

LUTSF Awardee: Dr Elena Catalano

Project Title: Nrityagram Intensive Summer Workshop

Aim: develop technical, performance, teaching and choreographic skills in Odissi

Durations: 1 month (12th June to 9th July 2017)

Funding received:

- Lisa Ullman Travel Scholarship Fund £775
- Movin'Up – Gai Giovani Artisti Italiani €1500
- Kingston University, Dance Department £200

Thanks to the Lisa Ullman Travel Scholarship, and further funding received by Gai-Giovani Artisti Italiani and Kingston University, this summer I was able to undertake one of the most enriching experiences of my life as a dancer. I practice Odissi, an Indian classical dance form, which unlike bharatanatyam and kathak is not yet well known and widely practiced in the UK, despite the breadth and depth of its technical vocabulary and choreographic potential. I have carried out most of my training in India under gurus of international acclaim, but it has always been my ambition to study for an intensive period at Nrityagram, a dance village near Bangalore. Nrityagram was founded in 1990 in order to provide unique space where future generations of dancers could focus exclusively on their artistic practice and deepen their understanding of Indian philosophy and performance aesthetics.

Nrityagram is presently home to some of the finest odissi dancers in the world, who have electrified audiences both in India and abroad with their distinctive style and breathtaking choreographies, mainly created by artistic director Surupa Sen. Sen's choreographic work is known for its contemporary aesthetics which is clearly visible in the use of space, time and dynamics, while holding on to traditional themes and symbolism. The result feels simultaneously timeless and continuously fresh, setting Nrityagram Ensemble apart from any other odissi professional company, for their originality and aesthetic appeal.

In addition, and as a foundation to this choreographic practice, Bijayini Satpathy, the director of education at Nrityagram, has done extensive practical research on the traditional movement vocabulary, expanding it from within, by deconstructing and reconstructing material found in choreographies created by the revivalists of the style in the first stages of development of odissi as a classical dance form. Bijayini has integrated her study of movement with a thorough investigation of classical texts of the South Asian performing tradition, in particular the *Natyasastra*. In addition, she has also introduced exercises and principles of Indian martial arts, yoga and western body conditioning and movement techniques in dancers' training. She has then come out with a pedagogical system, which is highly effective in expanding the potential of the odissi dancing body, in preventing injuries, in giving breath and texture to the movements, in allowing a more versatile ownership of the dance material and in nurturing creativity.

It was therefore essential to me to experience the work of these great artists and to bring it back to the UK where I work as a professional odissi dancer, equally committed to teaching and performing high quality dance. In particular, I was motivated to learn the Nrityagram pedagogical approach, as well as observing their choreographic practice. I wanted also to be exposed to the lifestyle of dancers who are fully dedicated to their art form. While this last point is not immediately translatable to our life as dancers in the West, where financial pressures and a different socio-economical system sometimes prevent us from going in total depth in what we are doing, nevertheless observing these artists at work has been extremely inspirational and has encouraged me to hold confidently on my artistic vision.

I will now briefly describe the content of the workshop and then I will discuss what are the key skills, knowledge and general understanding I have acquired. Also, I will mention how I aim to apply this material in my own artistic practice and my vision for the future of odissi in the UK and of myself as an artist, contributing to the professionalization of this dance form.

A standard day at Nrityagram starts at 6.00am with a tea and then a gentle jogging in the surrounding countryside, breathing fresh air and pumping oxygen in the body through the simple act of walking. Returning at 7am back to the village, we do our daily chores, such as sweeping common areas or making our own laundry. At 8am, we have our yoga and body-conditioning class, which lasts for an hour and a half. Then we have breakfast. The first dance class is from 10.30am to 12noon, after which we go to observe the Ensemble's rehearsal. At 2pm, we have delicious vegetarian lunch and, after some rest and a tea, we get back to class from 4.30 to 6.30pm. We have then another hour for personal practice, which we normally use to consolidate what we have learned in class and dinner at 8pm. After that, we are allowed to observe the artists teaching the traditional repertoire to residential students.

Every single of these moments is an incredible opportunity for learning. Waking up early in the morning gives insights on the degree of daily discipline required in the life of a professional dancer. The yoga and body-conditioning class, far from being an ancillary training, becomes the core of solid and safe practice. In particular, I have learned several exercises that, combining the wisdom of different movement disciplines, are helping me connect with my body and especially with my breath at a deeper level, incredibly enhancing my performance experience and execution. I aim to introduce these exercises also in my teaching as I start my regular classes at The Place and at Kingston University in the next few days.

The dance classes were an experience of its own. Normally, odissi training is based on the practice of a few steps and then the study of traditional choreography. However, at Nrityagram, one learns and practices different variations of footwork, steps, including jumps, walks, spins, acquiring a rich palette of movements which can be easily combined and transformed for both teaching and choreographic purposes. This approach, which clearly enhances physical and mental versatility and nurtures creativity, is already a deep source of inspiration for me. I am sure this training methodology will profoundly change my own practice, and will benefit future generation of dancers who will dance and learn with me. In fact, this approach is also feeding into the development of the odissi syllabus which will be approved by the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dance, and in which I am directly involved.

Equally inspiring was the observation of the Ensemble's daily practice. The amount of work, and the degree of relentless search for perfection, uncompromising commitment and deeply rooted presence in the movement is simply inspirational. The observation of daily rehearsals has also allowed me to have an insight in the way the movement material is worked out and constantly transformed and improved by the choreographer and embodied by the dancers. I had the opportunity to observe the nuanced use of the sound in the footwork, sometimes stronger, sometimes more subtle, the shades in the use of movements, where dancers play with speed and size, and the mesmerizing use of space where the bodies cluster and spread in a constant state of compositional transformation. This understanding of the subtleties of the style will certainly feed into my own creative practice, which I am developing as part of the Odissi Ensemble, a leading performing group presently touring the work *Of Gods and Mortals*, produced by Kadam/Pulse.

Similarly inspiring was observing the teaching of the traditional repertoire. While I have learned many traditional pieces myself, observing the transmission from guru to disciple as an outsider really gave me insights on the degree of endurance and focus both teacher and learner need to have to produce excellence in dance. This awareness will certainly influence my teaching practice as I aim to train the professional dancers of the future.

Among the most important things I have learned in this workshop is the idea of finding breath in the movement, of not sparing anything but completing each movement, of finding a moment of rest and release in the stances inspired by temples sculptures, which Odissi is very famous for. I have also learned to constantly feed my imagination, to think about the meaning every single

movement has for me and how can that be communicated and translated in its execution. I have learned to 'wear my eyes' in different parts of the body. I have certainly expanded my dance vocabulary and refined my performance skills. Finally, it was a unique opportunity to observe how the artists were choreographic short dance sequences on our bodies, combining material learned during the workshop.

I feel now much more embodied and grounded as a dancer as I am exploring the texture of each movement. And the feedback I have received on my performance upon my return show that Nrityagram experience is already working in my body. In a more programmatic sense, I want to set up in the months to come my own odissi dance academy to foster excellence in this art form, as well as in the study of ancillary skills and knowledge, such as music, philosophy and aesthetics. I am presently creating a website for this academy and I am looking at publishing it in the next couple of months. As a result of this experience at Nrityagram, I also hope to develop more creative practice, through the collaboration with other visual and sound artists and through choreographic experimentation with the Odissi Ensemble. This has in part already taken place as immediately after the workshop, I worked with a video-maker on a dance shooting in the natural and archaeological landscapes of Hampi, which was a great conclusion to my dance trip to India.

I am again very grateful to LUTS, to Movin'Up-Gai, to Kingston University and above all to Nrityagram artists to have made this experience possible at different levels. My goal is now to give what I have learned back to people in the UK, through performances, teachings and the active involvement in the shaping of the future of Odissi in this country.



PHOTOGRAPHIC DIARY

Entrance to Nrityagram Dance Village



Morning walk, body conditioning and dance classes



Nrityagram Faculty

Surupa Sen



Bijayini Satpathy



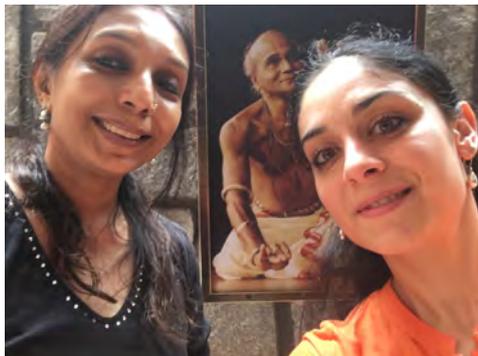
Pavithra Reddy



Marc Jay



Networking with other dancers in Bangalore

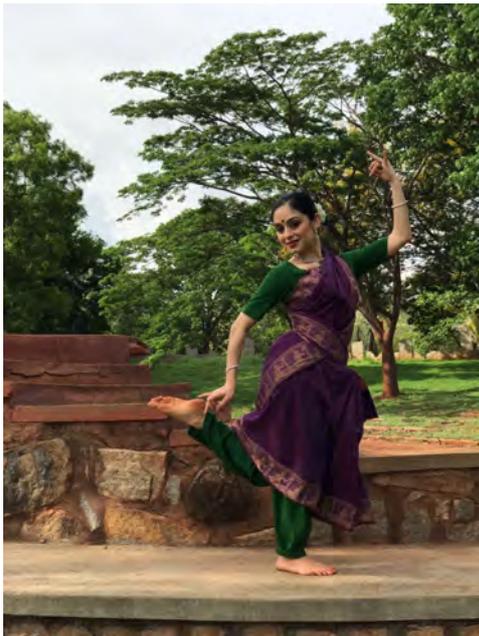


Sharmila Mukhareeja and Madhulita Mohapatra

Dance Video Shooting in Hampi with Fstopro



Sculptural Inspirations



Receiving a Certificate at the End of the Workshop

