

To: The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship
Report from: Christina Gusthart

Project: To spend two months learning about the Funk styles of hip hop dance in Los Angeles and one month to learn about other hip hop dance styles in New York, in 2010.

I would like to thank the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund whose funding helped support my trip to Los Angeles and New York to study hip hop dance and Parkour with some of the greatest and most inspirational dancers and athletes in the world.



My first stop was Los Angeles, the centre of the world for entertainment and a hub of commercial dance, shows, music videos, movies, celebrities and was the birth place of hip hop and funk dance. I spent a total of three months in the United States and two months was spent in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles

I spent most of my time taking class at Debbie Reynold Dance Studio, Millennium Dance Complex and Evolution Dance Centre, and it was here that I met the most amazing inspirational dancers. Hip Hop originated from New York which gave birth to Breakdancing. However Los Angeles gave birth to funk dance, the Soul Train and Lockin'. It was here I studied under the great dancers of Tony Basil, Slim the Robot, Anthony Thomas and Suga Pop.

I took three to four classes per day, five days a week. I focused mainly on hip hop styles such as Lockin, Poppin and House dance, arranging my own training plan and attending as many workshops as possible. I did as much as I could possibly fit in with my time.

Lockin'

Taking class with Tony Basil and Slim the Robot was a fantastic way to learn from the original dancers who were part of The Soul Train decade. From the soul train, funk dance was born and from this funk grew a style known today as Lockin'. Tony and Slim were part of this movement in the early 70's right through the 80's in a group called The Lockers. Tony and Slim, now easily in their 60's were still teaching workshops and seminars on Lockin' and its history. It was this that I found the most invaluable information I could find. Lockin' was formed through the love for Funk music and its funky feeling, this is how certain steps and techniques were formed and that has become known over the decades as Lockin'. As it was formed from Funk music, when dancing to Lockin' you should always feel Funky. However in today's dance culture Lockin' has been taken out of context and has become very commercialised, as the originals say 'Lockin' has lost its funk'. It was one of my aims, to learn more about the heritage of Lockin' and, knowing that it began in LA, it was the perfect place to learn this discipline in order to fully understand this culture. Funk Dance is a huge part of hip hop culture, however here in the UK it is hard to find this depth of knowledge and understanding. Now that I have an insight into the history, talked to the pioneers, taken class with the original Lockers of that time and practised for three months in this genre, I now feel I am in a position to train myself and other people with the right feeling of the dance and understanding of its culture which I can pass on to others and use for my own artistic benefits.

Training

A big part of hip hop culture is training outside of a studio environment. It was never created in a studio, but in clubs and outside, so it was important for me to follow this culture and I found myself in different training sessions which were held outside with programmed classes. Often these training sessions are open to anyone, and people train by themselves or with someone else. It involves open dance circles where one person enters at a time. It is a very supportive environment

and had a distinctive positive energy surrounding these training sessions. People are happy to share experiences and steps and different techniques. This is something that is quite different to the UK. I am keen to help have this feeling here in Scotland. I developed my own Lockin' technique and understanding of how to use the music and achieve the right feeling.

Poppin'

I also practised alongside Anthony Thomas which was an absolute privilege. Anthony had been choreographer to Janet Jackson for over six years, choreographing her whole Rhythm Nation Album and tour. He also taught Michael Jackson how to Pop and Lock. He taught classes at Debbie Reynolds and was a priority class of mine. Poppin' also began in Los Angeles and, although my main focus was Lockin', it was important to learn this style as well as it is also originally a funk dance. Anthony Thomas taught me to dance in the pocket of the beat, not on top and not underneath it, but in the beat. And that for me was such vital information as I then started to feel the beat and dance as part of the music. So much of dance I have been taught in the past has been on the steps, on the counts and on the presentation of steps. What I learned with Anthony is invaluable, to dance in the pocket of the beat. That piece of advice has helped me in all of my other styles of dancing and is something I teach now to others.

Waacking

Ana 'lolipop' Sanchez is one of the founders of a funk dance style called Waacking. She was another exceptionally inspirational dancer who spent most of her time in the 70's in the gay community dancing with her male friends and learning from them. Ana talked a lot about the history and the origins of Waacking and its influence on current dance industry. Waacking is currently experiencing a sudden boom in popularity however, from my experience from Ana, it is being danced without the right feeling. Waacking is another funk style which was part of the Soul train era. It encourages individuality, personality, positivity and funk. In her workshop we spent most of our time focusing on the feeling of a piece of music where we had to dance by ourselves and find our own feeling from it.

Ana also talked about how the original dancers who are all now sadly dead due to HIV and Aids, all used different personas when dancing. Some would use movie stars and some would use Cartoon Characters for their own inspiration and character that they became while dancing. I thought this was a great idea for when I freestyle, to think of a character and to commit to myself and give over to the music. I had the opportunity to talk one on one with Ana and this conversation changed the way I see dance altogether. She talked about supporting each other, about setting yourself free and how to use the music which is all part of the Waacking culture as well as the Funk Dance culture. Her passion for the dance is contagious and she helped to open my mind and how I view dance in a way I never have before.

Free Running

I have always been active and enjoyed moving physically, and while I was studying at Liverpool's Institute of Performing Arts, I started free running with a friend of mine, Ryan Doyle. Ryan went on to work for MTV's Ultimate Parkour Challenge which has been hosted and aired in Los Angeles. We met up in Los Angeles where I spent two weeks training with him. He talked me through the techniques of Parkour, how it started and where it started. Ryan also talked a lot about the Parkour Philosophy which is to face every obstacle and find a way around it, because there is always a way. This idealism really helped me with my time learning Parkour and approaching different dance styles while in the United States. Learning Parkour was an important step for me as I was interested in how I could use these skills in my choreography.

New York

I spent most of my time at Peri Dance Centre continuing with my Lockin training with Jazzy J, who also used to dance with Anthony Thomas in Los Angeles. But I also studied Voguing under



the famous Archie. This genre of dance is something I had never before been very interested in, and I only tried this for fun. However I found it extremely rewarding, indulgent and interesting and something I'd like to continue to study. I also took some House dance classes under Brian Green a fantastic teacher and dancer. Again, this is something in which I'd like to take more classes and I am looking to return to New York for this purpose.

What I did next.

On my return to Scotland, I had a hip hop theatre piece to create for the Breakin Convention Tour. I had recently been working on the idea of working in an office and how mundane a typical days work of 9 -5 can be. Within in this piece I used Theatre, Lockin', Contemporary, Breakdancing, hip hop and popping. I used all the styles I have learned on my trip to put on a fantastic Hip Hop Theatre piece. Jonzi D had some positive things to say about the piece, and has encouraged me to push this piece further.

I had a two week residency at Dance Base the National Centre of Dance of Scotland. For this I wanted to explore the idea of free running and hip hop, so I used a large scaffolding structure and explored the ideas of Lockin', and free running. I worked with David Aing, a French hip hop dancer and learned the technique of Tracing, a type of breakdancing done by only moving one part of the body once it has been touched by another, for example, your elbow as the connector. It has a very contemporary feel about it and I used this, along with Lockin' and free running as well as manipulating the scaffolding structure. This Residency was a fantastic opportunity to explore my ideas from what I had learned from my American Trip.

Both these projects since my return have opened up great opportunities for my company Xena Productions. I now have another date booked for a performance in Dundee Rep, Scotland on the 15th of January. I have also another residency at Dance Base in April, which will give me the opportunity to further explore these ideas I have been working on in my current projects.

Without the help from The Lisa Ullmann travelling Scholarship Fund, I would not have been able to complete my project and training, and the opportunities that have come from this trip are invaluable. I would like to say a huge thank you to the help and support you have given me!!