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Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund

Iris Tomlinson
1 Beverley Court
Aldrington Close
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January 25th 2017

Dear Ms Tomlinson,

I am writing to you regarding the submission of my report for the scholarship I have received to support the travel costs for my project. My report is titled 'Female Empowerment through Dance in Cambodia' and describes my three-month artistic residency in Siem Reap, Cambodia, with the contemporary dance company *New Cambodian Artists (NCA)*. The project took place between 29/08/2016 to 29/11/2016.

In my original application with Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF) I stated the purpose of my project to be to undertake the role of contemporary dance technique trainer as well as choreographic assistant to the artistic director. However, in close liaison with the Artistic Director and the Company Manager of NCA it was decided for me to independently lead on the development of a new piece of choreography addressing the issue of domestic violence.

The piece '*Kom Lang Satrey*' (*Power Women*) constitutes the successful outcome of this project. It is the first work developed by a visiting artist and is an important addition to the company's repertoire in disseminating their mission of female empowerment through dance. It was premiered in Phnom Penh on 24th November 2016 at the Institut Français Culturel as part of the Dignity Project commissioned by NGO-CEDAW.

I am immensely grateful for the support I have received through the LUTSF. From my funding research I have gained the impression that, as Cambodia does not present with an attractive developing arts scene, funding bodies appear to be hesitant to invest. However, LUTSF have been visionary in supporting this project and I hope to see more investment for projects in countries with similarly deprived cultural infrastructures.

With regards to further opportunities to disseminate this work, I am very fortunate to publish an article on Culture 360 (www.culture360.asef.org), an online portal to stimulate the cultural engagement between Asia and Europe managed by the Culture Department of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). I am furthermore planning on contacting relevant higher education institutions to offer visiting lectures. Information on this project will furthermore be published through my professional website (www.ellensteinmuller.com) and social media.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions or need further information.

Yours sincerely,

Ellen Steinmuller

Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund - Project Report

'Female Empowerment through Dance in Cambodia'

With the generous support of the *Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund* (LUTSF) I undertook a three-month artistic residency in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Working with the first and only all-female contemporary dance company in Cambodia, *New Cambodian Artists (NCA)*, the purpose of my residency was to provide daily dance technique training as well as develop a new piece of repertoire addressing the issue of domestic violence. The piece '*Kom Lang Satrey*' (*Power Women*) constitutes the successful outcome of this residency. It is the first work developed by a visiting artist and is an important addition to the company's repertoire in disseminating their mission of female empowerment through dance. It was premiered in Phnom Penh last November at the *Institut Français Culturel* as part of the *Dignity Project 2016* commissioned by *NGO-CEDAW*, a non-governmental organisation to monitor and promote the implementation of 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women'.



*NCA dancers in a studio rehearsal of 'Kom Lang Satrey' (Power Women):
Ni Lei, Kong Seng Va, Khon Sreynuch, Son Sreynith (left to right)*

My professional practice

I am a professionally trained dancer and performer, a highly experienced community dance artist and a qualified and registered Dance Movement Psychotherapist with substantial clinical practice. Based in London, my current professional portfolio includes a wide range of different activities in the areas of art, education and therapy. I primarily work with marginalised and vulnerable populations facilitating personal development, learning and growth through creative movement and dance interventions. My artistic residency with *NCA* allowed me to take my professional practice into a new and challenging international context working within the socio-economically disadvantaged environment of Cambodia.

I have previously worked with *NCA* as a contemporary dance technique trainer over a two-month period in 2015 as part of a self-funded professional development initiative. During that time I built strong working relationships with the company sharing a profound vision of uniting high artistic standards with the promotion of personal and social change. I have been deeply touched by the talent and courage of

these young women who are true role models and an inspiration to a new Cambodian generation.

The pioneering work of NCA

Since 2012, *NCA* is making history as the first and only all-female officially registered contemporary dance company in Cambodia. *NCA* is an initiative by Dutch theatre director Bob Ruijzendaal. His work as *NCA*'s Artistic Director is driven by high artistic expectations, helping empower and strengthen the Cambodian artistic community from within.

Together with the Company Director, Khon Sreyneang, they have assembled, trained and developed an innovative dance company with a unique repertoire; a fusion of the rich Apsara tradition with contemporary improvisation, choreography and music with the intent to foster growth and understanding of contemporary Khmer expression. *NCA*'s work is powerful, strong and innovative yet within the feminine form of the Apsara tradition challenging current perceptions of Cambodian art.

Not only are *NCA* artistic pioneers, they are also pushing social boundaries in pursuing their mission of female empowerment through dance. It is evident that being part of *NCA* has transformed the dancers' lives, helping them become confident, independent, empowered and professional young women. Through their work they disseminate this powerful message and inspire change in the perception of women's roles in Cambodian society.

Being the only all-female contemporary dance company in Cambodia certainly has its challenges. The company does not receive any financial support from national or international funding bodies. Their work is sustained solely from the income received from performances primarily for Western audiences. Additionally, Cambodia faces a lack of cultural infrastructure that is hard to appreciate from a Western perspective. The radical policies of the Khmer Rouge regime in the 70's left Cambodia deeply scarred in many ways. The effect of the total annihilation of Cambodian arts, with 90% of artists killed, can still be felt today. The result is a lack of artistic development and funding as well as a lack of public accessibility and engagement. Fighting against economic, cultural and social pressures, *NCA* faces a continuous battle in the production and presentation of their work.

The artistic residency

My three-month artistic residency with *NCA* encompassed the delivery of daily contemporary dance technique classes, training alongside the dancers in weekly Apsara classes and the development of a new piece of choreography addressing the issue of domestic violence, '*Kom Lang Satrey*' (*Power Women*).

All the dancers have a background in Apsara dance. During their time with *NCA* the dancers have been furthermore trained by Bob and visiting artists, acquiring vital skills such as contemporary technique, improvisation, contact work, martial arts and musicality. Apsara is the traditional Cambodian dance form. It presents with unique movement particularities. The movement repertoire is highly stylised and uses a complex alphabet of hand and body positions. It requires great flexibility and body control to execute the intricate and highly articulated movements. Joining the weekly Apsara training gave me an embodied understanding of the particularities of this dance style and helped me to appropriately support the dancers in their technical development.

From my own learning of the Apsara repertoire and previous experience of working with the dancers I identified core aspects to focus on throughout the daily technique

classes with the overall aim of increasing movement repertoire. This involved practice of total body integration and connectivity, development of movement fluidity and training of core strength and use of core support. I conveyed this learning through improvisation tasks, body awareness activities and exercises based on Release and Cunningham technique. The daily technique classes also served as a warm-up and preparation for daily rehearsals.



Daily contemporary dance technique class

'Kom Lang Satrey' (Power Women) aims to be a community engagement piece to raise awareness of the issue of domestic violence and inspire change in the perception of women's roles in Cambodian society. It was absolutely paramount to create a choreography that would be accessible to a Cambodian audience in terms of narrative and movement symbolism.

During my artistic research for the piece, it became evident that oppressive cultural traditions have left women in Cambodia vulnerable to violence and abuse. It offers a fertile ground for the normalisation of the issue and creates a culture of silence. The tradition of subservience and inferiority of women particularly manifests in the *'Chbab Srey' (Women's law)*. This traditional code of conduct highlights the cultural context of inequality that is prevalent in Cambodia to this day.

I have taken the *'Chbab Srey' (Women's Law)* as a starting point for the artistic exploration with the dancers developing initial movement themes around pain, shame, sadness, oppression and anger. Over the course of the first phase of the project I introduced further creative stimuli to generate movement material. This included the Cambodian proverb 'Men are gold, women are cloth' and the archetype of the female warrior. The dancers' authentic and raw responses guided me in creating the overall narrative of the piece, a story of transforming pain into power.

After a phase of intense artistic research we shared the first draft of the choreography with the Artistic Director. Bob's expertise and guidance was immensely valuable in the process of developing the piece. It was central to ensure the artistic integrity of NCA's work and accessibility for a Cambodian audience. Whilst maintaining the overall narrative, we experimented with the central movement symbolism and introduced new stimuli into the process. The theme of weddings offered a recognisable and light-hearted access point into the narrative. Movement inspiration from the Maori 'Haka Dance' enriched the final empowering section of the piece.

The final result of this residency is testimony to the courage and talent of these young dancers. As with other pieces of *NCA*'s repertoire, the stories the dancers tell are deeply personal and yet so universal. In *'Kom Lang Satrey' (Power Women)*, they share their own pain, anger and struggle of being trapped in oppressive social and cultural structures and demonstrate what it takes to break out and turn pain into power. The piece thus showcases them as what they are: inspiring role models for a young Cambodian generation.

'Kom Lang Satrey' (Power Women) was premiered in Phnom Penh on 24th November at the *Institut Français Culturel* as part of the *Dignity Project 2016* commissioned by *NGO-CEDAW*. At the beginning of December 2016, *NCA* had the opportunity to share it with a local audience as part of the *Kindness Festival* in the remote village of Troket.

However, these opportunities are rare and reaching Cambodian audiences, the very people this piece is intended for, continues to be a challenge. This adversity is not only faced by this particular project but by *NCA*'s work in general. It is evident that this group of young artists are pioneers creating an industry that does not yet exist and bringing about a new chapter for Cambodian arts.



New Cambodian Artists dancers and me at the premier of 'Kom Lang Satrey' in Phnom Penh

Reflections

This artistic residency has furthered both my paedagogical as well as artistic abilities. It has certainly been a steep learning curve for me to translate my Western understanding of contemporary dance, choreography and performance into such a different context. Being able to independently develop my own artistic language has given me greater confidence in my choreographic capacities. Working with the traditional Apsara dance vocabulary has challenged my personal dance practice and artistic perceptions. I gained working knowledge and understanding regarding the adversities of working in a deprived cultural infrastructure. All of these learning aspects will deeply enrich and inform my professional practice in the UK.

I am immensely grateful for the support from *LUTSF* who contributed to making this project possible. Securing additional funds to finance this project proved to be a great

struggle. As Cambodia does not present with an attractive developing arts scene funding bodies appear to be hesitant to invest. However, *LUTSF* have been visionary in supporting this project and I hope to see more investment for projects in countries with similarly deprived cultural infrastructures.