

20/09/09

Dear Chair,

Concerning Report for Trip to Senegal

Please find enclosed two paper copies and a floppy disc with the report of my trip to Senegal which was supported by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship fund. I attended two meetings which were scheduled back to back: The 'Meeting-Confrontation-Exchange', a meeting of choreographers from Africa and the Diaspora and 'Festival Kaay Fecc' a festival of performance and dance workshops. The first was from the 15th of May to the 30th of May, 2007 and the second from the 1st of June to the 7th of June, 2007.

I was invited to attend these meeting by the organiser, Germaine Acogny, who runs the dance centre 'Les Ecoles des Sable. I wanted to attend because I could see this would be a good opportunity to improve my practice on three levels. I would be able to update my knowledge of contemporary African dance which is important to my theoretical research in African dance as a theatrical practice and I would be able also to develop my practice as a performer and teacher. I also hoped to build up contacts in the field.

'Meeting-Confrontation-Exchange' was a unique event. The attendees consisted of choreographers from Africa and the Diaspora ranging from 21 to 61 years of age. Also invited were several musicians and dance photographers. A documentary of the event was also taking place. It was the first of its kind to be organised. The venue 'Les Ecoles des Sables' was idyllic. It is located in a village about two hours from Dakar the capital of Senegal. The intensity of practical work, debate and experiment has open up new vistas of opportunity and I foresee the event having a long-term impact on my professional life.

The goals of the project were achieved – I was able to learn a great deal about the practice of contemporary African dance in Africa and through discussion understand how it relates to similar choreographic practices in America, the Caribbean and Europe. My thinking was challenged at many levels. My understanding of contemporary African dance on a practical level has deepened. I took part in a number of master classes. We also had the opportunity to go to the village and watch and perform with the local people. The local people also visited the school and danced. Lastly I have had some precious professional contacts and have plans for a number of research projects with some of the attendees. The Kaay Fecc festival gave me the opportunity to see local and international dance companies. I write more about the gains of this project in my report. A highlight of the project for me was delivering a dance improvisation workshop and receiving some constructive feedback from the participants and taking part in the discussions about making work.

My suggestion to future awardees is that they should organise themselves in such a way that they are able to document as much information as possible – both for the record and as reference material. If possible design templates to record information before leaving England. This is something I wish I had done as it would have made it much easier to re-write my notes.

I plan to write an article for circulation amongst the people who attended the conference and to present it to Les Ecoles des Sable, granting them permission to circulate the article further. This will be done before the end of the year. I will also be asking The Association of Dance of the African Diaspora if a short version can be published on their website. I will inform the Fund when this information is put out. I will also send the trust photographs of the meeting when the photographer grants the right to do so.

My thanks to you and the rest of the steering committee at the Lisa Ullmann trust for running this organisation and providing me with this experience.

Yours Sincerely,
Ms 'Funmi Adewole.

REPORT

Meeting – Confrontation – Exchange and The Kaay Fecc Festival

Introduction:

Germaine Acogny first invited me to participate at the conference she was organising at her dance centre, 'Ecoles des Sables' in Senegal when we met at the 2004 edition of the Julidens festival in the Netherlands. Germaine Acogny was present at the festival teaching master classes to dance teachers. Her dance company was also touring a production about the Rwandan genocide, *Fagaala*, which she directed and choreographed in collaboration with the Japanese choreographer Kota Yamzaki. I had been invited by the organisers of the festival to speak on contemporary African dance.

The conference was being organised to coincide with the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 2007. It would be a meeting between choreographers from Africa and the African Diaspora. Therefore, I had over two years to think about it. I meet Germaine Acogny a number of times at dance meetings during this time and she would remind me of the invitation and also inform me about the Kaay Fecc dance festival which was being organised to follow it immediately.

In 2005 my touring career ended. I entered a period in which I began to seriously consider new directions for my professional life. I had management and research experience but I was aware that if I wanted to continue to work practically with dance in some shape or form I would need to develop an independent practice. I also wanted to facilitate the development of theatrical expressions of African dance in educational institutions. I felt this conference would be very useful in moving me in this direction.

The conference would be bringing together a wide range of choreographers to learn from each others working methods, the creation of dance productions which draw on forms of an African origin and discussion of socio-political issues surrounding the production of dance by Africans of the continent and of the Diaspora. I knew I could learn a lot in this environment and would probably receive very constructive feedback on the creative ideas which I have been exploring. I also hoped to make contacts with professionals with similar research interests. I developed a year long professional development project and gained support from the Arts Council for it. Attendance at this conference and the Kaay Fecc dance festival which followed were planned to be central to this professional development project. I was overjoyed when I awarded a travelling scholarship by the Lisa Ullmann Fund to Senegal for these meetings.

The choreographers' 'Meeting-Confrontation-Exchange' ran from the 15th of May to the 30th of May, 2007 and the 'Festival Kaay Fecc' a festival of performance and dance workshops from the 1st of June to the 7th of June, 2007.

The centre

'Meeting-Confrontation-Exchange' took place at Ecoles des Sable, Germaine Acogny's dance centre. The centre is located in the village of Toubab Dialow, about a two-hour drive from Dakar. The Ecoles des Sable (School of the Sands) is a unique meeting place. The school has two dance spaces which can also be used for performance. One has a conventional, western dance floor and the other is built in the round according to traditional design and has a floor covered with sand. There are three 'villages' as we call the clusters of living quarters. These are basic, neat and comfortable studio flats, also designed in reference to the traditional houses and huts in the region. Helmut, the administrative director of the centre explained to me that in building the centre they had taken great care to work with the natural geography. The grounds remained uneven, scattered with rock, with high points and low points so you could see the beach in the distance, there were spaces between the buildings so you get a sense of the surrounding village. The importance of working with the natural terrain came home to me on the first day of the meeting when Germaine led the early morning warm up on the rocks facing the horizon. We watched the sun rise in the sky as we danced.

The choreographers Meeting

Germaine Acogny and her husband Helmut, the administrative director of the dance centre, had devised a dense programme, though they stressed there was room to change things as the meeting progress. The additions we suggested were a trip to Dakar and a session for small group discussions. There were two programmes running daily, one for choreographers and one for musicians. The day began with a warm-up led by a choreographer which was then followed by two consecutive workshops or presentations two more choreographers. At night there were meetings in the conference room where a participant would show DVDs or videos of their work. These screenings were sometimes followed by discussions.

I found the discussions extremely interesting and rich. None of the participants from the youngest, 21 year old Junaid Jemal of Ethiopia to those in their sixties worked solely as choreographers. They combined choreography with running dance companies, dance schools, businesses, art centres and even communes. Some were also researchers, lecturers, authors, festival producers. The discussions took place in three languages French, English, Portuguese with translation. The time-keeper had to work very hard to stop us from running over time. I came away with full note books and four DVDs of footage. There was also a highly active film crew during the length of the conference. I am looking forward to seeing the film.

The workshops

The choreographers came from a wide range of backgrounds in terms of training and performance. Most worked across techniques and dance forms. A small sample: Nicole Lumarque of Hiati combined Yoga with Voudou dances of Benin., Fred Bendongue of Cameroon/France had investigated in depth the popular partner dances of Congo and had developed ways of using the Congolese rumba as a solo form and also with the dynamics of the theatre space, Lena Blou of Guadelupe, trained in ballet and modern dance taught us elements of the traditional dance of the Grawka people of Guadelupe and provided us with insights on how the form could be used with in a theatre context. I led a workshop which combined movements from African dance with drama and improvisation exercises from a European post-modern dance tradition. It was appreciated by the participants, the work created was very interesting and I received some very constructive feedback which will help me communicate my ideas more effectively.

I was struck by a number of presentations given by participants: Flavia Le Chevez danced as a character, a coquette, drawing on traditional Afro-Peruvian movement, Greg Moquoma's solo triggered a discussion about the 'multicultural body' – a south African choreographer he is investigating aspects of South Asian dance, Ariry Andriamorasiresy's improvised solo showed how one could completely master the performance space through creating clear pathways through it, using the gaze in a definite and precise manner and through making definite choices about when to stop and perform a section. I found workshops led by Rui Moreira and Andreyra Ouemba very instructive as they had developed innovative dance styles which seemed to come from their embodied knowledge.

The joy of having a musicians' programme running alongside the dance programme meant there was live music supporting each workshop or presentation. What is more, the music was exciting, creative, emerging from improvisations and experimentation taking place between the musicians who were in their own time teaching each other new skills, introducing to each other new instruments.

The discussions

The theme of the conference was Memory. What was the role of memory in the work of the choreographers from Africa and the Diaspora? The speakers at the conference were Professor Yacouba Konate, a professor of philosophy from Ivory Coast, Patrick Acogny, a scholar and choreographer, Jacqueline Scott Lemoine, a veteran actress and I. Professor Yacouba, a lecturer of philosophy spoke on the aesthetics of dance and also on the role of dance in locating oneself, and the way artists worked with memory. He also raised interesting questions about the relationship between memory and history.

Patrick, who is also the son of Germaine Acogny, imparted a very important piece of dance history. He spoke about the three dancers who were amongst the first to teach African dance in a studio context in Paris in the late 1960s to early 1970s: Ella Wollanston, Germaine Acogny and Ahmed Tidjani Cisse. Each of them emphasised a specific aspect of African dance in their classes which Patrick described as their 'vision of the body'. Ella Wollanston's vision was located in repetition. The dancers were led to repeat certain movements and gestures causing them to adopt a 'repetitive body'. Through this they achieved a deep understanding of the gesture and consequently a better understanding of themselves. Germaine Acogny's vision was that of 'a rhythmic body' which she arrived at codifying in a formal, rigorous manner seeking to retain the elegance of the traditional dance. Ahmed Tidjani Cisse's vision was that of 'the spontaneous body'. Ahmed Tijani Cisse did not insist on steps or gestures or technique but on leading the dancer to the point he or she could without self consciousness dance spontaneously to rhythm and achieve an inner freedom.

I spoke on the 'theatre as a meeting place and point of departure'. I spoke on the impact of introducing the western style theatre institution into Africa and the possibilities of this mode of performance which involved an audience which had no affiliation to the performers. The stage became a place where national identities could be celebrated over and above the ethnic identity as seen in the work of the National dance companies. Studio based dance training also became a place of meeting, exchange, re-invention and recovery. I also mentioned the various political and cultural movements which encouraged various trends and genealogies of choreographic practice. Here especially Africa and the Diaspora meet. I also spoke about the kinds of disagreements that took place between choreographers who used African forms in their work but came from different parts of the world. There were sometimes disagreements about the meaning assigned to dance forms and the way they were appropriated. However, it had to be

acknowledged that we came to the stage from various paths culturally, historically and professionally. In art African expressions meant different things to different people. What was right and what was wrong had to be contextualised.

Jacqueline Scott Lemoine, who is in her eighties, relocated to Senegal over forty years ago. She gave a talk about her career in the arts which spanned decades and continents and various political situations. She ended by narrating a poem which caused some of us to cry.

The discussions after the workshops and the evening screenings were often thought provoking. We discussed the inevitable question 'What is contemporary African dance?' Odak Onyango brought up the issue of 'relevance', pointing out that much contemporary African dance produced for western audiences did not work for an African audience. He runs a festival and a commune in Kenya for dancers and actors, both disabled and non-disabled. His organisation takes performances to the most disenfranchised members of society as well as international audiences. His intervention raised questions about touring work between Europe and Africa and the importance of audience development and artistic exchanges alongside the work.

Fred Bendongue's intervention on this topic was very insightful. He pointed out that the debate on contemporary African dance stifled creativity because it caused the artist to constantly question themselves, to constantly ask themselves if they had the right to create the way they were creating.

Lena Blou spoke on the concept of the African Diaspora and opened my eyes to the fact that it was as much a complex and contested notion as that of 'Africa'. In Guadeloupe, people did not only have African ancestry but French, Dutch and Asian. Salia Sanou who lives in France and runs a centre in Burkina Faso also spoke on the difficulties having control over your image as a dancer when you work with in a variety of dance contexts. He is seen to be part of the French contemporary dance scene, where he is thought of as being post-contemporary, and also of the African dance scene where he is thought to be a choreographer of contemporary African dance.

We also had discussion in small groups. We met to discuss the following topics: Funding, Education and Choreography and African identity.

Outings and visits

The conference organisers set up two trips into the country to see the sights, we visited the Goree Island which was a slave port and danced salsa played by a band of local musicians. We were also taken to visit the chief of the village, whose daughter was our highly respected cook. We were invited to dance in the village circle. The villagers are fantastic dancers so it was only the brave who took up the invitation. The old women in the village, the Ndeup society, were invited to the school to dance. Germaine also led the participants for a dance session in 'the bush'. We left at dawn, trekked two or so miles into the savannah. Germaine introduced us to the vegetation, the trees, the stones, the soil, speaking about how nature had inspired traditional dances and, indeed, her own work. This formed the basis of an improvisation session and short compositions. After breakfast at a compound not far from the place we danced we returned to base.

The Dance Festival

The Kaay Fecc dance festival began the day the conference ended. Some of the participants were performing in the festival and Ecoles des Sables was one of its venues. Kaay Fecc festival is billed as a dance festival for all kinds of dance. The programme was varied: from Western forms of contemporary dance to Contemporary African dance, traditional African dance companies, Hip-hop and break dance companies, and companies which combined elements of everything. There were international companies from Germany, Madagascar and France. It was a great opportunity to see Julie Dossavi, whose elegant movements had a strong traditional based inflected with European club dance. The festival also had a seminar which featured a panel of professionals discussing issues to do with organisation, funding, travel and choreography.

I was most interested in the traditional African dance companies as it is not possible to see such a variety of this kind of work in England. Traditional dance by these Ballet companies (as they are known in Francophone West Africa) is not static. Traditional dance companies do not present unchanging repertoire pieces. 'Traditional' refers rather to their preference for improvising and generating movement in relations to the frameworks and technique of traditional dance forms. In their performance they do not seek to rupture or deconstruct the form. The amount of innovation, improvisation the performers and choreographers could achieve within the confines of the specific dance form (mostly Sabar) was astounding. The companies had to be very good technically and very innovative in developing new motifs and steps and floor patterns or an audience member might stand up and out dance them.

Reflections

The meetings in Senegal were very productive. In terms of my dance research, the meeting both confirmed some of my assumptions and also caused me to question others. I met my aims to update my knowledge of how Contemporary African dance is developing. I came to terms with the fact that it was fine that in professional contexts contemporary African dance was so fluid. I now have a feeling for the artistic concerns of practitioners and its socio-political and philosophical context.

The meeting confirmed my belief that theory should exist to support practice and not the other way around. For Contemporary African dance which is a fluid choreographic-led practice which can have overlaps with potentially with every kind of dance technique in the world, this is most important. How could this fluidity be understood and how does one work with and within such fluidity? What is the best way to theorise fluidity? The need for theory was something that arose several times in discussion.

I also gained a clearer understanding of my strengths and weaknesses as a practitioner having tried such a range of dance techniques and compositional processes. It helped clarify what processes should be central to my work and what new process I would like to investigate. I am now ready to return with fresh eyes to some unfinished pieces which I began a while ago.

In terms of my professional development I am finding a new way of work. I am helped by the fact I made connections with a wide range of practitioners from different parts of Africa and the world. I have already embarked on two projects with dancers I meet in Senegal. I feel that, for a long while, I will be reaping the benefits of this opportunity.

Participants

The choreographers who attended the meeting are Adedayo Liadi (Nigeria), Andrey Oemba (Congo/Senegal), Airy Andriamoratsiresy (Madagascar), Clement Kakpo (Benin), Gilbert Douglas (Zimbabwe), Gregory Maqoma (South Africa) Hyachinthe Tobio (Chad) Jean Michel Fonkam (Cameroon) Junaid Jemal (Ethiopia), Pape Ibrahim M'Diaye (Senegal), Longa Fo Eyeoto (Congo), Naidia Beugre (Ivory Coast), Odak Onyango (Kenya), Salia Sanou (Burkina Faso), Errol Grimes (Barbados/USA), Flavia Le Chevez (Peru/England), Flora Thefaine (Togo/France), Fred Benongue (Cameroun/France), Funmi Adewole (Nigeria/England),

James Carles (Cameroun/France) Jawole Zollar (USA), Lean Bolu Guadeloupe), Lola Adodo (Nigeria/England), Nicole Lumarque (Haiti), Nora Chipaumire (Zimbabwe/USA), Patrick Acogny (Senegal/France), Rui Moreira (Bresil), Tatiana M. Damasceno (Bresil).

Besides the five musicians who worked with Germaine Acogny others who attended the meeting were Allan Blou (Guadeloupe) Felix Flauzin (Gaudeloupe), Francisco Tiago Simao, Gil Amancio, Paulo Simao, all from Brazil and Raoul Jr Denis from Haiti.