

TRANSCRIPTION | E05 | ARTISTIC ROOTS PODCAST

Amara Barner | Behind the Scenes of the Contemporary Dance World

MC = Mel Charlot | AB = Amara Barner

MC: Welcome to Artistic Roots. This episode we have Amara Barner ([@amarabarner](#)) with us. We are talking about behind the scenes of the technical dance world. Amara Barner is a contemporary dancer. She's currently in Montreal. She is a dancer who was with the company RUBBERBAND ([@rubberbandance](#)) since 2016. She has been on occasion, a journalist for Dancegeist Magazine ([@dancegeist](#)). She has assisted choreographers on The PULSE on Tour and Intrigue Dance Convention, and she has also in the commercial world has danced for several artists such as Sia on Jimmy Fallon and also *Chanteurs Masqués*, which is a beautiful new TV show that is hitting our screens in Montreal. And she's going to be on our screens tonight, so congratulations, Amara. So excited to meet you and get to know you as we have this beautiful conversation. There are so many things I want to know about you and talk about and share with the audience, even though I've heard great things about you already. I just want to start with what your artistic roots are. Can you share that with us?

AB: I grew up in Minnesota in the U.S., and I started dancing when I was three years old at a competitive dance studio. I competed up until the time I was 15 or 16. I was training in ballet, jazz, tap commercial, hip hop. I went to a convention, The PULSE on Tour, when I was 13 and I was given a scholarship. Luckily, I was noticed, and I began travelling every weekend after that with the dance convention. And then a few years later, I was given an assistant position. The same year, I was given an assistant position at Intrigue Dance Convention, so I was constantly travelling. Instead of going back home to Minnesota, I went to L.A. and New York to continue training until eventually I just decided to make the move to New York when I was 15.

MC: In a big city at 15 years old, how was that? Did you already know for sure what you were aspiring to be?

AB: I think it's a mix of both. I knew that I wanted to dance. I was meeting so many people in both L.A. and New York, and I felt that I wanted to lean more towards the contemporary world and keep training on the contemporary side of things. New York is a little bit better known for contemporary in that way. And luckily, my mom has always been really supportive, so she helped me make the transition to online high school so I could finish in New York. There's a certain unknowing you can't really prepare for everything. I just took the leap.

MC: I love it. Do you think that there's a huge difference between technical dancers and commercial dancers?

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AB: Yes. Huge difference. So basically, what I have found in my experience is that technical dancers seem to be a bit more serious in their approach, a bit more regimented and individual and is very much, I think, because of the work that that they're asked to do, especially if you're in a dance company. There's a repetition, long workdays (Monday to Friday) and then a tour schedule, and you're asked to do the same show repeatedly. You have to have a certain approach in order to take care of your body and get through those long and arduous work periods. And then I think in the commercial world, the projects are maybe a bit shorter unless you're on a really long world tour. Shout out to Justin Bieber two-year world tour dancers. Unless you're on a really, really long world tour, maybe the projects are a bit shorter. You might have a long workday to film or perform for the project, but I definitely think that in the commercial world, the dancers are maybe reflecting more of the work that they're asked to do. The performance has more vivacity, more personality, more fun to it. So the dancers begin to reflect what they're asked to do on stage and in the technical world, the work is usually more serious and contemplative, so the dancers are a bit more serious and contemplative, and in the commercial industry, the work is usually a bit more fun and playful, and the dancers reflect that as well and their approach to the work.

MC: I think it's because I've seen many technical dancer's transition to the commercial world and brought that discipline along with them and has helped them definitely succeed, to last long or to understand to prevent injuries, to be able to set up something that makes sense for them in terms of their schedule, their lifestyle, etc. I think there is a difference between both for sure in terms of where your focus is. From what I've heard, you end up being very focused on the show, the task at hand, basically. You're zoned in compared to a commercial dancer, depending on whatever job you're on at the moment. If you are on a tour, then yeah, you're zoned in on to whatever that repertoire is for that time or if you're like a house dancer for a TV show. For example, *The Masked Singers*, they have house dancers, so they're literally focused every week as the choreographers change, as the artists change, but they are house dancers, so they're never changing. They have to stay focused and develop a certain lifestyle so that they're lasting and so that they're able to provide what they're asked for. I agree that tends to sometimes have a lack into the industry dancers who are not coming from a technical background. When you and I were just talking before we were saying how it's good for the new generation or dancers that are maybe listening to this, that are not from a technical background to take gems from it because it will help you just like it's good to take gems from every art and every style of dance. Because you're able to develop a certain discipline as an artist period.

AB: I think it goes both ways. If I'm thinking about the hip hop classes that I've taken versus the ballet classes, there's a bit more individuality in the hip hop classes and fun. And yes, there is a focus and it's real training. But in the ballet class, there's no room for jokes or there's no room for a smile. And you stay on track in that way, and I think that there's a balance to be found. And if you expose yourself to all sorts of training and you will find that that balance within yourself.

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MC: I love that. As we know, the ballet and contemporary world are very often pointed out for their lack of inclusion in the industry and in a lot of things. Do you ever feel the pressure to enter a mould?

AB: Yes, most definitely. When I first started taking dance classes, I fell in love with ballet and contemporary. And I was quite skinny and small, and as I continued training and I started to go through puberty, my body was obviously changing. And it no longer was fitting that mould that aesthetic for ballet. And it definitely was damaging in many ways because I loved this art form, I wanted to continue training in this way, but I knew that there wasn't a place for me the way that I wanted to continue. But luckily that did encourage me to explore other avenues such as the industry/commercial world or contemporary, because I do think that both of those avenues are a bit more accepting of all body types and potential. I was told that at some point that I have to go into the commercial industry because little girls that look like me needed to see someone that was built like me. And I never thought about it that way. I never thought that I could provide representation for someone like me. And I definitely think that the commercial industry is a bit more diverse than the contemporary technical industry. I feel personally that I'm offering what I'm offering on a theatrical stage for the contemporary and technical dance world that this is a representation that is moving towards the right direction. And it's really needed right now because there's definitely not a lot of technical dancers that have my sort of body type. I get mistaken for a circus artist quite a lot just because of my build. I think seeing someone like me means something.

MC: I'm so happy you mentioned that because often when we talk about either body types or inclusion and stuff, it automatically goes to those who are thicker or more curves and stuff like that. But it's like it goes all around, the entire perspective, because I always go back to my experience. Growing up, I didn't get to see myself on TV very much, and if I did, especially growing up in Montreal, it was very much more in the U.S. That's why I always wanted to watch U.S. channels because you didn't see somebody who went from, not having a big chest and all of a sudden hitting puberty. We are all made so differently. And it's crazy because I agree in the contemporary world you don't see it as much, which is why I never was even interested to be in that because I never saw myself. Until I saw Donyelle Jones ([@donyelledenise8](https://www.instagram.com/donyelledenise8)) on *So You Think You Can Dance*. I cried because, it wasn't even because of how she looked. She was incredible, I couldn't take my eyes off of her. And then I was like, "Oh my god, wait a second. She's a black woman." It just wasn't the norm to see that. I literally went into taking contemporary ballet classes after that just because I wanted to explore it, I didn't think I would look like her, be like her because it was way too late by then. I think even within the industry, it took time to start to see it more, which is why there are certain things of social media that I love, because now everybody is able to have a voice, so we're able to see ourselves everywhere.

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MC: And what's crazy is that the industry it's all about being a product, right? Or it's all about representing brands. Well, technically, it should be available to everybody. You should be able to open like turn on the TV and see yourself, no matter how you look. So, yeah, I love that you touched on that. Do you think the public has certain prejudices towards contemporary dance?

AB: Yeah, I do, because there's a history of societal hierarchy and who has access to the theatre and specifically, I think that there's this separation, you know, with middle class, the lower class and the upper class. The tickets are expensive. Do I really want to drop fifty dollars right now to go see an hour, hour and a half show? You know, fifty dollars could be groceries per week. There's a necessity to stretch your money when money is scarce, and in this way the theatre becomes something that's really not accessible unless you have a lot of research, you have the means to make it there. Then there's this aesthetic of dressing up to go to the theatre and it definitely becomes alienating if you don't have the means to get there.

MC: Yeah, I agree. I want to ask you, how's the audition process to enter a big, contemporary or ballet company? Like, do you have any tips or tricks for dancers who would like to prepare for this kind of audition?

AB: Prepare for possibly a really long day, bring lots of water, chapstick, clothes. But also, don't take anything personally. There's so much typecasting, and what I've learned from working in a company is that especially if they are still doing older shows, it's easier to find someone with a similar body or similar look to fit in the role of a previous cast member. And it has nothing to do with you if you look like this person or not. And it could completely come down to, you don't have the same shoe size as that person or you're a bit too tall, it's nothing to take personally, and I think that's the same in the commercial industry, but for me, it's something that I learned in the contemporary world. I didn't know it was quite as prominent. If there was an Asian woman or man in that role before, they might be looking for another Asian man or woman. Don't take it personally. Do your best. Remember to breathe. Stay present. Leave it all on the dance floor, so you have no regrets.

MC: I love that you started with what should be in your bag, what you should be bringing from yourself to the audition. We tend to forget that. Come with you and come prepared. And then let faith take its course to what should happen after that, right? And you choreograph as well?

AB: Yes. Occasionally, I was doing more of it in the States. Since I moved to Montreal and I had my company experience, I wasn't doing as much choreographing. Of course, there was some workshopping of material and development of material within the company for new shows.

MC: Can I ask you, what's your process when you're creating? Is there something that you regularly do or something that moves you?

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AB: I'm quite a spiritual person, very intuitive. The way that I even just get into my body, I like to think about moving up the path of the chakras. I start with the root chakra and it's very interesting because the root chakra it's like roots, your legs are the trunk of a tree, and they connect to the Earth. Actually, the sciatic nerve that runs along the back of our legs, they look like roots. I travel up this path and I have this process. It's basically checking in with my body and integrating my body with my present state of mind. And in the physical space that I'm in. And then I work through alignment and mechanical function of the body. And then I'll add emotional prompts or maybe mental or visual prompts and try to find moments or direction in which to fuel where I'm coming from, because I don't like to create movement for movement's sake.

MC: It's beautiful to hear that because it's so important to find your process and it's important to be connected to something. But it's so nice to see that it's connected to something that's within you and that is already existed, to then create something that is not yet. As I'm listening to you, I didn't come from a contemporary background or anything, but when I would just lock myself in my room more, eventually the studio or whatever, and I just wanted to move, not necessarily to even create or choreograph something specifically, which is what I need to get back to when I feel like I'm choreographing just to choreograph, which is why I said I repeat that. I just needed to close my eyes. My mom used to tell me that all the time she was like, "Close your eyes and let it move you". Sometimes the music doesn't even have to be playing yet. You have to move from somewhere that's authentic and natural, and people automatically put that with the contemporary world. That's what makes you so different. And that's what using your voice in another way is basically right. Everybody has that power. Everybody can do that. I think that's why I also tell everybody can dance. You just have to decide to connect to it, you know? I want to ask you what was or what has been your biggest challenge during your career as a dancer?

AB: My biggest challenge during my career as a dancer, I think it's keeping the fire lit. And it's not in the perspective of my career, it's in the perspective of my time dancing for my whole life. I've been dancing since I was three and we go through so many challenges in our lives and maintaining my relationship with dance, it's been really beautiful, but it has also been one of the most challenging, and I think that I've developed a lot of my character through maintaining this relationship with dance. Sometimes, you know, we get burnt out, we get uninspired. Whatever it is, your relationship to movement might be affected by what's happening in your life and learning and teaching myself how to nurture my relationship to my body and the idea of movement has been the greatest gift to keep my fire lit, but it's not always the same methods that will keep the fires lit. Sometimes you might need a change of training, a change of approach. Maybe a yoga class. Maybe going for a run. It might be the thing that reignites something again. Maybe it'll just be lying on your floor and only moving your thumb, you know? Reconfiguring the idea of what is dance, because there's movement everywhere in the world and understanding that there's movement everywhere and constantly within the body, with others, in our relationship to each other. This is really fascinating. For right now, in my life, this is what's keeping my passions ignited for dance.

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MC: I'd never thought it would be possible to lose the fire. I was like, "I will be connected to dance forever. I don't know anything else." And then a few years back, I lost my mom and I honestly never thought I would lose my fire like that. I ended up being on autopilot. And they were all great new things happening to me, but I was so disconnected and the fire that used to be in me just wasn't lit at that moment. And that's when I realized that dance is so much more than just the gig, the steps and who I'm doing it with. It's an internal situation. When you truly live something that feels like it took something from the inside of you and that was so connected to your passion. This is really deeper. This is truly rooted in me. And it's finding like the right fire and water to water those roots again. I'm realizing that in all of our conversations with different guests, we all come back to that. You want to stay so connected to what's inside of you to fuel and for your branches to come out in the right way so that you don't feel like you're on the wrong path or if you do get on the wrong path to right away, get on the right one, right? Do you remember a specific moment in your life where you realized you could really be a professional dancer?

AB: In my first dance studio, there was this beautiful and massive piece of art that was framed. And it was this depiction of Broadway. There is the busy street and the lights and this big show and everyone was lining up to go to the show. It wasn't a moment that happened to me, but this was an image in my head every day that I went to the dance studio. And I told myself, I'm going to get there and I'm going to be in that, and I feel like I kind of subconsciously worked for New York after that. But I guess one moment that is also kind of sticking out to me. I think it was in Tyce Diorio (@tyce82) class. He took me right away at the Pulse and he would like pulled me out to do a solo in front of this group of hundreds of people. He always pushed for me to push further. He had this way of believing in me and putting me on the spot and trusting that I could deliver that encouraged me to rise to that occasion. I definitely feel like as a teenager, this was like the signal to me, realizing that I could actually make something of this. As you were saying before, everyone can dance. In a way, it's hard. At some point when you're young and you don't quite know your place in the world to believe that my dancing is special enough, that I could do this professionally. And I had quite a few family members that weren't really believing I could do it either. I was quite lucky that it came from outside of myself and also a choreographer that I really admired and looked up to the kind of put me on the spot and say, "You can do this, so do it."

MC: Shout out to Tyce. Please go do your research and go check it out who it is. It just emphasizes how important it is to encourage others on their journey and to believe in others and show that you believe in them. You know that extra support and encouragement. Keep encouraging each other, that's community. What can you leave as a tool or what can you give an artist for them to shine today, for them to be able to continue on their journey?

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AB: Today, I want to offer any artist that's listening to trust in yourself, trust in the journey and your path ahead that you can't see. Trust in your timing. Because the timing of your life is divine timing, it's not for anyone else. And things might not go in the direction that you planned. But what's meant for you will come and what's not meant for you will shed away. Trust in yourself, trust that you're able to deliver, trust in your potential, trust in your beauty because that one is hard. And most of all, trust in your journey.

MC: Thank you so much Amara for being with us today for dropping beautiful gems during this episode of Behind the Scenes of Technical Dance World. So excited to have you guys with us today as we shared beautiful energy with Amara. Make sure you guys write some great notes on what we spoke about and go do your research and please feel inspired and inspire others and share what you've heard today. Thank you again, Amara. Such a pleasure.