

26<sup>th</sup> October 2010

Dear LUTSF

**RE: Research and Development Project with Dance for All**

**Dates:** 27<sup>th</sup> July – 24<sup>th</sup> August (independent travel until 4<sup>th</sup> September)  
**Location:** Cape Town, South Africa  
**Timescale:** 1 month

Please find enclosed two paper copies of my evaluation report along with a disc containing the report and this letter. I have also enclosed a disc of photographs taken during the project. In addition, I have enclosed a reference written by Philip Boyd, the Artistic Director of Dance for All.

My colleague, Lucy Nicholson, and I are also writing a report for the next edition of 'Animated'. This will certainly contribute to our process of evaluating the project but will be our main way of disseminating our work within the community dance world.

As you will read in the report, the project was an incredible experience – both professionally and personally – and I am truly grateful for receiving support from the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund.

The main aims of our project were certainly achieved (as highlighted in the report) and I am already experiencing the impact of my experience with Dance for All on my work in the UK. Despite significant cultural differences and barriers, I have learnt a great deal from my time in Africa and have gained skills which I can undoubtedly use as I progress further in my career as a community dance artist.

The main highlights of my work in South Africa were:

- Travelling into the townships to teach the sessions
- Working with such dedicated, respectful, conscientious and professional young people who had come from such disadvantaged and deprived backgrounds
- Working with such an inspiring organization which has remained committed to transforming the lives of so many young people over 20 years
- Watching the final sharing of work as seeing how much the young people had progressed in terms of technique, choreography and performance skills

With regard to future awardees, I would suggest doing as much research as possible before the trip. Find out about the group, the space and venue, the culture, the schedule etc. This information can really inform the planning before departure and will ensure the project is successful and effective.

Thank you again to the LUTSF for your support with this significant and transformational element of my professional development.

Yours Sincerely

Helen Linsell

# DANCE FOR

# ALL

## A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH PROJECT

An Evaluative Report - Helen Linsell



## Outline of Project

Dance for All (DFA) is a non-profit organisation based in Cape Town, South Africa which **"provides children in historically disadvantaged communities with the opportunity for enjoyment, promotion of self esteem and empowerment through the medium of dance, as well as training professional dancers"**... [www.danceforall.co.za](http://www.danceforall.co.za)

Helen Linsell, Community Dance Artist based in West Yorkshire, in collaboration with North West based artist Lucy Nicholson, were invited to deliver a month-long dance project with DFA between 28th July and 25th August 2010.

The project was intended to be both a professional development activity and research exchange exercise.

The project was funded by Arts Council England, Yorkshire and the travelling costs were covered by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. In-kind support was provided by DFA and Dance United in the form of local travel expenses in Cape Town and rehearsal space in the UK.

The project involved creating two new pieces of contemporary choreography with two groups of young people based in the townships of Cape Town; seniors (16-22yrs) in Khayelitsha and juniors (11-16yrs) in Nyanga. Both were established groups.

The project would also involve observing the current practice of the DFA artists and sharing our skills in teaching and choreography.



## Aims

As stated in the original funding proposal, it was hoped that the project with DFA would enable me to:

- develop my skills as a teacher, facilitator and choreographer working with disadvantaged young people on the margins of society in the UK
- take 'time out' of my regular work in order to gain perspective and reflect on my overall artistic, choreographic and delivery skills
- gain a stronger understanding of the benefits of my own methods of contemporary dance training within different cultures and social contexts
- stretch my artistic skills through the process of making new pieces of choreography for young people from a very different culture
- draw comparisons with how social and economic factors effect the behaviour of young people in South Africa and the UK
- observe my international peers in a similar spectrum of work - shadowing the Artistic Director Philip Boyd and his teaching staff in their methodology
- offer professional development to the current DFA staff- in teaching practice and choreography - ensuring that there would be a legacy after the project
- initiate an ongoing dialogue with DFA to examine the potential for other projects in the future
- develop new and potentially very exciting ideas for my future community dance work which may have not yet been researched or explored in the UK



**Attendance**

Khayelitsha - Senior group - 16-22yrs - 8 members



## Structure

<b>Week 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Planning sessions and developing choreography</li><li>• Observing rehearsals leading up to 20<sup>th</sup> celebration gala "Two Decades, One Inspiration"</li><li>• Watching gala event - involving some of the young people with whom we would be working</li><li>• 2 weekly sessions in Khayalitsha</li></ul>
<b>Week 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Planning sessions and developing choreography</li><li>• 2 weekly sessions in Khayelitsha</li><li>• Full-day weekend session with Nyanga and Kyayelitsha at DFA studios</li></ul>
<b>Week 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Planning sessions and delivering choreography</li><li>• 2 weekly sessions in Khayelitsha</li><li>• 2 weekly sessions in Nyanga</li><li>• Full day weekend session with Nyanga and Khayelitsha at DFA studios</li></ul>
<b>Week 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Planning sessions and developing choreography</li><li>• 2 weekly sessions in Nyanga</li><li>• 3 full week days with Nyanga and Khayelitsha</li><li>• Observing class at Jazzart and Cape Town City Ballet</li><li>• Rehearsals for public sharing</li><li>• Public sharing and presentation</li></ul>

The structure of the project outlined in the original proposal altered slightly as a result of:

- lack of professional classes in which we could participate
- national public service strikes

## Sharing

A public audience and 'friends' of DFA were invited to attend a presentation at the end of the project to hear about our training, careers and current work in the UK and watch the two groups perform their new pieces of work. This was followed by a question and answer session in which the audience were able to ask questions to both the artists and the young people.

## Approach

Before arriving in South Africa, Lucy and I worked on creating movement material, developing choreographic ideas and selecting and editing music.

We wanted to create two contrasting pieces of contemporary choreography and whilst we hoped to incorporate elements of their own creativity, we intended to provide them with a new and different dance experience to what they are familiar with.

With the junior group, we concentrated on creating a lively and energetic piece which would demonstrate the contrast between subtle and restricted movement and large and powerful movement. We also needed to use choreographic methods which would allow all 20 dancers to be used, so therefore looking at sections of a large numbers of dancers moving on stage.

With the senior group, we wanted to challenge their technique, create a more emotive piece and use more sophisticated choreographic structures. We explored entrances and exits, solos and duets, complex spatial formations and accumulation.

With each group, we designed a spatial and technical warm-up exercise which would remain consistent throughout the project. We allowed for development and progression within these exercises. We also added other exercises and activities in order to enrich their experience of contemporary dance and keep them engaged and excited by the process.

The first 3-4 sessions involved teaching and refining 2-3 phrases of movement and a contact duet. When the young people felt fairly confident with all this taught movement, we incorporated a creative task.

We then started structuring the pieces and allocating 'roles' within the pieces. We ensured that we gave all dancers equal 'moments' in the piece and allowed every individual to shine within the choreography.

As the project progressed, so did the choreography. Although we had an overall structure for each piece before arriving, our ideas developed and changed as we worked with the group and as we became more familiar with what they could achieve within the time frame.

We completed the pieces in the final week and then allowed 2-3 sessions to polish and refine the work. We worked towards achieving a high standard of work at the the public sharing - both in terms of artistic quality and professional standards of performance.

## **Practical Challenges**

### Cultural Differences and Traditions

The main challenge with the young people was their level of discipline, predominantly in Khayelitsha. After speaking to their regular teacher, it appeared that their initial lack of response and minimal communication with us was a result of the way they are brought up and taught in the home and at school. He explained that, from a very young age children are taught to

respect their elders and do as they are told without questioning. This ultimately transfers to the dance context.

We also observed DFA dance staff using very 'traditional' and 'old school' approaches to teaching which included:

- describing movement but not fully demonstrating or joining in
- wearing casual and everyday clothes in which to teach rather than appropriate dance-wear
- delivering sessions with mainly instructions and directions rather than questions or discussion
- teaching choreography with little creative input or reflection from the young people

The way Lucy and I deliver our work in the UK involves establishing interactive relationships with our students and encouraging them to be openly communicative. We guide young people in expressing their creative ideas, asking questions to improve their skills and making their own decisions and conclusions about artistic processes and products. We establish clear boundaries, authority and discipline but we also ask our pupils questions and set up a continual dialogue with them; "do you have any questions about that movement?", "do you want me to repeat anything?", "how could we develop this section of the choreography?"

However, the group in Khayelitsha seemed unfamiliar and almost shocked by our approach and we initially found it difficult to interpret how they felt about the movement, choreography and us as teachers. This immediately led to us reflecting on our practice in the UK and comparing it with the way young people are taught in South Africa.

The fact that we were pushed to reflect on our practice at such an early stage in the process was a very positive experience. We actually made very few alterations to our usual methods of communication but, instead, were actually able to recognise and confirm the benefits and values of the way we teach.

As the project developed, the barriers reduced significantly and the young people gained much more confidence in asking questions and interacting with us. As a result of our approach, they maintained a high level of respect and discipline but were also able to develop their communication skills and move towards becoming more creative and independent dancers. They gradually took more ownership over the process and were able to clearly feedback to us about their experiences at the end of the project.

### Language and Interpretation

All the young people spoke and understood English but their first language was Xhosa. Therefore, there were some challenges to overcome in the initial stages:

#### *Names*

It was very difficult to learn their Xhosa names and pronounce them correctly. However, we made the effort to ask their regular teachers, write the names

down phonetically and practice them in the evenings! We also made the effort to find out what their names meant in English.

### *Use of Humour*

Due to our differing cultures, we noticed that our usual strategies of humour and 'banter' did not necessarily have the same effect as in the UK. However, over the month, the young people became used to our senses of humour and we found new approaches to using humour in our sessions. We found that watching how other teachers use humour was very helpful. What kind of things made the young people smile and laugh? We discovered that mimicking really bad practice and using exaggeration whilst saying "it's not like this", often created laughter and a light hearted atmosphere.

### *Interaction among the Young People*

The young people would communicate with each other in their own language and this would immediately create a barrier between us. This was not intentional but it was obviously more natural for them to speak to each other in Xhosa. However, we reached a point where, through body language, tone of voice and facial expressions, we were able to interpret what they were saying without understanding the actual words. There were even moments when they would ask us a question in Xhosa and we would answer in English!

### *Misunderstanding and Manners*

There would be occasions when the young people would indicate that they had understood our instructions and feedback and then it would become clear that they had not understood and had perhaps just been too polite or lacking the confidence to admit they did not understand. As we got to know the young people, we simply learnt to be as direct and clear as possible in our instructions and feedback. In the UK, we are often very thorough in our explanations and sensitive in how we deliver feedback. We actually found that this held us back when working with these particular young people and that they were, in fact, more used to being told "this is right and that is wrong".

### Space

We taught in three venues:

- 1) Yomelela Primary School, Khayelitsha
- 2) Hglenglisa Primary School, Nyanga
- 3) DFA Studios, Athlone

The school classroom spaces were obviously much less suitable for dance activity than what we would be used to in the UK and we were faced with:

- concrete floors
- tables and chairs set out for classroom activities which had to be tidied away before class and then re-set afterwards
- dirt and dust which had to be swept up by the young people before the sessions

Nevertheless, the young people made no complaints and were completely

familiar and comfortable with these spaces. Therefore, we quickly accepted and adapted to the settings in which we were working and understood that there were no other alternatives for dance studio spaces in the townships.

In the UK, risk assessments and health and safety matters would immediately arise from working in such spaces. However, in such an underprivileged area of a developing country, we acknowledged that this is how and where dance is currently taught in certain circumstances.

Within these conditions, we simply tried to ensure that we were extremely conscious of delivering the dance activity as safely as possible in terms of the technique.

### Political Unrest

During our time with DFA, national strikes were arising across the country in which public sector staff were demonstrating for an increase in pay. This affected us directly because it meant that the schools in which we would usually rehearse were closed during the strikes and, consequently, some of our sessions were cancelled.

Initially this happened on occasional days but, in our final week, it became continual. One school stated that "the school will be closed until the government give us what we want".

Fortunately, DFA were able to send minibuses into the townships to pick up the young people and bring them to the DFA studios in Athlone. This also meant that we were actually able to work with the groups for longer periods of time which was of great benefit to us leading up to the public sharing.

### **Artistic and Creative Challenges**

During the planning and delivery of the project, we experienced the following challenges:

- Choreographing pieces for young people from an entirely different culture to our own - prior to meeting them. Despite receiving information from the DFA Outreach Co-ordinator before arriving, we were still unsure what to expect and how to 'pitch' the level and content of our work.
- Receiving misleading information about the length of the dance sessions. We had to re-think how realistic our aims and objectives were within a shortened time-frame.
- The number of dancers in the senior group grew from 4 to 8 across the first few sessions and although this was a positive sign in that the dancers were encouraging their friends to come along, we had to keep re-choreographing the piece during the initial stage of the project.
- Despite being told the young people had some training in contemporary dance, they had limited experience of release-based techniques and contact work. We therefore had to return to and spend a considerable amount of time on certain basic principles such as parallel position and giving weight to another person.
- The young people lacked experience and understanding in working creatively and progressively towards a product. This meant that they

were very confused by how we were structuring the pieces and relatively unfamiliar with some of our choreographic devices. However, they remained engaged for 100% for the time, stayed focused and seemed to enjoy the process we were taking them through.

- The process of giving notes after a run-through seemed a very new method of feedback for the young people. They were used to being directed during a run through but not afterwards. We therefore found they responded more effectively to practically working through the notes rather than just talking them through.

## **Outcomes**

### Artists

- Development of problem-solving skills and the ability to remain a flexible artist through having to overcome a multitude of obstacles within a set of challenging conditions and restrictions.
- Improving communication skills by working with young people from a different culture, with different traditions and a different language.



- Raising awareness of non-verbal signs in others by drawing conclusions about the participants' learning through their tone of voice, facial expressions and body language.
- Exploring new teaching strategies, particularly in terms of giving instructions and feedback
- Consolidating the extent and value of our teaching experience in the UK and increasing our confidence in our teaching methods and approaches
- Confirming our ability to break down social and cultural barriers through our range of teaching styles and strategies and our respect for each individual young person



- Re-thinking the importance of clear teacher-student boundaries. Whilst maintaining an open, honest, flexible and interactive approach and being fun, caring and fair, we must still demand respect from our students irrespective of their background. It is important for them to recognise, respect and respond appropriately to authority.
- Recognising why we should encourage an interactive process and ongoing dialogue with young people in our delivery; to improve their confidence, to develop their communication and problem solving skills, to help them become more reflective and analytical dancers and human beings and to help them become more creative dancers and thinkers.
- Increasing our confidence as choreographers after successfully making two new pieces of work in a totally new context.
- Reflecting on the importance of good demonstration and active participation in the delivery of a session.
- Realising that social and economic deprivation in South Africa does not generally result in challenging behaviour in the same way it does in the UK.
- Gaining a stronger understanding that it is the critical role of discipline in the home and in a child's early development which seems to ensure that discipline is transferred to all other contexts and effective learning can take place. This is what is lacking in the UK and a fundamental reason why we are confronted with such difficult behaviour in this area of work
- Confirming the positive impact of creating work which allows every dancer to show their individual potential and how contemporary dance and choreography can enable this to happen:

***"You are different to our other teachers because you do not have favourites" (Sim – Khayeltisha)***

***"You really let everyone shine and show their individual talents" (Nocawe – Khayelitsha)***

- Consolidating that dance can provide the opportunity for young people to achieve, gain a multitude of transferable skills and consider positive futures for themselves, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds

- Confirming that dance has the phenomenal and universal potential to change and enhance lives – anywhere in the world
- Emphasising the importance of continuing our work with ‘hard to reach’ young people in the UK and having the confidence to encourage and push them to achieve high standards in dance and in their lives
- Re-affirming the fundamental need for discipline, professionalism and quality when working with ALL young people, particularly those who are on the margins of society and have challenging behaviour.
- Gaining a greater awareness of how important it is to sustain projects over a number of years and potentially decades. DFA have trained young people to become international performers working for companies including Cape Town City Ballet and The Lion King. However, they have worked with these young people since they were very young. How can we strive to achieve the same thing in the UK?
- An increased interest in maintaining an ongoing dialogue with DFA with the following ideas:
  - Future projects in the townships of Cape Town – re-engaging with the young people in Khayelitsha and Nyanga
  - Future projects with DFA in other areas of South Africa exploring new challenges in the more rural areas of Barrydale and Montague
  - Working with the Artistic Director, Philip Boyd, to design teacher training opportunities with DFA staff
  - Exchange opportunities with young people from South Africa and the UK



## **Conclusion**

On reflection of the whole project with DFA, we clearly achieved our aims and objectives and have been re-motivated and excited by continuing and developing our work as practitioners in the UK, particularly in the area of social inclusion. Working with an organisation which has dedicated its last 20 years to providing dance training to the most disadvantaged children and young people in South Africa was truly a privilege and inspiration.

It was also an incredible and refreshing experience to work with such dedicated and hard-working young people who fully appreciate the opportunities they are given and show such a high level of commitment, enthusiasm and respect. It is these qualities which I am determined to keep pushing for with ALL the young people I work with in the UK, irrespective of age, ability or background.

I have also returned having been able to fully reflect and evaluate my work as a community dance artist for the past 10 years and the experiences and skills I have gained. The importance of self-reflection is so crucial to developing ourselves as teachers and artists and is fundamental to keeping our passion alive and recognising what we need in order to be able to provide the best possible dance experiences for the young people we work with.

Despite all the differences between my work in the UK and the work of DFA in South Africa, ultimately the same message is there: dance can change lives, dance can create communities, dance can help us see the world in a positive light and dance can take us to another world – and this is universal.....

***"when I dance it feels like I am somewhere else  
– like in water. It's like I'm in heaven. And only  
when you dance, you will know how I feel"  
(Voyukazi – Khayelitsha)***

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Photos by Robin Elam-Rye, Helen Linsell and Lucy Nicholson