

From: Charlotte Darbyshire

Dear LUTSF

Thank you so much to all at LUTSF for making it possible for me to travel to Bangladesh, and in particular for the extra award from the Ellinor Hinks bequest which enabled Juliet Robson to join me. We had a most fantastic time, working and playing across two sites and were given the warmest welcome from both institutions. All our needs were met, and we felt totally supported in our plans to offer dance, voice and art workshops to disabled and non-disabled people. There was such enormous potential for creative work, but also for us individually as artists. To be honest though, we needed much more time there, but are heart-set on returning again as soon as we have enough time and money.

I have enclosed my report with some photos and an article written by a journalist for the *Daily Star*. I am sorry that I did not have the facilities (or know-how) to scan the photos electronically, but hope you will be able to do something with them for the website. I am truly sorry that this reaches you after the two-month deadline. There is really no excuse, except that we had intended to submit a video report but poor Juliet never received her luggage (with all the footage) off the plane at Heathrow. We have been waiting, forever hopeful for its return, but still no joy ... Apart from the beautiful ivory wedding sari she bought, five of our six video tapes were lost (luckily not the camera or remaining tape inside). Both of us have a history in film-making, but Juliet in particular spent a lot of time filming, with the aim to make three films on return; an education video to use for further funding applications to return and continue our work; a dance for camera, largely made up of hands; and a documentation of our experience. All of these would have copied for you. Julie may well make something with the surviving tape which she will forward, but otherwise, we will have to wait until next time.

I hope the report meets the requirements and gives you a taste at least of how we spent our time. I have also put a copy of the report on the Laban website and will contact the editor of *Animated* to see if I could re-work it for an article in the magazine.

Again, many, many thanks

Yours sincerely,

Charlotte

Report for the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund

A brief background: The Sreepur Village, (SPP) a community for destitute women and children, in Bangladesh, was contacted by the chair of LUTSF who suggested that they might welcome a visit from someone who could give them some guidance in introducing an integrated approach to dance. Traditional Bengali dance already played an enormous part in their daily lives, but they were eager to find ways in which the disabled children could also be involved. I was a member of CandoCo Dance Company (1992 – 1999) with experience in creating opportunities for disabled and non-disabled people to make and experience

dance together, so was invited to apply. Luckily, I was successful and awarded a scholarship to go there.

Shortly afterwards, I caught an interview on the news with Valerie Taylor OBE, a physiotherapist who founded the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP), in Savar, just outside Dhaka in 1979. She seemed an extraordinary woman and, hearing her talk, I felt sure that I could offer and learn something there too. I tracked her down and arranged to divide my time between the two sites. It seemed obvious though, that a disabled artist would be an invaluable role-model for such a project and so, cheekily, I asked LUTSF if they had the funds to extend the scholarship so that a friend, artist and wheelchair user could come with me. Juliet Robson is a visual-artist. She has a background in dance and is a trained opera singer. We met through the education programme of CandoCo Dance Company and have taught together and collaborated on our own projects many times. Thanks to a bequest left to LUTSF by Ellinor Hinks, one of its founders, we were both able to go. We had the most fabulous time, working and playing across two sites.

CRP was the perfect environment for integrated dance and arts of all disciplines. The centre is huge and has been slowly developing under the rigorous eye of Valerie Taylor, a physiotherapist, who was originally sent to East Pakistan by VSO, 25 years ago. It is the most inspiring place and a perfect example of a truly inclusive community. The hospital, staffed with fully trained nurses, doctors, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, deals mainly with disability caused by spinal injury or disease, although out-patient clinics include treatment for cerebral palsy, polio, stroke and accident victims etc. In addition to hospital treatment, CRP houses its own school which also has a Special School within it, [photo below left] their own workshops where they tailor-make wheelchairs, prosthetic limbs, supports etc [photo below right] and a variety of accommodation purpose-built in a style similar to their environment at home. Patients live here temporarily when they leave hospital and prepare to live as independently as possible, after they leave CRP.



The patients, staff and students often meet for art and craft workshops, sports and games, [photo below left] and to learn new skills, such as sewing, making fishing nets or paper bags, [photo below right] so it did not take long to gather a group of interested people, both disabled and non-disabled, to join in a dance workshop. It took a little longer to establish that you didn't *need* a wheelchair to join in!!! It was not the first time in my life, but certainly no less astounding that nearly half the participants got out of their chairs and walked away at the end of the session. This was not the result of a miracle, but simply,

one of many communication issues. Our session had been translated as 'wheelchair dancing', which implied, that you needed one and suggests something closer to formation dancing or synchronised swimming. The next hurdle then, was to encourage and facilitate individuals to make their own creative decisions, and to develop those ideas into something they could present. This process proved to be the most enlightening and rewarding for us all.



In true Bangladeshi style, we ran around at the last minute inviting people to watch our last class. This turned out to be an impromptu performance to over 200 patients and staff. The basketball court that we usually worked in had been transformed; a carpeted stage erected, with huge ramps on either side, and a sea of chairs and spaces that were soon filled by patients in their wheelie beds. The dancers had a momentary panic: "how can we do a performance, when we haven't prepared anything?", but soon felt the strength of what they had made. Juliet lifted it from an open class to a beautiful performance by singing live for their duets. It was a real success and most excitingly inspired the group to continue to meet after Juliet and I had left. [photo below] At first, they were rehearsing the same material to perform at a fund-raising event in Dhaka, in collaboration with the children from Sreepur village, but I have since heard that they continue to meet and explore creative approaches to moving together.



One group that we had very little time with but with whom, I would like to work again, were the women from Gonokbori, a refuge for disabled women. Apart from a few permanent members, the women are offered shelter and vocational training for six months. They were a wonderfully inspiring bunch of women, who welcomed us with traditional song and flowers from their own garden. We were really keen to offer the women some movement and voice workshops. Juliet is a trained opera singer and wanted to exchange some songs. We had great plans for putting the two together to make a mini performance, but when we arrived for the second time, the women just wanted us to have a disco with them. This was actually more fun than anything we could have planned and lasted until the Hindu pop tapes ran out and I couldn't breathe anymore. This was our first taste of heeding the advice we had been given by CRP: to go with the

flow. The written guidelines we were sent before we arrived, said that ‘the Western sense of urgency of ‘wanting to get things done’ is very different from the Bangladeshi laid back, calm approach, (which is often interpreted by westerners as laziness).’ This advice became increasingly helpful and clear.

To be honest, Juliet and I were in complete shock for the first few days and it took a week to calm down enough to absorb our surroundings, and to sense a way that we could involve ourselves and actually offer something that would be relevant. We managed this by abandoning any premeditated plans, and just ‘hung out’ with various people in the centre. After a while, Juliet and I found the confidence to separate from each other and seek out our individual interests. Julie spent a lot of time going around the wards and chatting to patients and their families. This seemed invaluable to both parties. A lot of patients apparently accept their condition as being the will of Allah, or believe that if they had enough money, they could travel to the West, for an operation and be cured. Julie, spoke to them of her life in England since her accident nearly 20 years ago, and of all the opportunities she has as a disabled person. She certainly inspired a few young men and women and became a bit of a celebrity; she was even asked to present the awards for the last Sports Tournament, which included Basketball, Keram, Skittles, table tennis etc. She also led some art classes and spent some time in the workshop where all the wheelchairs are made. Once a week, a sculptor comes to the centre and made the most crazy objects out of bits of old chairs. Juliet loved them and would have made her own, if she had had more time. We did both find time though, to join a papier-mache class and made and decorated some tiny chairs for the children in the cerebral palsy unit. This was great fun and very messy.

I had fun joining in some of the classes in the Special Needs Unit. I hadn’t expected to teach, at least not on my first visit, but suddenly everyone was looking at me expectantly, saying: “now its your turn.” This was my first lesson in how to teach without a translator (lots of animated facial expressions/gestures and noises) and cope with a Shalwar Kameez while going in and out of the floor. Not strangling myself while rolling was quite a challenge! My favourite moment was when I had finally exhausted them and got them to relax on the floor. A guest actor/teacher spontaneously sang a Bengali lullaby and many of the children (including me) drifted off. Apparently, this level of calm was a rare sight in the school and judging by the energy at the beginning, I can believe it.



I also joined in a children’s Bengali Folk dance class [photos above left & right] and then offered a creative class in return. I struck a particular connection with the teacher: Aniket Paul, who is a professional dancer and brother of the Administrative Director at CRP. [photo below] Though our training, experience

and opportunities could not be more different, we found we shared some common aims and were excited by the same things. I spent a lot of time with him and his family, observed more of his classes and saw and discussed his choreography for hours. We were determined to work together again and hopefully to collaborate on a big production in Dhaka in the future.



Quite separate from this, Juliet was invited to curate a project called 'Line of Enquiry' for the Notts Dance festival this Spring. Her aim was to invite five international artists to join her in a programme of experimentation. These artists were all people who had crossed her path over the last ten years and who had provoked questions and informed her practise. She was excited by the potential collaboration between Aniket and I, and so generously invited us and secured funding for him to come to the UK to work.

To make his trip worthwhile, he stayed with me for two weeks. He saturated himself in all sorts of dance. He observed technique and choreography classes at Laban; led a taster class in Bengali folk dance, both for the Professional Diploma students on the Community course and for the disabled students on the CandoCo foundation course. He spent the whole day watching videos in the Laban library and saw every performance on offer at the Notts dance festival. We had a really refreshing time experimenting together and returned to our respective homes, full of ideas and determined to continue our explorations and to collaborate in the future, on a piece that fuses Contemporary and Bengali styles.



After two weeks, Juliet and I were really at home at CRP and didn't really want to leave for SPP. We had heard that SPP were not used to hosting volunteers, and were a little anxious about the facilities for Juliet. We needn't have worried though. CRP had communicated all our needs, and they had

adapted the bathroom and built portable ramps so that Julie could get wherever she wanted. We also had Beauty, who cooked for us 3 times a day and made us tea and hot-water bottles around the clock, (it was freezing after dark) and of course, the children!!! [photo above left] We received the warmest welcome and were able to invent our own schedule as it was the Eid holiday and school was officially closed. The people who we had been liasing with though, were away, so it took a couple of days for our aims to be understood. At first, the teachers rounded up all their most 'talented' children [photo above right] and looked confused when we asked where the disabled students were and whether they would like to join in. Eventually, I was taken to the 'special needs' accommodation to recruit interested students. This felt a little daunting, as all the students were in one dark room, on mattresses on the floor. I spoke to them one by one, trying to muster some interest, via a translator who I felt sure was not convinced by the idea either. We ended up with five enthusiasts though and the next day, began working together in the way we had hoped. The children were fantastic; they quickly got over any inhibitions and were full of energy and ideas. The hardest challenge was with the staff. They were trying to be helpful, going around tidying up what the children had made and making it all unison or similar. It took some time to communicate, that that wasn't necessary in this case and that we were more interested in the children's individuality and what that might bring to the group. Eventually, everyone had created their own solo and group piece. [photo below shows the boys that made a fantastic piece]



Four group pieces were rehearsed long after we had left and performed with the group from CRP at a fund-raising event at The Heritage restaurant in Dhaka, in February. These pieces were performed to a mixture of live and recorded songs. Many of the children had beautiful voices and regular singing lessons, so they accompanied the dancing with their own song and three that Julie had taught them. [photo below left] We also taught them some English nursery rhymes and children's songs, and were amused when they volunteered that 'tigers' lived on Old Macdonald's Farm! [photo below right] We were sent a DVD of their performance, which apparently was a huge success.



It wasn't really until the final evening though, that I realised the success of the sessions. I snuck out for some air and bumped into a group of teenage lads that had been in the workshop. They whisked me into their dormitory, where the two disabled boys were bopping and breakin' away with the others. [photo below] Nothing looked out of the ordinary, except that until now, they would have been asleep in a separate building on the other side of the village. Feeling too old and tired to join in, I was volunteered to DJ, or rather swap the tapes in the portable walkman, and eventually got roped into repeating the rap out loud, so that they could understand the words. My brothers would have died to hear me rapping so shamelessly!!



I am so grateful to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for giving Juliet and I the opportunity to visit Bangladesh and to work together in such a stimulating environment. There is so much potential there to explore and make creative work. Equally, our experiences there, and the friendships we made, have and will continue to feed us personally and as artists. We are heart set on returning to Bangladesh one-day.

Finally, I would like to end by trying to capture one of the most magical moments of my experience in Bangladesh. At one o'clock everyday, the call for prayer, summoned the men to the mosque and the women, including us, went inside for lunch. Everything quietened down or closed until three o'clock, so I took to sneaking onto the roof to do some yoga in the sunshine. I had discovered this spot, while hanging out the washing and had returned to it every day as it was the only time in the whole three weeks that I was alone. Juliet and I shared a room and lived with several other volunteers. We were constantly looked after (which was wonderful but exhausting) and seemed to attract quite a crowd wherever we went. [photo above – this is what happens if you ask for directions!] This secret place was on one of the highest buildings around and became my personal refuge. One-day, I was warming up as usual, swinging my arms about admiring the view when I noticed a woman in full sari, about six or seven roof tops away, doing the same movements. At first I wondered if this was also her only hour to herself and a wonderful coincidence, but when I changed the pattern of what I was doing, so did she. I still wasn't quite sure of our connection, so I synchronised my rhythm with hers and stuck with it, giving her permission to lead. She did. I was laughing out loud with excitement as we took it in turns to add something new, all the time mirroring each other exactly. This duet went on for about half an hour, until she waved, picked up her washing and returned inside. I never saw her again and wouldn't recognise her if I had. I don't know if I have ever enjoyed a duet so much in my life!

