

Trip to Senegal

May 2011

Dear LUTSF,

Please find enclosed two paper copies, a DVD and a CD with the report and covering letter of my trip to Senegal, which was supported by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship fund. I attended L'Ecole des Sables Professional Training 'Creating the Future' from the 14th of April to the 8th of July, 2010.

I was invited to attend this programme by Germaine Acogny, who is the Artistic Director of the dance centre 'L' Ecole des Sable. I wanted to attend because I knew this would be a good opportunity to improve my practice on many levels. I would be able to update my knowledge of traditional and contemporary African dance which is important to my practical/theoretical research in African traditional dance as a base to the style I am developing in the UK called Afro-Eclectic. This opportunity would also enable me to develop my practice as a performer, choreographer and teacher. I also hoped to build up contacts in the field and international networks.

'Creating the Future' was an exceptional event. The attendees consisted of 42 dancers/choreographers from Africa and the Diaspora ranging from 21 to 40 years of age. The venue 'L'Ecoles des Sables' was breathtaking and inspiring. It is located in Toubab Dialaw a fishing village about an hour drive from Dakar the capital of Senegal away from disruption and near the sea. The intensity of daily practical classes, choreographic research, traditional dance exchange, theory classes, debates and experiments have opened up new thoughts, skills and knowledge of dance practice in the wider picture. Dancing and creating in such an environment was almost surreal at times and allowed me to focus clearly on my goals and training without the distraction London offers.

Germaine Acogny, her son Patrick Acogny, Flora Thefaine and amongst the teachers who taught during the workshop gave me a real insight on African Contemporary Dance. Those particular teacher profoundly inspired me because of the way they developed their traditional African dances and contemporised them to create a modern vocabulary.

Patrick Acogny gave me different ways to deconstruct traditional dance, and I feel that this has been a beneficial tool in my box of creativity. Germaine Acogny inspired me to continue on my quest to create a technique based on African dance and to codify my work and exercises in order to transmit it through generations in the same way modern dance choreographer such as Martha Graham did in the past.

Flora Thefaine demonstrated how by creating an exercise bar she not only had a set class but also a base to create choreographer that develops from this bar. In terms of learning traditional dance, every Saturday 2 of the 42 participants had to share 3 hours of class, and share their traditional dances in a practical but also theoretical way. This weekly experience opened my eye to the diversity in Africa traditional dance and the multitude of dances to learn and the richness I the vocabulary.

I feel that the opportunity to travel and spend 3 months at l'Ecole des Sables is continually impacting on my professional and personal journey in a constructive and positive way, through this experience I feel that I am becoming a specialist in my field of dance and that is now being recognised and being sought after. I feel that it would be great to do this every year as a continual professional development, I am lucky that I have been chosen by Germaine Acony to return to Toubab Dialaw participate in the Transmission workshop of Germaine Acogny's technique which in the future will enable me to transmit her technique and be a representative of it in the UK.

I personally feel that the primary goals of the project were achieved and many more were added – I was able to learn a lot about the practice of contemporary African dance in the African continent and through discussion understand how it connects to similar choreographic practices in the UK and world widely. The contemporary dance sector in Africa is Avant garde and the creativity of the African makers is even further pushed, because their identity as dancers seems to be quite clear and their issues relevant to their surroundings. I felt that they pushed boundaries and were very connected to politics and social issues.

My understanding of contemporary African dance on a theoretical and practical level has deepened; I feel that there is a place for me in that field. I experienced watching African Contemporary dance at many occasions whilst in Toubab Dialaw, St Louis and Dakar, something that I had hardly experienced in England. I also had the opportunity to go to the village and watch and perform with the local people. Another great opportunity experienced whilst at L'Ecole des Sables was to be invited as a special guest at the Solo Duo Festival by director Alioune Diagne where myself and 6 other dancers travelled to St Louis (Senegal) to watch the contemporary arts and dance festival where I had the opportunity further network.

Lastly I have had some precious professional contacts and have plans for a number of research projects with some of the attendees.

On more than one occasion I was also able to share my practice with participants when I delivered a workshop based on my company's repertoire, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive and the acknowledgment that my vocabulary was clearly exciting to dancers from Africa and the Diaspora was very uplifting.

My suggestion to future awardees is that they should photograph, record, film and write as much as they can, and bring a hard drive to keep all those information as reference for the future.

I have created a mini film in collaboration with ADAD which I have enclosed, but I am planning to create a longer film about my journey and its effect on my day to day life in the UK. This will be done before the end of the year 2011. I will also inform the Lisa Ullman trust when this information is put out.

My thanks to you and the rest of the steering committee at the Lisa Ullmann trust for running this organisation and providing me with this beautiful and life changing experience.

Yours Sincerely,

Alesandra Seutin

REPORT

L'ECOLE DES SABLES: CREATING THE FUTURE

The venue

Situated in Toubab Dialaw, a fishing village at an hour drive from the Senegalese capital of Dakar. L'Ecole des Sables is a village in it self, there are about 20 bungalow, 2 dance studios, relaxing areas, showers, 'laundrette' areas, kitchen, canteen, office and an I.T corner. This micro dance village is situated 5 minutes from the beach and nature is all around, the importance of working with the natural terrain came home to me on the first day of the meeting when Germaine led the early morning warm up on the rocks facing the horizon. As we stood on the hot rocks, we watched the sunrise in the sky, the horizon of the sea and the calm of nature, and as we did every morning we created a circle of unity and meditation before as we danced to the drums.

The training

During the 3 months I spent at L'Ecole des Sables we had classes 6 days a week, a 10.00- 7.00pm Monday to Friday week consisted of two 4 hours workshop with two teachers in two different studios. 1 of the studios was made of clean and deep sand, the other studio was a grey dance floor studio both outdoors but covered at the roof. Every day we alternated the studios, which gave the dancers a good challenge because of the different surfaces we worked on. On Saturday we would have 3 hours 'sharing your traditional dance' workshop, which consisted on all the dancers sharing a dance from their region with other participants. The joy of having live

musicians was incredible. It was such an experience to have 6 drummers accompany the class everyday. It brought more intensity to the work and training.

Teachers

The choreographers/teachers who attended the project are Germaine Acogny (Senegal), Patrick Acogny (Senegal/France), Longa Fo Eyeoto (Congo), Salia Sanou (Burkina Faso), Flora Thefaine (Togo/France), Nora Chipaumire (Zimbabwe/USA), Rui Moreira (Bresil), Pedro Pauwells (Belgium/France), Pierre Doussaint (France), David Zambrano (Costa Rica/Holland) and Opiyo Okach (Kenya/France).

Debates and discussions

The discussions took place in two languages French, English translation and I had the opportunity to translate a lot as I speak both languages, which I felt was bonus. I had a book full of note, a hard drive full of footage, sounds, and music. There was also a highly active film crew during the length of the conference and they filmed classes, performances, and talks. We had a weekly film night were we watched dance films and discussed them; I loved that as it was insightful and entertaining. In our many conferences we discussed the subject of what is African Contemporary Dance or Contemporary African Dance? What are the differences between the latter or are they the same, what are the thoughts of dancers from Africa and the dancers from the Diaspora? Choreographer/dance writer Patrick Acogny and choreographer/dance scholar Longa Fo spoke on the aesthetics of African dance and also on the role of dance in locating oneself, and the way artists utilised their tradition in the contemporary world. Patrick, who is also the son of Germaine Acogny, shared a very important piece of dance history and gave a lot of references for further research. He spoke about the three dancers who were amongst the first to teach African dance in a studio context in Paris in the late 1960s to early 1970s: Ella Wollaston, Germaine Acogny and Ahmed Tidjani Cisse. Before he spoke about them, I realised I had never heard of them and this was yet another enlightenment to my discoveries on European black dance. Each of them emphasised a specific aspect of African dance in their classes which Patrick described as their 'vision of the body'. Ella Wollaston's vision was located in repetition. Germaine Acogny's vision was that of 'a rhythmic body', which she arrived at codifying in a formal, rigorous manner seeking to retain the elegance of the traditional dance.

Outings and visits

They were many trips into the country to see the sights; we went to Dakar the capital of Senegal to watch African contemporary dance performances, which I had not seen so much live back in the UK. We also visited the Goree Island which was a slave port, this was an inspirational sight for me and gave me a deeper sense of history, I felt that been there was like been part of time. We were taken to a circumcision ceremony, were we witnessed traditional dances and rituals to celebrate the manhood of the young men who were going through the practice; this was a very long but fulfilling experience. I was invited by the lady cooks to a village wedding where I was able to meet the bride and groom and witness the dance circles, songs, outfits, make up and traditions of Senegal. As part of a choreographic task we visited the Dak'Art Biennale which is an arts exhibition which showcase art

works from modern African & Diaspora artists, this was such a highlight for me to see modern art from Africa, as it is a rare opportunity in Europe. I was so inspired about the exhibition and the Avant-garde works I encountered, this has opened my visions about African art, amazing. Germaine also led the participants for a dance and improvisation session in 'the bush'. We left at dawn, trekked two or so miles into the savannah. Germaine introduced us to the natural surrounding, the trees, the stones, the soil, speaking about how nature and her surrounding had inspired traditional dances and, indeed, her own work and technique. This formed the basis of an improvisation session in the middle of woodland, the improvisation lasted 45 minutes. Germaine also took us to the beach to do a class and work on senses and how it affects our qualities but also how it compliments our use of imagery, we dance on the sand, in the water, on the rocks, I could not help but to think that such experience was something I which I could share in the UK because it is possible but at a very limited time. I have learned that is important to embrace our surroundings and use it as much as possible, life in London is so hectic that we as a community forget to look at our surrounding to appreciate the richness in it.

Reflections

The project in Senegal was eye opening and resourceful and I met my aims to update my knowledge of how Contemporary African dance is developing. I came to terms with the fact that it was fine that in professional contexts contemporary African dance was so fluid. I now have a feeling for the artistic concerns of practitioners and its socio-political and philosophical context.

The meeting confirmed my belief that knowledge of traditions is important in been able to grow and expand the movement vocabulary I have started creating.

I also gained a clearer understanding of my strengths and weaknesses as a dance artist having tried such a range of dance techniques and compositional processes. It helped clarify what processes should be central to my work and what new process I would like to investigate. I am now ready to return with fresh eyes to creating new works in response to the multiple ways of movement and choreographic formulas available to me.

In terms of my professional development I am finding a new way of work. I am helped by the fact I made connections with a wide range of practitioners from different parts of Africa and the world. I have already embarked on two projects with dancers I meet in Senegal. I feel that, for a long while, I will be reaping the benefits of this opportunity. I have been invited to be part of Chrysalides project in 2011 where I will travel to Gaara Dance Project (Opiyo Okach) and be part of a choreographic workshop in 2011 and I will travel back to l'Ecole des Sable, other African dance schools such as La Thermitiere in Burkina Faso and aim to do so for a long time.

Alesandra Seutin