

To the Chair, LUTSF,

In October/November 2009, I was fortunate enough to make a trip to America, Partly funded by The Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF), in order to further my personal and professional development through training in contortion and burlesque dance. As it turned out the trip was so much more than the outline above. Before I went, I booked the contortion classes with Serchmaa Byamba and my mentor in the USA, Emily Park, booked me into an improvisation workshop, A vintage Pin-up workshop and found out about various other burlesque classes in the Bay area.

I cannot stress enough how useful it was having a contact at my destination. Not only to help find somewhere to stay but also some of the workshops she organised for me I would not have thought of doing and the impact of them has greatly improved my rehearsal techniques and subsequent performances. Although I had pre-booked many of the classes I was glad to have left some flexibility in my schedule, as this enabled me to take up other opportunities that came my way.

My time in California was extremely busy. Monday to Thursday I had contortion classes and one or two burlesque classes. On Fridays I had solo contortion practice. At the weekends I was performing in order to put into practice what I had learned during the week.

I kept a very detailed diary and made sure I wrote every day. I was so busy that if I had left anything to write up later, bits would have been forgotten. I managed to fit so much into just one month that having it all down in black and white has been really helpful to refer back to and has helped me to absorb more from the trip.

In hindsight it would have been good if I had got more photographs of my contortion lessons.

At the weekends as well as performing, I tried to see as many relevant shows as possible and these I wrote up in an analytical form i.e. what worked and what didn't. This process helped me think more clearly about what I was seeing and I managed to glean some useful ideas from watching other people's performances.

I cannot express enough what a huge opportunity LUTSF has given me, how I discovered a joy in learning and getting the most out of each available day. Not only did I find I could be so much better than I thought, but I could have another ten years of doing contortion, despite having been told right from my first training that I was too old and ought to do something else.

I feel that not only have I been given my career back but I can be really good at it and that it is something worth continuing with.

Please find a detailed report attached,

With thanks,
Emmi Ogle.

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Report on - The continued personal and professional development through training in Contortion and Burlesque Dance.
October/November 2009
San Francisco, USA.
By Miss Emmi Ogle.
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With this report I intend to detail some of the various courses and workshops I was able to attend on my sponsored trip.

My main area of study was contortion, under the Mongolian teacher/performer Serchmaa Byamba. I arranged to do two private and two group classes per week on Monday to Thursday and Serchmaa gave me contortion "homework" to do on Fridays. The classes took place at the Circus Center in San Francisco and I enrolled and paid for the classes and necessary insurance before I left England.

My background in contortion started nearly 10 years ago when I did an apprenticeship in a traditional tented circus. My first trainer was not a contortionist herself but coming from an old circus family was able to teach me enough to develop an act.

The lessons in America were therefore going to be my first contortion lessons in 10 years. Serchmaa very quickly realised that my years of solo practice and performance, whilst providing me a living had left my back very uneven. She gave me a warm up and training routine in order to help me correct this, and whilst I was sad not to be able to do some of the deeper contortion stretches because of the unevenness of my back, I cannot describe the relief of being instructed by someone who knew contortion and it's effects on the body so much better than I did.

It is sobering to think that had I continued to practice alone without this having been spotted, irreparable damage may have been caused.

I had been told in the past, and witnessed that the careers of contortionists could be very short lived and I personally did not know any other contortionists over the age of 25. Through meeting Serchmaa and watching her other students I realised that there is no age barrier, and despite my previous fears that contortion may be coming to an end I could still have another 10 years of developing and performing.

Whilst the above paragraphs detail my delight in these discoveries, the physical process of correction was at times a painful and exhausting one. It was made enjoyable by Serchmaa's understanding and softly spoken teaching method.



Whilst the contortion was physically and mentally demanding Emily Park, my contact and Mentor had organised various workshops and classes, loosely collected under the theme of burlesque.

The first of these was a two-day improvisation workshop taught by Al Wunder. I could not have anticipated how extremely useful this workshop would prove to be. Al got us to do lots of different exercises and to perform improvisations in front of each other, time was then spent analysing what worked and why. I have since found this has become an unconscious technique I use with both my own performances and other peoples. It was also useful that this workshop was right at the beginning of the trip because it enabled me to evaluate the many performances I was to see over the next month, using the analytical approach I had learned.

I had private classes with a professional burlesque teacher/performer called Delilah at her house in the Mission district in San Francisco. During the lessons I had with her we covered fan dancing, tease, use of props, and hair/make up. I loved fan dancing which I had not had the opportunity to try before. Delilah was helpful with specifics such as the best products for the price, how to do my hair in a forties style, and where to get to get cheap hot rollers in England! The fan dancing lessons were very detailed as to what to do with the fans, and how to move with them, she also gave me instruction in how to make big feather fans, as hand made ones are invariably better quality than the ones you can buy. It is my intention to develop a new act using contortion and fan dancing.

I would not have considered doing the Vintage Pin up workshop run by Bombshell Betty had it not been for Emily arranging it for me. The aim of the workshop was to instruct participants on styling, and how to pose, and to increase body confidence. Included in the price was a CD containing all the photographs taken of you during the day. The workshop was held in a beautiful old hotel called The Chateau Tivoli and the lovely antique furniture gave a great setting for the photographs. We learned about styling and hair/make up from the twenties to the fifties, also about posing and the heavy use of negative space in many pin up poses. We were taught how to elongate or shrink limbs in a photograph by how we positioned ourselves in relation to the camera.



This workshop was very useful in helping me to think in 2d rather than 3d and what the camera rather than the eye sees. I will be using photographs taken in the workshop in future publicity.

As well as the classes I have outlined in detail, I also took part in Pilates, Yoga, Conditioning and Burlesque Boot Camp classes.

I appeared in three performances, none of them paid but the experience was invaluable.

The first performance was for a Halloween street party in Mendocino as part of Flynn Creek Circus. Using some of the techniques I had learnt in the improvisational workshop I devised a performance that involved the interaction of poetry, movement, burlesque and contortion. Emily acted as director and for rehearsal we broke the act down into tiny components. I used a witch costume and unusually started the piece with my back to the audience. The act was well received and I have had positive emails from those who saw it.

The Second performance I was asked to do was by Dark Garden, run by Autumn Adamme, who makes incredible custom corsets for Dita Von Tease and other neo burlesque stars. She asked me to model for an event at a venue called Supper Club. Where clientele are given a 5-course supper interspersed with performances. The theme of the evening was Bondage hence the involvement of Dark Garden and the corsets. I was asked to model as part of the fashion show and to do contortion whilst wearing one of their corsets. It was my first experience of walking down a runway. For the act I devised a piece doing contortion in handcuffs and spent time practising with the cuffs which really restricted and altered the balance of many of my normal contortion positions. At the end of the evening I was approached by the manager of the venue who told me that as well as Supperclub San Francisco, Supperclub Amsterdam, they were opening a Supperclub London and they enjoyed my performance so much they would

like me to be involved. Since then I have had work performing at the London venue.



The last performance I did was at a club called Uptown, in Oakland for a weekly event called the Hubba Hubba review, a burlesque cabaret show. As I was pushed for time I decided to do the same act as I had performed a couple of nights before at the Supperclub. On the night my assistant did not show up at the crucial moment, and improvisation came into it's own! Fortunately what I did went down really well and Jim who booked me was very sorry I was going back to England and unable to do more performances at the venue.

In conclusion the trip far exceeded my expectation. I packed a huge amount into a relatively short space of time and discovered that I was equal to it. The amazing thing about learning away from home is that you can really focus on it. There are no distractions.

Without doubt the thing I enjoyed most and have missed since returning home is the input and involvement of my teachers and other performers. I have found the career of a freelance contortionist to be a surprisingly lonely one at times and having the opportunity to take part in so many courses has revitalised my enthusiasm.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of my teachers especially Serchmaa Byamba for her patience and expertise. Emily Park for organising me, telling me about LUTSF in the first place and for being a great director, friend and mentor. Hans Winold for providing me with a welcoming place to stay and last but not least LUTSF without whom the trip and it's lasting impact would not have been possible.

Thank you.

Pin up Photographs courtesy of Bombshellbetty.net