Series 8, Episode 5: An interview with Olivia Lume:

**David:** Hello, hello, hello. I'm David Jays. This is *Why Dance Matters*, the Royal Academy of Dance podcast. Here's a thing about the RAD. It's international. Very international. There are RAD members everywhere. In nearly 90 countries around the world, and though the RAD tries to ensure they all feel a strong connection to the Academy, the people who do the most to foster that relationship are the RAD's National Directors. The National Directors and their teams are the RAD's frontline. They're not always from a dance background, but they have passion, enthusiasm, and a craving to keep the connection strong between the Royal Academy of Dance and its teachers. Our guest today is a pillar of the RAD community. Olivia Lume is based in South Africa and last year celebrated her 40th year with the RAD.

**David:** As National Director for the Academy in Africa, she has seen huge changes, not only in her home country, but across the continent. And she has seen the RAD spread and grow, especially after its flagship event, now called the Fontaine, but then the Genee International Ballet Competition, was held for the first time in Africa, in Cape Town, in 2011. Olivia has seen a lot of change. How does she reflect on where the RAD has been and where it's heading? How does a professed non-dancer come to be so crucially woven into the heart of a dance organisation? Time to call Johannesburg and hear all. Olivia, welcome to *Why Dance Matters*.

**Olivia:** Thank you so much, David. It's an honour.

**David:** Also, congratulations, because you are celebrating 40 years with the Royal Academy of Dance, which is quite an incredible landmark. Was it something you expected? Did you think you would be with the RAD for the long haul?

**Olivia:** No, not at all. One never expects to be in one company or one organisation for as long as 40 years. So it is a very long time, but there are no regrets. And if you look back, if I look back on my 40 years, there's no reason why I should have left. I've loved most of it. And this is where I see myself, I think, until retirement, which is not that far away.

**David:** But that is lovely to find something that is so satisfying and so fulfilling. And it's not something to take for granted, is it?

**Olivia:** No, definitely not something to take for granted, particularly since I don't have a dance background. I knew nothing about dance when I first came to the academy. And in my 40 years, I've never danced, which is not such a great thing. I really should, but I have got what they say is two left feet. So I think I'd make a total fool of myself. I can't remember combinations. But yes, I came from a background that I had no exposure to dance. So coming in on an admin point of view, even ballet was something that I had to look up in the Oxford Dictionary back then, of course, it was the Oxford Dictionary and not Google.

**Olivia:** So, uh, you know, it is quite remarkable that I've just come in love with the organisation, I've come in love with the art form and, and here I am. Still not pointing my toes or turning out. But, uh, yeah, yeah, here I am.

**David:** So even when you were a little girl, there were no dance classes. There were no ballet classes. You weren't shoved into those.

**Olivia:** My parents were immigrants to this country. We immigrated out here when I was two. I was actually born in Portugal. That was my culture. And with my parents coming to the country, what is it, 50 odd years ago, we lived in communities back then. You know, we always lived in suburbs that were very Portuguese.

**Olivia:** And it was something that the culture itself didn't have any exposure to. The closest I came to dance was there was a church hall down the road from us, and they did tap dance. And I would go home and I would try to tap. It was really a cultural thing in that, you know, we just didn't know about those sort of things. We didn't have exposure to it.

**David:** I will get into the RAD properly very soon. But so interesting about moving all that way from Portugal, setting up a new life, was that a big culture shock for you and the family?

**Olivia:** Well, it wouldn't have been for me because I was too young, certainly for my parents, it was a huge cultural shock. But, you know, that's what people did back then, you know, they were looking for a new life and a better life for, for their children. So, up until this day, my mum, who lived in the country for over 50 years, still doesn't speak in English. So, it was very, very community orientated. We gravitated towards suburbs of people that share the same language that probably grew up as children, et cetera, et cetera.

**Olivia:** So to them, it's so. Certainly was. It was a huge cultural change, particularly for my mum, because she never worked. You know, she was a stay at home mum. It was definitely a big cultural shock for them.

**David:** So, how did the RAD come into your life? What had you been doing before you applied for that job?

**Olivia:** Well, David, wouldn't surprise you that I was straight out of school. Oh, it does. I was straight out of school and I went to secretarial college. I was literally at the end of the year finishing my course and there was a phone call from my predecessor, Yvonne Keeble, and she was looking for a typist. Our typing teacher looked at me and she said, I think you'd be perfect for the job.

**Olivia:** And I said, really? And she said, yes, you've just got to go for the interview. And I said, I'm not even dressed for an interview. I was kind of wearing jeans as one does, you know, very casual. Borrowed a jacket from somebody and I was sent to this interview. And of course I came home and I said to my parents, I've been offered a job.

**Olivia:** And they said, well, you take it. They don't come around that often. You take it. That's how it happened. I landed a typist job at the RAD, 40 almost 41 years ago. And it just evolved from that. So, if you ask me about my career history, David, there is no career history.

**David:** You've just been a prisoner for all this time.

**Olivia:** I've been a prisoner. I have been a prisoner for all this time.

**David:** So, what was the RAD like at that point? Because it feels like it's changed so much over the past few decades.

**Olivia:** Yeah, it has definitely changed. It's changed, changed a lot. And I think one of the most notable changes has to be the culture, which now encourages members and teachers in particular to be a lot more vocal. So I joined when, and I, and I hate to say this, but this is the absolute truth. There was a hierarchy of people and we treaded very, very carefully. We didn't dare voice our opinions. We accepted. What was passed down from the top and we got on and we did our jobs in those early days, one felt very apprehensive, whether you weren't already employee or a member and I confess to feelings of fear, which don't sit well with me at all and anybody else for that matter, because nobody should unnecessarily experience this in life, certainly not in education, recreation or the work front.

**Olivia:** Thank you very much. So, that is how it was at the RAD. I remember looking up to, you know, some of the ladies and the gentlemen and feeling so inadequate. It was hard. We weren't on a one to one level. Yes, I grew up, respect your elders. One does respect one's elders. It shouldn't be to that point where children or people, you know, are to be seen and not heard. And that was the culture, if I can use that word. Yes. That very much the R. A. D. It wasn't good.

**David:** And it's interesting because on the podcast we've spoken to dancers or choreographers of an older generation who will say exactly the same about the ballet world and the professional dance world at the time when they started and were growing up. So it's depressing but interesting that it was throughout, it was the professional dance world, it was the educational and training dance world. It feels like it was a real pervasive culture.

**Olivia:** It was David, and as I said it wasn't planned, and last of all it just wasn't good. But interestingly, the dramatic change and the breath of fresh air was immediately evident when our former CEO, Sir Luke Rittner, whom I absolutely adore, joined the academy just before the turn of the century.

**Olivia:** And we were blessed in so many ways to have him as our boss for 23 years. So, you know, if I look back and I look back at all the directors and personnel, you know, and the various committees and whatever that we reported to prior to Luke, it was like day and night. It was like a switch had been flicked when Luke came in. Those of us who were fortunate enough to work with him, I think we all feel pretty much the same and know that he was the turning point for the RAD.

**David:** Amazing, isn't it, that the person at the top can set the tone for even such a huge and international organisation, that that, just that change of personnel and change of attitude can really ripple through everything.

**Olivia:** Absolutely. He just had that magical touch in transforming us into a people society. He gave us the voice. Our lines of communication are so much more effective and our members are now far more engaged and invested in the Royal Academy of Dance. Do you know, I must tell you David, I recall the misconception of the little black book. If one complained or they disagreed, they would essentially get a demerit. On reflection, is absolutely absurd. But this is how unapproachable we appeared. People were terrified. People were absolutely terrified of, you know, contacting the R. A. D. and speaking from the heart, telling the truth on how they felt.

**Olivia:** And I don't think this was just on the African continent. I think this was right across the globe. And as I say, if I can say again, Luke was the person who really gave us a voice and he encouraged us to speak up.

**David:** He really is so warm and so funny, quite silly. It's a good combination, I think.

**Olivia:** Absolutely. And he does it, and he did it with the greatest sense of humour and I just love how he would laugh at himself. You know, so he brought a lot of humans to the R. A. D. which immediately broke the ice and he did some really silly things and he laughed about them, you know, and he would admit them openly. So, he just set the tone for us just to breathe and relax and that's just so magical.

**David:** Olivia, let's talk a bit about your role because so you're based in South Africa, of course there are RAD members everywhere, in Botswana, in Mozambique, in Zimbabwe, everywhere. So how do you keep all those balls in the air and create a sort of sense of connection for people in the region? Very widespread countries.

**Olivia:** Pre the pandemic, it was great because our examiners did that on our behalf. That was really our connection. Our examiners, who are a brilliant team, and I must say, we're very, very proud of them. And they are, in fact, the ambassadors for the academy. They were brilliant in going to all these countries and really passing on information, sharing information, et cetera, et cetera.

**Olivia:** So that's how we stay connected. Today, it's a little bit more difficult. Unless, you know, we have a Zoom or we communicate electronically, travel has come to a bit of a halt. And a lot of these countries are not, able to do the exams as we knew them in the past, they all have opted to do the filmed exam.

**Olivia:** So there's still a connection, but it's not the same. It's just not the same having that one on one. Sadly, yes, we've lost quite a few members or teachers, I should say, in places like Botswana and Swaziland. As people have retired, um, there hasn't been somebody new to take their place. But I think our fastest growing market on Africa, outside South Africa, has to be Kenya.

**Olivia:** Which is absolutely amazing. We've been able to train so many new teachers in Kenya. And their exam entries are just shooting through the roof. They're doing fantastic work out there. Going into communities and bringing children on board to learn. dance ballet in particular. But we do have to pull up our sleeves to grow the African market. It's very untapped and we are working on Africa expansion projects.

**David:** Let us talk about the Genee International Ballet Competition. It's now called The Fonteyn, but it's the flagship RAD annual event and in 2011 it was held in Cape Town. The first time it had been held in Africa so it was a very historic moment. What are your memories of that?

**Olivia:** Well, it was spectacular. That's the first word I want to say. It was spectacular. The fact that we chose Cape Town, the mother city, as the place, as the location to host it, was phenomenal. And the timing, David, the timing was absolutely perfect because it was exactly a year after South Africa hosted for the very first time the FIFA World, the Soccer World Cup.

**Olivia:** So that was 2010. So spirits were still running extremely high and South Africa was on a global stage. Not only for having the most famous national president, Mr. Nelson Mandela, our beloved Madiba, but because all the talk about the Rainbow Nation was so, so real. We had gone through immense political change, as you know, phenomenal cultural equality, and we were embracing a new world by interacting internationally after decades of sanctions and exclusions. It couldn't have been a better timing for the show, though.

**David:** And you had, of course, dancers from across the world coming to Cape Town. That must have been exciting to suddenly see so many dancers and their teachers and their families converging.

**Olivia:** Absolutely. We had 36 candidates, competitors for the Genee. They were from 13 countries and that of course included South Africa. It was quite phenomenal to have so many international people, um, one place. Okay. Yes. I have been with a lot of international people in one place, but that had normally been in the UK, in London in particular, with, you know, with all the conferences that we, we had, but to actually have it on our doorstep or right here in Africa was just absolutely amazing.

**Olivia:** And then also for that journey, we did partner with Cape Town City Ballet. The Artscape Theatre and the City of Cape Town Municipality, as well as Cape Tourism. And there were a lot of initiatives that had to be put in place to raise funds. We were going all out to have one of the most spectacular successful dance events and we did it.

**Olivia:** We really did use it. Everyone came to the party. That is no lie. I promise you that's no lie. It was countless businesses, supporters, and RAD members who contributed in one way or another. Our fundraising campaign started about 18 months in advance. And whilst there were a great many challenges and doors closed in our place.

**Olivia:** They were outweighed by the generosity and the willingness of people determined to make it work. And I think that my most memorable and the most special fundraiser we had is that by some miracle, we came across Li Cunxin, correct me if I've pronounced that wrong, who, as we know, was the magical dancer who affected China.

**Olivia:** And at that stage, his book, his novel, *Mao's Last Dancer*, was on every bookshelf here. The movie was out and Li came to South Africa. He is the most amazing, amazing man. He is just so tranquil. He is just so lovely. And he came to South Africa and he accepted our invitation. We thought we'll take a long shot and ask him if he'll become involved in a fundraiser.

**Olivia:** And we will just invite people, fill up a venue with people and let him talk about his journey. And honestly, there wasn't a dry hour in the house. It was such a money spinner for the Genee. He showed us clips and he spoke so humbly about his beginnings and to where he was at that stage. And then he did a book signing at the end.

**Olivia:** And I remember saying to him, I think it's enough now, Li, you need to get a cup of tea. Then I'll bring you something to eat. And he said, not until the last book is signed. And that is the most magical moment I've had in the RAD is to meet somebody of that caliber and his contribution. He of course then later on, or shortly thereafter, became a vice president of the RAD.

**David:** And as you mentioned there at the beginning, talking about the Genee, South Africa has been through so much change in the time in which you and your family have lived there, in which you've been at the RAD. I don't want to make you feel ancient, Olivia, but what has it been like to live through that historic change?

**Olivia:** It's been a challenge. It really has been a challenge. Growing up, there was the apartheid era. I lived through that and it was difficult. I'm also the mother and a grandmother. It seems like such a short period between the time I was a child and the time I became a parent and how different my children's schooling was to my own.

**Olivia:** And it's just been amazing to see the change in South Africa. Even with myself being Portuguese. I can't say there was the segregation. We were a little bit on our own, you know, we were kind of pushed aside. With my predecessor, Yvonne Keeble, I remember her saying to me, look, I have trained you to take over from me, but it's going to be no easy task, Olly, because that's what they called me, because number one, you’re Portuguese.

**Olivia:** So you're from a different cultural background to what the RAD is used to. And number two, you are from the southern suburbs. You come from the south. Everything was about the north, you know? The north is where the, you know, the elite is and the North was the area to be and also where a lot of the RAD schools was.

**Olivia:** So she kind of warned me and said, it's not going to be easy. You're going to have to really work hard just because of my background. So, um, I empathize with formerly disadvantaged communities. And what they must have been going, because I had only just the slightest taste of what that was, to be different, to be considered different.

**David:** You're not going anywhere anytime soon, thank goodness. But if you were to start thinking about what you might say to a future successor, when you start to think of handing over the role, what would be the advice that you'd give to them?

**Olivia:** Yes, you've got to wear the boss's hat. To a degree, but I don't think my staff or the RAD members look at me as that person at the top that you've got to, you know, there, there, there's a line and there is a line. David, don't get me wrong, there is a line, but I just like everybody to be on a similar footing. Just make everybody welcome. Make everybody feel comfortable. Communication is key. I just want people to talk to me as openly and as honestly as they can. That's definitely what I would say to anybody coming in.

**Olivia:** Listen. Listen. And hear. You've got to hear people, our members have to have a voice. We've got to hear because we're not always right. And it's them who often pave the way for the success of an organization. So it's very much a give and take. It's working together. You're not the person who's going to be shouting out the commands and setting, setting the regulations.

**Olivia:** It has to be a partnership. The RAD is a family and we are all in partnership with one another. To create an atmosphere, I'm all about atmosphere, just to have a welcoming atmosphere. For me to come to work every day and know that I'm going to a place where I feel satisfaction is so important. I would have left the RAD a long time ago.

**Olivia:** If I woke up in the morning and thought to myself, oh darn, it's another day. I think that's awful. I think it must be absolutely awful to go to a workplace because you need to have a paycheque at the end of the month. It's, one spends a lot more time at work than one does in the home family environment and you've got to enjoy what you do.

**Olivia:** And you've got to ensure, as the leader or the person who's at the forefront, that you create that same working environment for the people who are in the building with you and those who are outside. That's just me.

**David:** And as we've said, you've spent 40 now, 40 plus years, uh, with the RAD, they grabbed you early and never let you go, but what does the RAD mean to you, Olivia? What's it, what's the importance for you of being part of it?

**Olivia:** Well, what's important for me about being, uh, part of the RAD is the community, it's the children. And when I look there, and a lot of our teachers. People who are now teaching weren't even born when I first started, but I've watched them evolve from tiny little tots and come through the RAD and then they eventually get to being a dancer.

**Olivia:** So many of the current dancers in the companies and former dancers of the companies were children when I started. And to see that it's just so gratifying to see how they've made a career at the RAD. It's just brilliant to see that and just how we have changed. We have changed and we are so inclusive now, so, so inclusive.

**Olivia:** I just hope that that continues because bringing that kind of joy is just phenomenal. So if I can just go back a step to the, our spectacular genome. In 2011, we had two wraparound debate with that particular Genee. One of the events was that we had a dance challenge, a Genee dance challenge, where we had some heats in six of our regions and there were finalists that were selected from those heats and they came and they represented their particular region at the dance challenge in Cape Town, which was just the night or the evening prior to the Genee finals. And that was so great to be able to bring children to come and compete on one stage from all corners of South Africa.

**Olivia:** That was great. But the other wraparound event was Sisov Danisa, which translates as Let's Dance, and it attracted people, young people from 10 programs, both outreach and mainstream. So we brought on 10 organizations or schools. There were a hundred plus students that participated and they were coached as a unit by volunteers from Cape Town City Ballet, who is, of course, the resident ballet company down in Cape Town.

**Olivia:** They were transported to the theatre, to Artscape Theatre. We didn't have a studio, for them to rehearse or to work in and we used the foyer. So the foyers in this great big magnificent theatre building were used for workshops. And this was whilst the Genee candidates were rehearsing back at the university in the dance studios there.

**Olivia:** We had these magnificent volunteers, actually company dancers, they were all company dancers from Cape Town City Ballet, who coached these students. And then there was a cherry on the top because we finished off just prior to the Genee finals, we put these hundred odd students on stage and we had a show and it was the, the cherry on the top.

**Olivia:** I have no doubt the majority of people who were present at that particular showcase, uh, have images of the pure joy, the pride and the enthusiasm that these children have are going to be forever engraved in our hearts. In our memory, and I think this is the legacy. This is the legacy of the South African Genee and why dance matches.

**Olivia:** It matters because this broke barriers and it sealed the foundation of children and students coming together, regardless of the socioeconomic backgrounds and the culture, there was just one single objective. And that was to experience the freedom of expression through dance. There was no tension, there was no anxiousness, just the purest joy from dancers and audience alike.

**David:** So, Olivia, you've given us a taste of individual events in which dance clearly mattered, but why does it matter to you?

**Olivia:** Why does it matter to me? So, now it's 13 years later, since we had this magnificent Genée, and the doors remain open to all who want to dance. There are numerous schools and programs throughout South Africa and the African continent who accommodate those who want to experience dance. Once the bug has bitten, there's no turning back. There really isn't any turning back for many children and adults. Dance is an escape in this country, on this continent, and in fact, in this world that we, we live in. And just for that short period, maybe it's just a short period of time.

**Olivia:** They are fully focused on the movement and the music. It may just be a temporary hiding place from the reality of poverty and hardships, but without it, to many, life would be meaningless and empty. And that I've said from my heart, and that is, I think, how people feel about dance. It's just escapism. It's just, let me just go and not have to worry what's going to happen later. It's just my time. It's my time to just endure and love the cycle, which is just so beautiful.

**David:** It was great to talk to a national director for the first time on this podcast, and Olivia's enthusiasm, burning bright after 40 years, lit up a grey London morning. If you go to our show notes, you'll find out more about the RAD all over the world.

**David:** You'll also find details of the RAD's social media. We love to know where you're listening from and who you'd like to hear on the podcast. And we're always pleased when someone subscribes or likes us so that we can find other people who might enjoy *Why Dance Matters*. Our guest today was Olivia Lume. *Why Dance Matters* is made by the RAD team of Niamh Carey-Furness, Keshia Dodd, and Katie Hagan. Our artwork is by Bex Glendinning, and our producer, Sarah Myles, brings a world of dance to our ears. I'm David Jays, take care and see you soon.