

Emma Houston commented: “We are beyond excited to have been offered this opportunity. We’re looking forward to working together, connecting and collaborating with new people in Birmingham, and getting to know the city better. It’s super affirming to be given the chance to bring this project to life, and it’s also a big opportunity for us as professional artists.”

Birmingham-based Omar Spence takes up the artist development opportunity working alongside Joseph. Also known as ‘Kidd Ronin’, Omar was inspired, at aged 18, by his father and godfathers who were part of the first generation of breakers in the UK.

Talking about the artist development role Omar Spence said: “I feel ecstatic to have been given this opportunity, even more so considering who I’ve been paired up to work with. I look forward to learning more about producing, organising, performing and choreographing at such a high level and hope to bring all the knowledge I can back to my peers, crew and students.”

This commission was stimulated by an extensive recent public consultation by **Punch**, which surveyed the opinions, aspirations and life choices of over 1,000 residents of North West Birmingham. The consultation revealed that 63% of residents rated arts activities locally as “not good/poor” and Hip Hop dance was the most requested activity by the local community. In response, Punch teamed up with DanceXchange, producers of BIDE, to create ‘Roaming Dance’.

BIDE is a major biennial festival, which began in 2008, and is celebrated for taking over the city’s theatres, streets and squares with show-stopping performances and engaging choreography. The festival’s ambition is to connect people with great dance, creating vital space for artistic dialogue and exchange, and promoting Birmingham as a global dance city. ‘Roaming Dance’ will be a highlight of the 2021 festival next Summer, which has been re-scheduled from its original date in 2020, due to Covid-19.

‘Roaming Dance’ is one of a series of six commissions to be delivered in North West Birmingham, that will collectively launch the three-year GALLERY37 NORTH (G37n) arts residency programme for young people led by Punch Records and Saathi House.

Keep up to date on ‘Roaming Dance’ at <https://www.bidf.co.uk/> and on all Gallery37n commissions at <https://www.wearepunch.co.uk/gallery37> <https://www.saathihouse.org>

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ENDS

For further information contact Helen Annetts, PR on behalf of DanceXchange on 07779 026720 or email HelenLAnnetts@hotmail.co.uk

Find out more at www.bidf.co.uk Find us on facebook, twitter and instagram @BhamDanceFest

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Notes to Editors

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Joseph Toonga

Joseph Toonga originates from Cameroon and was raised in East London. Rooted in the Hip Hop culture and form he has established himself as a fore fronting change maker for the scene. He continually looks for authentic reasoning for choreographing and his expertise enables him to engage with other individuals and communities in order to bring stories foreword and empower people during both his research and live performances.

Commissions include: Boston Conservatoire of Dance; Middlesex University; Codarts University of the Arts, Rotterdam; Edge; National Youth Ballet/ Bundesjugendballett; Richard Alston Dance Company. Achievements include: Secret Cinema collaboration for premier of French film *Les Misérables*; DanceEast Associate Artist; Elephant in the Black Box, Junior Ballet Madrid; Hofesh Shechter/ East Wall; Best Choreography Award Reverb Dance Festival (New York).

Alongside extensive teaching and independent commissions, Joseph runs his dance company 'Just Us Dance Theatre' (JUDT), a collective founded 2007. He established mentoring programmes (Let's Shine Mentorship and New&Notable) to support and provide opportunities for young Hip-Hop dance artists to achieve their goals. He is also co-founder of artist-led hip-hop initiative 'Artists4Artists'.

Emma Houston & Bellatrix

Dancer Emma Houston and musician Bellatrix have joined forces in a new interdisciplinary collaboration project. Both artists are prolific in their fields, with the shared lived experience of being queer womxn operating in heavily male dominated spaces, and through challenging societal norms at large within their work.

Having performed with the UK's top dance companies including Boy Blue, Far From the Norm and most recently Zonation's "Message in a Bottle" in which they were also dance captain, Emma is at the top of their game. Their extensive experience within the breaking battle scene combined with conservatoire training in contemporary dance contributes to their fluid and powerfully dynamic style. Houston Dance Collective, the brainchild of Emma Houston, is a collective of inspirational movers who are all forging new paths in the industry.

Similarly, Former World Beatboxing Champion and multi-instrumentalist Bellatrix is a conservatoire trained jazz double bass player, who has cultivated a kaleidoscopic uniqueness through their existence across multiple artistic worlds. Bellatrix has performed with a range of artists including Jarvis Cocker, Nadia Rose and The Gyuto Monks of Tibet and their broad experience as a music creator is reflected in their own genre bending original music.

Houston Dance Collective x Bellatrix

Houston Dance Collective (HDC) is a collective of inspirational movers who are all forging new paths

in the industry. First coming together for 'The Purple Jigsaw': A Breaking and Vogue piece supported by Breakin Convention, Arts Council England and East London Dance, HDC question societal norms and celebrate the breaking of societies gender roles. HDC is keen to bring artists together from different movement backgrounds and collaborate across artistic disciplines.

Emma Houston of Houston Dance Collective in collaboration with musician Bellatrix will be recruiting dancers Annie Edwards and Nafisah Baba for this project commissioned by DanceXchange and PUNCH. Annie, a disabled Hip Hop and contemporary dance artist from Brighton, combines her love of movement and music with a drive for social justice. Her work includes: ZooNation: A Kate Prince Company, Candoco Dance Company and Just Us Dance Theatre, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Botis Seva and Leila Macmillan. Nafisah graduated from Tring Park School for the Performing Arts in 2015 and went on to win BBC Young Dancer in 2017. Nafisah has worked with Zonation on 'Everybody's Talking about Jamie' Movie and Message in a Bottle, Phoenix Dance Theatre, Sadler's Wells and Jonzi D's 'Our Bodies Back' and Beyonce's recent movie 'Black Is King'.

Omar Spence (also known as 'Kidd Ronin')

Kidd Ronin aka KiRo, started dancing at 18 initially inspired by his father and godfathers who were part of the first generation of breakers in the UK. He ventured first into breaking, initially joining up with a crew from Wolverhampton called Transit Trix who introduced him to other street styles such as popping, locking, hip-hop freestyle and house. This led to performing, battling and eventually founding the second generation to his father and godfather's crew, "Reckless".

Over the past few years, he's been blessed to perform for and alongside pioneers and icons such as Crazy Legs of the legendary "Rock Steady Crew", "Morning of Owl", King Charles, Plague, dance for Radio 1Xtra live, perform at 2 IDFB's, Breaking' Convention and much more. Recently he has began moving into hip-hop theatre work and initially started off by performing in "Break Mission presents Dance Of Death pt. 1", Dance Nuvu's "B-town" and "Wings" and Deaf Explorer's "Sign Criminal" before choreographing alongside and performing in Reckless' "Futility X Fatigue" in which he explored themes of mental health and the effect it has on the creative process. He has run his own small jam in Wolverhampton called "Circles", helped curate the UK's first hip-hop archive based here within the West Midlands and perhaps most proudly helped set a world record.

BIRMINGHAM INTERNATIONAL DANCE FESTIVAL

Produced by DanceXchange, Birmingham International Dance Festival (BIDF) is a major biennial festival which takes over the city's theatres, streets and squares with show-stopping performances and engaging choreography. Its overall ambition is to strengthen the impact of the festival for the city, the dance sector, and for our young and diverse communities – connecting people with great dance, creating vital space for artistic dialogue and exchange, and promoting Birmingham as a global dance city. BIDF presents a dynamic mix of international and UK dance, creates opportunities for young performers, celebrates talented regional artists, and involves people of all backgrounds as participants and volunteers. BIDF captures the imagination with inspiring and memorable dance experiences and opens up new ways for people to engage with dance.

Since its beginnings in 2008, the festival has played a vital role in putting dance centre stage in Birmingham and is a powerful cultural asset for the city. BIDF has an international reputation and is a significant key player in the emerging national strategy to develop the market for UK dance. BIDF 2020, originally scheduled for June 2020, was postponed due to Covid-19. The next edition is planned for Summer 2021.

The festival is the Winner of Achievement in Dance, 2014 UK Theatre Awards and Winner of Event of the Year 2010 at the Heart of England Excellence in Tourism Awards. In 2018 BIDF attracted live audiences of 50,000 and online almost 300,000, plus almost 10,000 participants. The festival also stimulated over £1million visitor spend. BIDF is proud to be a signature festival for Birmingham and a highlight of the city's cultural calendar – bringing people together, providing new experiences,

attracting visitors, and contributing to the local economy. BIDS enlivens the city and helps make Birmingham a distinctive, vibrant place to live, work and visit. www.bids.co.uk

DanceXchange is an internationally known Birmingham-based dance house dedicated to producing, promoting and presenting the best of UK and international dance. dx produces Birmingham International Dance Festival, connects people with great dance, nurtures young dancers and champions some of the UK's best artistic talent. www.danceexchange.org.uk

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. By 2030 we want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given chance to flourish and where everyone of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. Between 2018 and 2022, we will invest £1.45 billion of public money from government and an estimated £80 million from the National Lottery to help deliver this vision. www.artscouncil.org.uk

Birmingham City Council works to achieve economic growth right across Birmingham, in all communities. Birmingham has the youngest demographic in the UK and is a super diverse city. <https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/>

Dance Hub Birmingham is an active partnership of organisations and individuals, representing the region's professional dance sector. Together, this partnership supports the development of the artform in all its diversity, seeking to drive the sector forward and position Birmingham and the wider region as a globally significant area for dance. <https://www.dancehubbirmingham.org.uk/>

Birmingham Festivals Group. Birmingham International Dance Festival is part of the Birmingham Festivals Group, an informal member-led grouping that provides sector support and champions the vital role of festivals in the cultural and economic life of the city. Birmingham is home to over 100 diverse and eclectic festivals. Taking place everywhere, from the Digbeth arches to world-class concert halls, these have a combined annual turnover of more than £4million, generating audiences of over 2.5million and creating more than 8,000 hours of valuable hands-on experience for volunteers. For more information and details of the latest festivals calendar, visit www.birminghamfestivals.com

PUNCH

PUNCH commissions emerging artists, produces new work and develops diverse audiences. We are a lead partner in a range of programmes that develop the creative talents of young people from diverse communities and marginalised backgrounds. PUNCH successfully delivered GALLERY 37 programmes in 2018 and 2016, featuring public art projects including murals in Handsworth Park and Digbeth.

For Gallery 37 2020 we have partnered with Saathi House and several local organisations to commission six new artworks across North Birmingham during 2020-21.

The Gallery 37 North commissions will bring artists from across the UK to north Birmingham for a programme of one off live performances, exhibitions and a first look at permanent art pieces which will pay homage to the area and its rich culture and history.

(wearepunch.co.uk)

SAATHI HOUSE

SAATHI HOUSE Saathi House are co-commissioners and producers of Gallery 37 2020. The organisation was established in 1977 in response to the emerging issues of migration and new arrival into the Ladywood neighbourhoods; in particular Aston, Lovells and Perry Barr. Saathi House is one of the longest-standing charitable organisations in the area; delivering arts and crafts activities, self-care and parenting workshops and a civic leadership programme for women. (saathihouse.org)