

July 2008-06

Dear LUTSF,

Here is my report following a 5 week trip to the US, supported by a Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship. During this time I attended a 3 week Master Residency at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, Florida, visited the dance department of the programme of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA and spent a week exploring the contemporary dance scene in San Francisco.

I was seeking to step away from the day-to-day management responsibilities with Scottish Dance Theatre and look at the bigger picture; to refresh my vision as an artistic director and as a dance maker and answer personal questions, looking forward, about my life in art. I chose to experience a range of different approaches in differing locations. I find travelling in itself jolts my thinking in very useful ways.

At the Master Artist Residency in Florida I met a New York and east coast formalist, post-modernist and post-minimalist approach in dance and music and – in the visual arts – a strong interest in nature and environment and in observing our historical and socio-political recording and telling of the natural world.

At UCLA dance was viewed in cultural and political contexts with the anthropology of dance and dance activism as core concerns; dance as a reflection of society and an agent for change.

In San Francisco the influences of contact improvisation and an urge to kinetic, organic movement were striking in the creative processes I observed, along with the maturity and versatility of the dancers, and the highly developed role of dancer as artistic collaborator.

The trip and time apart has allowed the space to refresh my thinking and given me the urge and confidence to introduce some changes into our busy schedule that will support my own and the dancers creativity.

I am planning for more impromptu creative opportunities for the company and saying yes to projects that throw up the possibility of play in new and unusual situations and through which we could meet a new public, or our audience in a different place. The aim of programming this kind of performance play/event is to stimulate and refresh our creativity as a company. It is a direct outcome of the impact I experienced from two moments in the ACA residency where I chose an impromptu performance opportunity for myself.

In the next month I have two workshops scheduled, in which to share ideas and approaches coming out of new experiences. Participants will be independent dance artists in Scotland, the company and independent artists drawn more internationally. I will be processing my learning in the act of sharing new games aimed at further empowering dancers as creative collaborators. Absorbing different perspectives and facets of dance helped me to reflect on what drives my own work and on the potential, as well as the reality of dance in contemporary life.

In the next month I have two workshops scheduled, in which to share ideas and approaches coming out of new experiences and I look forward to the process and outcome. Collaboration in the studio is where integration of experience happens in relation to creative output – and as I am about to begin new work, I will discover more shortly, in terms of influence and impact.

As well becoming more informed through seeing a range of work and observing rehearsals I have renewed professional contacts and friendships and discovered new friends and colleagues – an enriching and enduring impact of my travels. These travels in dance will, I know, resonate over time and on many levels. Many pebbles, many ripples. I hope to adapt my report for an article for Dance UK. The Brian McMaster report on ensuring excellence in the arts points out the need for lifelong learning for artists, raising the question of how we support this. For me this underlines the importance of the Lisa Ullmann Travel Scholarships – one of very few such funds to which dance artists can turn for help, in pursuit of learning, throughout their careers.

Many thanks indeed for supporting this great opportunity

Janet Smith
Artist Director, Scottish Dance Theatre

Report – Refuelling in mid-air

Master- Residency, Atlantic Center for the Arts

The three week Master Residency brought 7 choreographers, 8 composers and 8 visual artists to the same location, to share and develop their work, receive feedback, collaborate and absorb new approaches, working with a facilitator/master artist. Visual artist Mark Dion, composer David Lang and choreographer Susan Marshall were the master artists. The Atlantic Center for the Arts is one of many charitable artistic retreats in the US and part of a growing network internationally. It offers a chance to engage with artists from different cultures and disciplines that, to my knowledge, is not available in the UK.

At the start of the residency each of the artists gave a 5-minute presentation to the whole group about their work and we were encouraged to collaborate across the disciplines, although our formally scheduled time would be within our own discipline. I found myself most challenged by some of the visual artists' conceptual, scientific and curatorial approaches and most curious to find out more. I used my own presentation as an opportunity to do a five -minute improvised talk/dance performance, since I wanted to challenge myself and to move. I was also unwilling to show my work on video; unless made for the camera, or specially filmed, it feels like a dead thing.

Each of the master artists also delivered an illustrated lecture on their work and here again, I began by struggling to understand but ended by being most intrigued by visual artist, Mark Dion's work. His project at the Venice Festival – a typical example – involved dredging, cleaning, categorising and displaying the found objects (ranging from Roman coins to tumble driers), with process and public access to it being as significant as the exhibition itself - questioning how we measure, see and know our heritage and environment.

With Susan Marshall we engaged in daily – two-hour sessions that examined aspects of dance making, looking at content and structure and how we read meaning in viewing dance. Susan and some of her company who joined the group, shared her task and game approach to creating non-linear dance. As a small group we were also able to tackle specific individual issues and interests, like exploring the juxtaposition of text and movement and asking questions about moments of transformation.

It was fascinating that the choreographers had a very wide range of age and experience as well as stylistic approach. At first this made it difficult to collaborate, but gradually we negotiated ways of sharing studio space and working with and for each other collaboratively. In the end this led to informal discussions and the offering of feedback that became at least as valuable as directed

learning time. Another aspect of this was the informal ongoing and more in-depth presentations and feedback sessions that went on throughout the three weeks, in each artform.

I personally found the sharing of my work on video and feedback with my peers a nerve -wracking prospect and we all agreed this is something we are unused to in our normal experience. We are accustomed to critical feedback from journalists, audiences and perhaps others, but very rarely from our peers. We wanted to address this, so Stephen Shropshire, soon to take over as Artistic Director of the newly named Nord Nederlands Dans, and I want to initiate a sharing and feedback alliance between ourselves and other interested Artistic directors in a northern European circuit.

In a final open doors sharing of work I was happy to be involved in a site specific collaboration with a composer from Bella Russe and a Canadian choreographer, which involved the development through improvisation and delivery of text – a new experience for me.

As an aside to this experience I was able to reflect on the roles of facilitator and artistic leader through my experience of facilitation as a group member, - a novel role reversal from my normal position. This helped me appreciate in a new light the experience of our dancers within a group and the support they need in order to reach their potential and give of their best. A rare and precious opportunity for new insight.

UCLA

I spent a week at UCLA, attending lectures, classes, student and visiting performances and meeting with faculty members in order to get under the skin of a programme that places dance in the context of 'World Cultures.' Faculty member Victoria Marks, a former colleague on the staff at the LCDS in London, facilitated my visit, introducing me around the department.

It was hard to get a holistic view of the multi-faceted programme and one becomes aware of the different schisms of thinking as can so often happen in institutional life when individuals of strong conviction work in close proximity. (More food for thought)

The highlight was watching a rehearsal of a work devised and performed by Iraq war veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, in which they share their very raw experiences through direct and simple enactments and monologues. Initiated and directed by Victoria Marks, who also performs in the piece, the work is hard hitting and at the same time healing as it ultimately involves the watcher as a participant in reading together with the ex-soldiers.

The performance invited and involved me in a ritual act of atonement that, with unexpected surprise – reminding me of the ritual power of dance and theatre, helped address my own feelings of conscience and collective guilt about the war in Iraq. As the only audience member in this rehearsal I was privileged with a very intimate experience of the performers and the work, of shared trauma and loss and of human frailty and endurance.

I was privileged to listen to two guest lectures as part of a search to fill a new faculty appointment. Each offered different perspectives on dance in socio-political contexts. Listening to the questions, debate and feedback there was an interesting tension between the scientific approach of the observing, examining dance anthropologist, and the artist/activist who observes, intervenes, questions and acts for change. This highlighted the interesting tensions within the programme's approach and the issues of social science-meets-political art.

San Francisco dance community

The San Francisco dance community is small enough to have an intimate friendly feel and big enough for variety and diversity. I watched and participated in classes, observed rehearsals and had conversations with artistic directors and choreographers, all facilitated by Janice Garrett, former dancer with Dan Waggoner, who has both taught and choreographed for SDT. Janice is one of several dance makers of my generation working in the San Francisco bay area. She is well known and respected amongst colleagues and this gained me easy access to meet and exchange with Joe Goode and Margaret Jenkins and watch their rehearsals I also met up with David Levy of LevyDance and spent an afternoon with the company in which David invited my feedback and participation.

In physically and improvisationally sourced work, the push was to make only urgent movement, that had to happen. In this they seemed to be conscious to avoid anything decorative, unnecessary or redundant. I was very impressed by the extent to which the mature dancers working for Margaret Jenkins – a choreographer perhaps in her late sixties, who works entirely through task setting – take ownership of the task and play very freely, following their own hunches rather than seeking clarity. At the same time they can challenge and question with confidence. This does not come naturally to UK trained dancers whom I observe tend to obedience and show less confidence to take initiative. (I now want to emphasize the development of these skills within our work and challenge dancers training in this area.)

Advice to future Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship applicants

I realised that US, Canadian and some European artists on the Florida residency are very well informed about this network of artists' retreats. These could be more widely used by UK dance artists and it's a great way to expose oneself to international and across the forms artistic engagement. A useful publication is ***Artists And Writers Colonies; Retreats, Residencies and Respite for the Creative Mind*** by Gail Hellund Bowler, available from Amazon Books

When booking the flights with the specialist travel agent be really careful not to accept connecting flights without ample time for connection and make sure you are being told of all the other possible alternatives before you go with the booking In an otherwise very helpful service I ended up having to change and pay for an extra flight once I had started my journey because of this. Do your own research.

Flying the cheapest way may be also long and exhausting. You might prefer to share the cost to fly direct.

In Conclusion

My purpose and questions were complex and on many levels and I came to accept there would be no moments of epiphany, but more of a percolating of experience into different thinking as I process the many moments of this trip. My experience has been very full on, with no down time between stepping out and stepping back into the company – hence that feeling of refuelling in mid-air. Nonetheless, I found the trip both challenging and stimulating in unexpected ways – and in moments truly inspiring. Seeing a range of work and having exchange with different artists both informed me and fed my inner dialogue about the direction of my work as a dance maker and as an artistic director and programmer. It has certainly focussed my thinking around the work I want to make and the vision for SDT and how to achieve it. I am more informed, cleared and more energised and certain in my motivation and purpose.

I am extremely grateful to the Scholarship Fund and that it exists and only wish more such opportunities of enlightened funding were available in the support of invaluable lifelong learning opportunities for artists.

Janet Smith
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