



Ella Jade Peck: Ella Mesma
Ella Mesma Company
New York City: July 4th - August 30th

Dear LUTSF,

Thank you ever so much for the wonderful opportunity to travel to New York this year to train in Breaking and Salsa with a Lisa Ullmann Scholarship. The experience was extremely successful. I found Rocking teachers, Salsa teachers and breaking teachers who are internationally acclaimed and trained every day that I was there. I also attended the Graham school, and was invited to perform in two Breaking shows whilst I was there.

Highlights included training at Yamulee Salsa school, meeting Rocker Mighty Mike from Mastermind Rockers whom I trained with regularly, and performing at The Lincoln Centre with Full Circle.

I also had time to create a Company Class which uses Graham, Afro Latin styles and breaking floorwork and to link this seamlessly and organically as a professional level class.

Upon my return, my new work 'Ladylike' - which will premiere on the 28th October at Richmix in London, has become a smooth blend of Rocking, Breaking and Afro Latin movement along with Contemporary. I would love to invite you to attend. I am also writing a blog about my experience which will be published at www.ellamesma.co.uk

Thank you for the wonderful opportunity. Please find my report enclosed.

Sincerely

Ella Jade Peck
(Ella Mesma)



New York City
Studying Breaking, Rocking and Salsa.

Ella Peck
Ella Mesma Company
www.ellamesma.co.uk
4th July- 30th August 2016

Description of the project and major findings

I embarked on this journey to New York City to learn about the relationship between Salsa, Breaking and Rocking, and how these styles can complement Contemporary Dance theatre and classes.

I took dance courses, classes, performed, watched shows and conducted interviews with Breakers, Rockers and Salsa dancers. This was a unique professional development and research opportunity to develop my current and future work with Ella Mesma Company, Element Arts and Roots of Rumba. The experience was multi faceted, and developed me as performer, choreographer and teacher.

I trained in Salsa with Yamulee and breaking with Kwikstep and Rokafella of Full Circle. I trained rocking with Mighty Mike of Mastermind Rockers. There was a cross over in these as most of my teachers were of Latin descent and had experience in the other dance forms I was seeking to research. I also attended the Graham school to enrich my movement language as a choreographer and teacher, and found extra workshops with Stevie Insua a Rumba teacher, and some Haitian dance workshops at Gibney Dance. I was invited to perform with Full Circle, Inno' Artists and for Gabriel Alvarez who is a bboy and a salsera whilst I was in New York.

I learnt about the links between Salsa and Rocking, which enhanced and progressed my practice with my companies, and also my understanding and knowledge of the techniques for teaching and passing on these art forms. My research and training focused on the influences and connections between Rocking, Breaking and Salsa. This enabled me to explore how to further incorporate these techniques into my own contemporary dance practice for teaching and performance in the UK. It also gave me new ideas to enhance my choreography.

Having just created 'Ladylike', which previews on October 28th 2016 and will tour in 2017, I have been struck by the connections between Salsa and Rocking. It was wonderful to train with specialists in these styles first hand, and to deepen my understanding of the techniques. I was able to refresh, consolidate and enhance my own dance skills; improve my knowledge of Rocking, Breaking and Salsa; experience the culture and dances first hand and strengthen my confidence and credibility as a dancer. The experience confirmed the links I had recognized between the styles, and furthered my understanding of their relationship to one another.



The experiences performing in the theatre also enabled me to develop my role as a dramaturge for Roots of Rumba and strengthened my mentoring capabilities with emerging Latin & Hip Hop Dance theatre artists in the UK.

Interpreting and conclusions from my findings

I have a heavy workload in the UK, and know that to I need to learn ways to ensure everything is done and to widen my audience, and still train for myself. The opportunity to research and develop in these areas is crucial and learning those skills at the source means I had focused time to do this and learnt from the best.

What I am most struck by is the global reaches of dance. It was wonderful to confirm that Rocking evolved from Salsa, and see its connections to breaking. I also made connections from Graham and the contraction in almost all areas of dance. I am struck by the importance of the pelvis, the spine, the earth in all Latin dances, and how much this can help and enrich my own technique class and choreography.

In Graham, the base principle, is 'Contract, Release', which made my body feel so strong and enabled me to master my movement and gain so much control. I was helped to train my breaking with 'progressions' in order to build the strength and understand specific movements to move to each new step. In Salsa I was able to use the techniques from Graham to find an immense feeling of freedom and flow in my dance.

I also feel that Body Mind Centering features in all of these dances - in Breaking where everything moves from centre out; in Salsa and Rumba, where the Yanvalou is an important focus - I have realised that this is at the core of my movement. As an Embryo the spine forms first and from here, the legs, the heart - so there is an alive, alertness in everything; it all comes from the centre, the pelvis, the spine.

I am very impressed by the strength working from the centre gives me and in how the intention of the movement comes alive when moving from here. When we dance from this point we are able to expand to a much greater potential. We are able to move from the eyes through to ears, fingertips, back of head. We become goddess like, and take on a bigger presence on stage. This also helped me with my breaking and my salsa to work more efficiently and move effectively with less effort.

I realised in England I hold back when I dance, and this is a combination of not wanting to show off - a very English cultural inherited trait, not truly trusting myself and my knowledge of the movement. In these techniques I let go of this outward focus on what I am doing and getting it right and took it internal both in terms of how I use my focus - looking to be watched, or not wanting to be watched, and in trusting my body to tell me rather than looking at others. Martha Graham is said to



have once said to her students, 'I am arrogant but I know it. A bit of arrogance is ok'. I think I have needed more, and this opportunity allowed me to realise it is ok to be great, to expand, to be proud of my accomplishments, and to stop apologising in my movement. In New York, I learnt to love myself, to let go of my belief that I can't, or haven't had enough training, and be in the present in the way I dance. I learnt that only I know where I have come from and how hard I have worked to get here and so learnt to seek only to do my best not the best to win approval from someone else. This has fueled me to make huge leaps as dancer and choreographer and leader of others.

There was something about training with the bboys & bgirls in NYC which was different. They were competitive but in a very real, raw & supportive way. The level was high but there was less snobbery or arrogance about their level, and more willingness to share.

I experienced some wonderful imagery in Graham class: a soft wave, a dark cave which you retreat into frightened - everything had an image and a story to go with it, and this helped me to grasp the depth of movement and how much more there is than just shapes in space when we build a story behind it. This again filtered into the way I moved as a Salsera, and in inspiring my imagination and performance qualities.

I have created a class which uses my background of Breaking, Graham, Yoga and Latin dance. The opportunity to train in these styles has allowed me to create the class very genuinely, instinctively and authentically. I am also able to talk with more confidence about all the elements within my class.

My recent work 'Ladylike' focuses on Rumba and Salsa along with Breaking and Rocking from NYC. The experiences in New York mean I can draw from things I saw firsthand and create the work with integrity and utmost respect for the art forms.

In one class, I was told that Leonard Davids (one of the company dancers) was hired when he fell over in class trying so hard; the teacher said Graham recognised his effort and this was why she hired him. She said, we need to go out of our comfort zone with every bone in our body reaching to feel that - otherwise we don't improve. She said 'Imagine you will have an audience of 3000 in 2 years' time - they need to see every bone in your body reaching to be the best'. This really helped me to become an intelligent dancer and move right to my extremities, and has helped me feel so alive when I dance.

These past two years I have turned my focus from touring and performing towards a choreographic and leadership career. If I am to be successful in this highly competitive field, the right mentoring opportunities are crucial to refresh my choreographic 'skillset' and develop my creative thinking; this opportunity pushed my capabilities. With Element Arts Company, I see my role as mentor as very



important and this experience working with and being mentored by the first and second generation of bboys, rockers & salseras enhanced my knowledge and confidence as a teacher and mentor and also enabled me to become even more of an expert in these areas.

During my Contemporary training, I felt I wanted to bring more of my background into my dance. Having just created Arts Council Funded group piece 'Ladylike', I believe I have begun to find this, and that I am at a critical turning point in my career and movement development. I feel this was the perfect time to travel to NYC, because it allowed me to make important connections in the dance styles, and I am really ready to push both my companies in a new artistic direction. I also see that the scene both needs and is ready for it. There is a real currency and relevance in this research to my work as an emerging choreographer and through creating 'Ladylike' I had begun to see how strong the links between the two styles are.

I believe to truly understand a Culture, one must experience it firsthand. I am passionate about passing the historic knowledge and philosophy from Salsa and Breaking to my dancers. I feel strongly that the development of a technique drawing on diasporic Latin dances with Hip Hop will benefit the practice, understanding and appreciation of Latin & Hip Hop dance in the UK. The Latin scene needs more opportunities and I would love to see the long-term improvement of the level of work produced. I feel I have gained confidence as a leader in this field, and stronger resolve on my long-term goal to bring greater recognition to the Latin dance sector, and building a following for Latin Hip Hop Dance Theatre.

Photos



