

The LP Documents - Season 2 Episode 1

Community Building in Ballroom with Sydney Baloue and Samer RIDIKKULUZ

Emma: Hi everyone. This is Emma Colón. I'm the media and storytelling manager at the laundromat project.

[00:00:06] **Julia:** My name is Julia Mata and I'm the media and storytelling fellow here at the Laundromat project.

[00:00:12] **Emma:** And welcome to the LP documents podcast.

[00:00:15] **Julia:** where we dive into the worlds of community engaged artists and creatives who are part of the larger laundromat project family.

[00:00:23] For those who don't know the Laundromat Project is an organization that advances artists and neighbors as change agents in their own communities. We envision a world in which artists and neighbors in communities of color work together to unleash the power of creativity to transform lives. This season

[00:00:39] **Emma:** on the show, we'll be examining themes of affirmation and belonging.

[00:00:43] Both central parts of the community building process. How can POC artists, creative practitioners and neighbors work together to affirm each other and work towards self-determination in

[00:00:54] **Julia:** community. We'll be hearing from two amazing artists and alumni of the create change program, Sydney Baloue, and Samer AKA Ridikkuluz.

[00:01:04] As they talk about their individual journeys in the world of ballroom. We wanted to know. What does community building look like in the ballroom scene? I'll pass it over to Sydney and San Marino. Take it from here. Enjoy.

[00:01:18] **Sydney:** thank you so much. Yeah. For, I guess for folks who don't know, my name's Sydney Baloue, I am a writer, a performer and artist, a, um, a thinker and I would say also an archivist, um, Been in the ballroom scene for about 10 years.

[00:01:37] I currently work as a co- EP, um, and writer on HBO Max is show Legendary and I'm a very proud member of the house of Xtravaganza. The only, the only one, the only one. Um, but yeah, I'm happy to be here and I'm happy to be here with you, Sam, or why don't you introduce

[00:01:59] **Samer:** yourself? Yeah, I'm really happy to be here.

[00:02:02] Um, my name is, uh, Samer. I go by the moniker Ridikkuluz and I'm a multidisciplinary artist, Jordanian, um, queer and, um, exploring that like newfound queerness. And that led me to ballroom these, uh, this, this year has been crazy, but you've been working hard. You're in LA,

[00:02:25] **Sydney:** right? Yeah. It's um, I'm in my very bare Hollywood apartment.

[00:02:33] Cause I just moved here in November, but was otherwise living in New York, found out we had gotten picked up for season two last year. And then I was like, all right, the show moved to LA they upped the coin. I was like, all right, let me get out of New York for a little bit. And then, you know, just moved, moved to

[00:02:54] **Samer:** Hollywood.

[00:02:55] That's everything, that's everything. And, um, I love how you are doing this thing. Right. And you're like doing it well, making the coin, but at the same time, it's, it's, it's what you love as well. Like you it's ballroom, it's ballroom. Not that many people can say that they write for, for ballroom, you know, and be in it as well.

[00:03:17] You know?

[00:03:18] **Sydney:** Yeah. It is kinda crazy. Cause I mean, I've been in the scene for 10 years. I've uh, you know, walked balls, won trophies, made history as the first trans man to win evoking category at the latex fall 2019. So yeah, it is kind of wild. Um, and I'm very grateful with legendary, especially like thinking about how do you.

[00:03:42] Make this insider world more accessible to other people, especially people who are not queer, you know, like middle America or even more broadly internationally. If, and when the show goes that way, I feel

[00:03:56] **Samer:** like that's how people get their information. It's like through television. So you're as a writer.

[00:04:02] You're you're you're. You're you're painting the picture for us. So it's awesome. And I know here at Laundromat Project, we talk a lot about like community and things like that. And we're shaping like what the future could look like in our way, not our way, but

[00:04:19] **Sydney:** also like the right way. Is that crazy? I think, I think you're

[00:04:25] **Samer:** onto something.

[00:04:26] Yeah.

[00:04:29] **Sydney:** Let's kind of roll that back. How did you first get involved?

[00:04:35] **Samer:** I actually started voguing, not because like, I didn't want to voguer, but because like, I love dancing as a kid and I was always heavy, heavy, weight and like, and, and the only way I was able to get rid of it is by dancing. I couldn't, I didn't like going to the gym and like, I'm not good at sports, so whatever.

[00:04:51] So I was like, all right, I'll take this class like this jumbo, like, you know, oh, like, you know, I'll take it.

[00:04:56] **Sydney:** For me, it was more like I was, I really wanted to do other cool dips and flips and stuff and, um, and all the feminine stuff, because I was this little Butch lesbian back then. And I was like, oh, I feel like, I feel like I never really gave femininity a good try.

[00:05:16] I was like, oh, I failed at femininity. And this is also me being an overachiever because I was like, I need to be good at everything. I'm really. And I remember I did Georgina's class and Georgina's was like, you know, you're really good at the masculine stuff. And I was like, yeah, that's why I'm here because I'm here to learn.

[00:05:31] But then, but then I didn't fight it anymore. Cause I was like, okay, let me lean into this. So that's how I got into old way. And I got deeper into it, then, you know, moved to Paris, got in that scene, vogued some more, London vogued some more than finally moved back to the U.S. And then, you know, whatever one thing leads to another.

[00:05:51] Okay. So you took Slim's class and then you got inspired and then somehow I ran into you made it

[00:05:57] **Samer:** seem like anybody could do it. Like, like anyone can do it. Like anyone can do this thing. Cause I took those classes, but I didn't take it seriously. I felt like I would never be able to get this. I felt like I would never be able to get this because, and this is a conversation about Vogue.

[00:06:12] There's two types of Vogue, there's the technicality. And then there's just your essence. Like just the attitude or whatever. And I technicality I'm realizing like, I'm, I mean, I'm trying my best, but it's, it's more it's that, that empowerment, that emboldening feeling that it's like coming out now, that's working out.

[00:06:31] I didn't feel. I didn't feel that feeling, that, that cunt feeling until I met Benny Ninja Benny just changed my life. I speak with so much more emphasis.

[00:06:44] **Sydney:** No, I think it's really powerful when somebody helps you find your voice. Yeah. Like literally in that way, which I do think, I mean, in a lot of ways, it's interesting to hear you say it like that.

[00:06:58] Cause I think ballroom. Has given me a vocabulary, like not only like straight up, you know, vocabulary like ballroom lingo, which the world is privy to. But I mean, there is that like, um, cause when you said it's an attitude, it's a feeling. Um, I think that my take no bullshit attitude, a hundred percent.

[00:07:22] **Samer:** Doesn't it feel great?

[00:07:24] **Sydney:** yeah. And I think, honestly, that's, in my opinion, it's because the community was founded by femme Queens. It was founded by trans women who had to fight for their way in the world. You know, like I think about it a lot, like Avis Pendarvis other people who I never knew personally, but I can only know spiritually, like Peppa LaBeija, Crystal LaBeija you know, Dorian Corey, all the mothers, Angie Xtravaganza, Like these are women who had a fight, you know, Paris Dupree they had to like fight to just exist.

[00:07:58] And I feel like knowing your power is like so ingrained in every aspect of ballroom in a way. Do you know what I mean? A hundred percent, that that ability to be like, I'm not going to be kind of cute and I'm going to be real. I mean, to me, that's ballroom, like when you're authentically, like, no, I don't see it.

[00:08:17] I don't see it for her. I mean, to me, that's that has given me a lot of, um, power even just, you know, being able to sniff out in authenticity or things that are not for me, you know? Cause then you could just be like, Nope, No. Exactly.

[00:08:36] **Samer:** Yeah. How do you feel about this like family structure that is in ballroom?

[00:08:39] **Sydney:** If somebody like me who comes from like a difficult family, like biological family. Uh, bringing, it's kind of like where I just didn't feel validated or understood or, you know, which I do think is like so many of us. So then you like throw us all in a pot, most

[00:09:00] **Samer:** the important conversation is that conversation right there, like in regards to the chosen family, it's like to be allowed to do the things that you can't do, like, or like receive the love that you can't receive.

[00:09:13] Um, you know, from your, from your biological, it's just different. They understand the love. Something is different than to understand it, to understand it. It's just it's everything.

[00:09:23] **Sydney:** Yeah. I think because at the end of the day, we all want to be understood on some level. And that is definitely, I mean, I talked to Giselle so much, and it's just so helpful to have somebody who not only is like a

[00:09:39] You know, elder trans person. She's not like old, but like who's older than I am. And who has just been in,

[00:09:46] **Samer:** you cannot clock it. She does not look at day over 21. So we'll just call her 21

[00:09:52] **Sydney:** anyway, going to love to know, but just, but then it's funny. Cause she still has her moments where she kind of like gives away her age.

[00:10:00] I'm like. Ma, you could have Googled that. But, but I think like, you know, having somebody who's older or who's trans is very helpful. Who's seen things in the world who knows how to move in the world, you know? Like I feel like, yeah, having a mother who can get me on that level, but then who can also get me as an artist, to me, that's like the big thing is the fact that she understands when you are passionate about something.

[00:10:26] That, that means something because that's something I've never. Never gotten from my biological mom. I mean, my biological mom supports me in other ways, but I think especially if your art is important to you, it's very helpful to have somebody. Especially like Giselle and Jose, because Jose also gets it where he's an artist and he just understands when, you know, you feel like you've got a Vogue or you feel like, you know, you need something else or inspiration or whatever.

[00:10:53] It's just very helpful to have people who've been through it. Who can like guide you. And I, I was gonna say, I also appreciate having brothers and sisters.

[00:11:03] **Samer:** Yeah, that's the, one of the best parts. It's really, really one of the best parts. Um, I mean, the love that you get from your chosen family it's especially, I mean, me coming from like an Arabic background and I'm sure I've told you this before, but like, I am used to getting to know my ancestors, knowing who my grandfather is.

[00:11:22] If you say you're like, if I was to say you my full name, like, I don't know, I would be speaking for a very long time. So when it comes to like queerness and navigating that, it's like, where is my history? Where are the people that have come before me? And ballroom gives you that, that the access to like, know what it was like before then?

[00:11:44] And like, It just makes you feel grateful. Um, especially with, in the way, like HIV and aids has impacted the community. It's just like, I cannot believe it. I can't watch anything on TV. That's that that's, you know, HIV is, um, AIDS-related and like, not like tear up, it's just so it's so much. Yeah. It's so

[00:12:04] **Sydney:** I think that's a good point.

[00:12:06] It makes you feel like you're connected to something bigger. Which I've always felt like even with all the politics about Paris is burning. I've always felt like at the end of the day, part of why it's so powerful is that I think for any LGBTQ people of color, the fact that we're not reflected anywhere, like in history books or elsewhere, I don't even like, I mean, media wise, like, you know, poses like one of, you know, very few or if there are any representations of us, so.

[00:12:38] Yeah. I feel like knowing that you have a lineage and a history and there's people like you, who came before, which also says, you know, there'll be people like you who come in the future, you know, I've always felt like, yeah. Ballroom kind of gives you that.

[00:12:52] **Samer:** Yeah, that feels great to know actually, um, unity with us, I feel like is, is.

[00:12:59] Amongst the other houses. Um, so many trans, they, there was like so many trans woman that died this month. Um, and there was funerals and Giselle, um, called up so-and-so are you feeling okay from the house of Balenciaga and so on and forth? Like, you know what I mean? I feel like even though it's a competition in a way, I mean, all of like, well, that's another thing, like it's like ballroom imitates.

[00:13:24] Life itself. It's it's like, um, like if life is the, uh, is the building like ballroom is the, like the little model it's the Lego, it's just, it's modeling it. Like, we're all competitive in real life too. But at the end of the day, when like, you know, shit goes down, um, I'm here for

[00:13:42] **Sydney:** you. Yeah. I would say that too, like unity environment as a whole, I think even last year, you know, going to the protest together, um, that kind of unity solidarity for trans black trans lives.

[00:13:55] I feel like that was like such a beautiful moment when our family not like came together, you know, to Marge, but also yeah. And Layleen and leans on her. And I don't know, I feel like there's been a lot of moments like that,

[00:14:10] **Samer:** but you were talking about you and Giselle and how the art like between you two. So how does ballroom play into your

[00:14:16] **Sydney:** artist's life?

[00:14:17] I'll put it this way. I don't think you could have ever told me even two years ago, four years ago. Like my life would be like, I make a living from the thing I love to do the most and it's crazy to me, but it's also like, it's what, you know, ideally one should do. So, you know, for me as a writer, both in terms of like working on legendary, also working as a journalist, as an oral historian of the ballroom scene, I mean, I'm steeped in ballroom, right?

[00:14:49] And, um, and now I'm also like working on this book, that's kind of like a memoir. Um, that's about my time in the community and my archival work. Um, so a hundred percent, I mean, it's affected not only like the subject matter that I'm looking at, like really making sure our voices are heard because to me what's important.

[00:15:12] Like part of my frustration when I first started doing oral histories of the ballroom scene was that I saw in the academy, people would like write extensive research, theses, whatever, dissertations on ballroom and never actually interview or talk to anybody from the community. Yeah. It was like, you could get like a gender studies PHD

[00:15:34] or whatever. And just cite that one article from bell hooks or Judith Butler about Paris is burning and make a whole career. And I gagged and I was pissed and I was like, this is so lazy. Like you have no excuse in the information age. For like, not Googling people or like not getting in touch with people.

[00:15:54] And so my mission has always been like, I want to make sure our voices, like we tell our own stories, then we have a chance to tell our own stories and that it's our voices that are there. And if I can create an opening for people to do that, I'm very happy too. So yeah, it's kind of how I'm approaching things, but I'm curious for you, like where does ballroom fit in your work and trajectory in life?

[00:16:20] **Samer:** Um, ballroom for me is like, um, uh, excuse my language, like faggot bootcamp. Like it is the most freeing thing that you can it's it's I feel like it's necessary. It's healing for me as a queer person. Like I need that, you know, and I feel like my art was, um, was hiding the way my sexuality was hiding and they're like, I feel like there are like two cars, like parallel next to each other.

[00:16:49] And like not one car is going like at a, at a higher speed than the other. They're like very going in the same path. And like the more comfortable I get with my queerness, which ballroom it is the reason why I'm getting more comfortable in sitting in my chair a little deeper, but like, um, as I get more comfortable, like the art is getting better and it's getting more fluid and it's getting more confident and I'm getting confident.

[00:17:15] Everything's great.

[00:17:15] **Sydney:** It's like a fusion. I love this. I love this too, because I feel like I had that moment where I was like, kind of almost living these parallel lives. And then at some point I just let ballroom take over and. The rest is history.

[00:17:31] **Samer:** I love it.

[00:17:38] What's next for you? Like sit, like, what are you, what are you, what are you working on now?

[00:17:43] **Sydney:** Um, yeah. Well, I guess, so legendary season two, we've wrapped at the end of March. It's out now. Um, I actually just got repped, which is exciting for my TV writing. So I'm moving into scripted got repped by APA, which is really exciting.

[00:18:01] I'm just, yeah. I'm talking to book agents right now about this memoir that I'm looking to write about my time in the ballroom scene and. Um, also my archival work on the community and yeah, it's just like a lot of things working on getting into a scripted room. There's like a lot of things kind of like moving forward.

[00:18:23] Um, but what are things looking like for you? I feel like so much is happening as well.

[00:18:28] **Samer:** Yeah. You know, I like to play at humble, but, um, um, I'm graduating LP here in June. I got into grad school. Yeah, I'm going to hunter. Hello, MFA. Okay. Painting. And guess what? It's right next to the piers. So bitch I'm voguing after. live after class.

[00:18:52] **Sydney:** It'll be art sess and vogue, I'm here for it.

[00:18:56] **Samer:** I feel really good. I feel, I feel I'm not going backwards. Only four words only, uh, and honestly, it's been a pleasure knowing you. I, I know I told you this, but like seriously, I'm honored to know somebody that's like shaping the future for these kids and archiving all this, because if you didn't write it down, it didn't happen.

[00:19:20] So thank you for writing it down.

[00:19:22] **Sydney:** Well, thank you. Samer honestly, I mean, Especially the direction your art's going in. I'm very excited, especially this new chapter, because it just feels like, I don't know, like you said, you keep getting deeper, you keep sort of, you know, those, those two cars sounds like they're merging at some point.

[00:19:44] So yeah. I live and I'm excited to see what the next part is

[00:19:48] **Samer:** going to merge. They are going to merge. All right. I love you too Samer

[00:19:55] **Emma:** If you want to keep up with Sydney and Samer, you can find them both on our Instagram and have them tag in the post for this show and

[00:20:02] **Julia:** in the show notes. And if he wants to keep up with what we're doing here at the lodge in that project, you can find us at www.laundromatproject.org. And on all social media platforms. Happy pride, everyone.