

## Lisa Ullman Travel Scholarship Fund 2013/2014

Report from Jennifer Irons

**Project:** Working with Ombetja Yehinga Organization (OYO)

**Dates:** January 7 – February 12, 2014

**Location:** Windhoek and Rundu, Namibia

Dear Lisa Ullman Travel Scholarship Fund,

Please find enclosed my report for my trip to Namibia to work with Ombetja Yehinga Organization (OYO) in early 2014.

Wow, what an adventure! I have been working to make this project happen for 3 years, and it was only when I was awarded the scholarship that it was finally possible. The Lisa Ullman Travel Scholarship Fund has enabled me to realize a dream of working with and learning from an amazing arts-for-social-development organization. The project has provided the resources and time to gain new perspectives and reflect on my practice. It was incredibly challenging, but I have been inspired, learned a great deal, and have been able to develop my own choreographic practice that will surely feed my future endeavors at home and abroad.

The project with OYO was to choreograph an issue-based performance piece for the professional dance company to tour nationwide and to then travel to the rural area to repeat this model with local young people. Though I had been in discussions with OYO for years, I could never have truly understood what I was in for until I got there and was on the ground. This is the crux of working internationally and particularly in Africa; no matter what you expect, it's always going to be different. Circumstances and plans change all the time, and flexibility is key. As one of my colleagues there said, "We've learned to *always* make a Plan B... and a Plan C... and a Plan D... and then, accept that possibly none of them work!"

It has been an incredible journey; filled with more dancing, learning, travel and unexpected surprises than can fit in this report. I have however, kept a blog throughout that includes more detail about the day-to-day work, and includes photo, film and audio. The blog can be found at [Ironincinafrica.blogspot.com](http://Ironincinafrica.blogspot.com).

Additional documentation with this report includes:

1. Photographs of the work OYO Dance Company in Windhoek and OYO Youth Project in Rundu
2. Film of the first sharing of *When the Tide Turns*
3. Article featuring our project in *Confidante* Newspaper from Namibia

Thank you again for this wonderful opportunity. It has injected a whole new energy and process into my work and I will be inspired by this experience and in turn I hope to inspire others for a long, long time.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Irons



Young people in Rundu, Northern Namibia – OYO 2014

## Working with Ombetja Yehinga Organization

By Jennifer Irons

April 2014

### **Background**

I have had a long-standing love of working and traveling in Africa and have sought experiences that bring dance and different cultures together through a variety of contexts. Initially thinking I was bringing a certain expertise to 'help' people, I soon realized that the benefit to myself far outweighs anything I bring to people I work with there.

Though myriad difficulties exist in trying to set up overseas projects where communication is sparse, electricity and Internet are sporadic, and expectations can get lost in

translation; I never fail to be overwhelmingly inspired. This inspiration spreads exponentially as I am able to share it with the many individuals and groups I work with back here in the UK, and that in turn motivates me to go back.

My own organization; ironINC in Africa has developed projects throughout East and Southern Africa for the past several years. Despite the now-expected challenges, I have come to the very strong belief that there is no such thing as coincidence. This means sometimes the tiniest spark of a connection can have a substantial and far-reaching impact.

In late 2010, I identified Namibia as the place I would like to go next. Less than a month later, I was contacted by ADAD (Association for Dance of the African Diaspora) about a program in Namibia that was looking to work with choreographers and international artists. It was to be the first in those many tiny unexpected surprises that came along.

### **Project Brief**

I was invited to work with Ombetja Yehinga Organization in Namibia by its tireless Director, Dr. Philippe Talavera. The project was to work with OYO's teachers, dancers and young people to share practice and creative approaches to developing issue-based work and arts as a tool for social development.

*"OYO works with young people to target social issues such as HIV prevention, sexual and reproductive health, children's and human rights, gender, gender-based violence, alcohol and drug abuse, stigma and discrimination through writing, drama, dance, music and the visual arts. OYO programmes provide youth – whether they are in school or out of school – information and tools that enable them to make informed decisions."*

[www.ombetja.org](http://www.ombetja.org)

The project had 2 distinct parts:

The first was working with the main company of dancers and local teaching staff in the capital city Windhoek to create a performance piece about gender issues for a national tour. The piece would be presented with accompanying workshops led and facilitated by the dancers themselves. This has a two fold benefit— 1) the work is sustained beyond the time I was working with the group in terms of longer term employment and professional development, and 2) the work is disseminated much further beyond the direct participant group.

The second part of the project was to then accompany OYO's facilitators to a rural area of the country to work with a group of young people using the same model of creating issue-based performance, touring with the lead facilitators and again, leading workshops, facilitating discussions and educating other people on the topic.



Rehearsals for *Sugdaddies* – Rundu, Northern Namibia

My aim during this time was to share my own skills in choreography, technique, development and approaches to making work while learning more about OYO's approaches, their methodology and the wider context of the country and culture they are working in. I am pleased to report that I got all this and so much more.

### **Getting Started – Learning before teaching**

I had been very excited about examining gender issues in a cultural context so vastly different from my own. I had done extensive research into the topic for my Masters degree, but wanted to gain a different perspective by hearing from others' experiences and in particular, through the modes of dance and performance.

One of the early surprises came about 4 days before I arrived when I received an email from Philippe asking if I minded changing the topic of our piece to 'Stigma and Discrimination.' Appreciating that these things do change and that it is what OYO had to do to meet their funding requirements, I heartily agreed. And then panicked. I had no idea about Stigma and Discrimination, and most certainly not in Namibia. Thus began frantic Internet searching to get some background on the subject matter.

While it was terrifying to think I was going to make a piece about a topic I barely knew anything about, my nervousness stopped me from going in on the first day thinking I knew better than anyone there. This proved invaluable when it came to the devising process.



Instead, I was back in school, listening, learning, scribbling notes furiously and writing tests. Every performance the company does is followed by discussion so the dancers need to understand the subject matter and be able to respond to anything that can be thrown at them. This is an incredible skill, but it means a LOT of learning. I had the privilege of taking part in these sessions and not only learned about stigma and discrimination, but also HIV and AIDS, transmission, prevention, approaches and barriers to reducing rates of infection, sugar daddies, sex for money, money and crime, tribal prejudice, socioeconomic issues, apartheid, independence, corruption, TB and other opportunistic infections, gender-based violence and so much more.

Learning about TB and other opportunistic infections

Back in rehearsals with the dance company, we soon discover that the current issue of stigma and discrimination in Namibia has to do with young people who are HIV positive. Not from their status, as I'd assumed, but from having to leave class for 30 minutes to take their ARV medication every morning. This marks them out to other students, and as with all cultures when someone is different, they become targets for teasing, harassment and bullying. The young people can fall into depression, withdraw from friends, family and school, and in some extremely devastating cases; some commit suicide. So, this is the topic we have to address in our piece.

### **Objectives, Format and Context**

The creation of the piece is done with 3 objectives in mind:

1. The piece has to be catchy and entertaining enough that it grabs people's attention and stops them on their daily business of shopping, etc., to stop and watch.
2. The content needs to be engaging enough that they stay till the end.
3. Its story or narrative needs to be clear enough that the audience can understand what the piece is about.

This is no small challenge in choreographing a 15-minute dance piece, in 5 days, with a group of dancers I've just met, in a country I've just arrived in.

What makes this work so important is that there is a real tangible need for OYO's performances. They are communicating very important messages to try to affect social change in the youth and thus throughout the

country. OYO is at first, a public health organization; it just so happens that the arts are one of the most effective ways of communicating these messages, for a number of reasons.



OYO Dance Company – Rehearsals for *When the Tide Turns*

Namibia is a sparsely populated but highly diverse country that boasts dozens of tribes, some sharing language families, but many who are entirely separate from one another. During the apartheid era, it was difficult for someone from the north to converse with someone from the south. So, after independence, the government made English the official language of the country. Whilst this obviously has some benefit, it means that 'official' government communication is not understood by the large part of the

population who do not speak English. Finances restrict presenting communications in several languages, so choosing one is also the most cost effective approach. Added to this, literacy rates are inconsistent across the country, so a poster on the side of the bus stop is not a very effective way to get a message across. (There are also no bus stops, but that's a different matter.)

OYO's approach to addressing these challenges is to create a performance, or as Philippe says, 'a play without words' that functions as a true intervention. The dancers arrive at the village square (often nothing more than a dusty area in the centre of town), set up a sound system and perform. Afterwards, they facilitate a discussion with people who have stayed to watch.

Questions like, "*What do you think the show was about, Do you know someone this has happened to, and What happened in your experience,*" all initiate a conversation that gets people talking about the subject matter with the dancers and potentially, with each other.

It is worth noting that since these performances take place in public areas, the preconception (and funds) that requires one to buy a ticket is overcome by the fact that the performance instead comes to the public. Much of my work in the UK is based on this same premise. Theatres are perceived to be for theatregoers, and therefore only people who consider themselves as such, go. By placing performance in the public realm, people who might never go to a theatre can experience it without having to enter a building or circumstance where 'art' takes place. I find this whole aspect of performance fascinating, and it was great to see it in a different culture.



OYO Dance Performance – Rehoboth Village (credit: OYO)

As these performances catch people going about their daily business, they manage to cut straight to an issue by catching people with their guard down. The format creates a platform and encourages people to talk about what they've just seen much more openly than I'd imagine if we'd gone in just asking questions. These are not easy subjects either.

After the presentation of one of OYO's films in this way, I had an incredibly engaging conversation with 2 local men about homosexuality. In a country where being gay is still illegal and has huge cultural implications, I found this discussion remarkable for its frankness and depth.

## **The Devising Process**

The dancers were very enthusiastic about sharing their own experiences and participated fully in discussions and scenarios played out as part of the devising process. The story came from the dancers themselves, and this fostered ownership and clarity in the movement material. Our discussions further developed our knowledge to be able to answer those tricky questions after the performances.

This process encouraged all of us to think about our reactions to-- and understanding of the subject matter. When we widened the conversation, it revealed our own prejudices in other areas such as homosexuality and disability. It was a very honest discussion and one that happened only as a result of the creative process. This unexpected outcome demonstrates exactly why we should continue to pursue projects where we might not know the outcomes... because anything can happen!



Devising Process – Working with dancers in Rundu.

Philippe insisted that we could not make European Abstract Contemporary Dance, as the audience must be able to read the piece. Literal is not only good, it's a MUST. However, we had some lost in translation moments from what he considers physical theatre and what I consider physical theatre. It was only after watching the company perform some of their other work that I realised that literal, doesn't *literally* mean literal. Ah the joys of artistic interpretation.

We have other similar moments with the dancers and our understanding of the concept of 'unison'. I have forgotten that most often quoted of rules, 'Don't assume!' Additionally, as the teaching style in education here is rote-based, the dancers are more concerned with pleasing me, rather than feeling they can speak up and say they don't understand something. I had been forewarned of this before coming out, but other than these few minor misunderstandings, I found the dancers to be very creative and they contributed a great deal to the development of the piece. As often as possible I made sure to discuss the choreographic tools and concepts we were exploring and we decided as a group which ones were most effective to get our story across.

This type of practical based learning contributes to a more open dialogue by offering space to question and share our different perspectives on what we're seeing. It also helped me understand how certain concepts could or would not work within the local context. As I have never been to Namibia, I needed the dancers' experience to feed into the process so that we were hitting our objective no. 2 – making the story clear enough for people to understand. For instance, the dancers informed me that wearing red is apparently a sign of HIV positive status. Armed with this knowledge, we choreographed a scene with a red shirt for the young man who discovers he's HIV positive in the piece.

## **OYO's Methodology**

So, with our constraints of time, language, artistic viewpoints, and more, we put together a dance theatre piece that tells the story of a young man diagnosed with HIV who is teased so badly that he commits suicide. It is not the most uplifting of tales, but we create an ending where most of the characters come to realise the error in their ways and make conscious decisions not to discriminate in future. We agree to call the piece, '*When the Tide Turns.*'

The lesson we are trying to share is that stigma and discrimination are based on fear. Fear is based on ignorance. So if we can learn the truth about something, we are less likely to be afraid of it, and therefore less likely to behave negatively towards it or the person we have been discriminating against. Whew. Heavy stuff.

This methodology stems from OYO's overall approach to how they operate and what they can do as an organization working in the arts for social development sector. Their methodology comprises 3 stages to affect positive social change:

1. **Start a conversation.** If people are talking about something, it is harder to be swept under the rug or ignored. Evidence for this exists in countries where strong public HIV education campaigns have much lower rates of infection than those who don't. Closer to home, better sex education has resulted in lower teenage pregnancy rates.
2. **Educate.** A great many negative attitudes and behaviors in the social sphere are a result of poor and incorrect information. This ignorance breeds fear, and fear causes people to act out irrationally or unknowingly. See the above examples on HIV and teenage pregnancy. If more people understand the true facts of an issue, then society as a whole is one step closer to resolving it because they are using the correct information.
3. **Change.** Through this process of education and developing wider understanding, it is hoped that people will change their thinking and then their behavior.

These are HUGE asks of a dance piece. I have a massive amount of respect and admiration for Philippe and the company who do this work and to this very crazy schedule all the time. After completing this process in Windhoek, myself and the small team of facilitators travelled north 800km to Rundu on the border with Angola and did the whole thing all over again with a new group of dancers and on an entirely new topic: this time, Sugar Daddies.

The feedback from our first showing in Windhoek confirmed that the audience DID understand the story (especially the red shirt!) and were only disappointed that the piece was so short. To which Philippe responded it's better to leave the audience wanting more. That reassuringly, is the same across both cultures! The dancers were very positive about their experience and I feel immensely privileged and honored that they welcomed me with such open arms and generosity in their work. We would never have achieved the objectives of the piece if I'd gone with my own ideas from my own culture; it was the shared dialogue that got us there.

### **Further Observations and Outcomes**

In addition to the feedback from dancers and audience, I've picked up a few things along the way that have helped manage the project, and myself in the process!

*"If I hadn't done this project, I would have never known what my body could do! I have learned to work with different people."* – OYO Dancer

**I'm a guest** – I managed to learn a few words in (some!) of the local languages. This went a long way to reaching the dancers, especially the young people.

**Be Open Minded** - I was concerned that the work we created might not be what OYO usually does, but Philippe reassured me that they need different ways of working with different artists just as badly as we do and this is why they endeavor to work with international artists... very similar to my reason for wanting to work with them.



OYO Youth Group – Last day celebrations in Rundu, Northern Namibia

**Manage expectations** - If I were to do this project again, I would aim for less output and ask for more time. As it was, we created 2 separate touring pieces, with 2 separate groups of dancers in 15 days. This is incredibly challenging under any circumstances, but when trying to get to grips with the many considerations of culture, accessibility, transport issues, pastoral care, etc., it made for very long days. I felt immense pressure given the context of OYO's funding as an NGO and their responsibility as an employer to a large group of people who rely on that funding. There were very high expectations of what I could do in the time we had and some of these

were not realistic. Saying that, there was learning on both sides with regard to this and we have agreed that this is to be merely the first of many future projects to come!

**Be surprised** - This experience has strengthened my belief and helped me articulate that the value of the work exists not only for the audience who are exposed to ideas through the arts; but by taking part in the process. This extends to my own learning of a different culture through artistic practice.

It has been a timely reminder of the importance of developing skills and providing opportunities for young people to be able to contribute to their communities and wider society in meaningful ways. They are future leaders and nurturing growth and building skills and confidence helps prepare them for those future roles, while they continue to surprise and challenge my own modes of thinking in the process.

**Be prepared for anything to change** – Because they do! However unsettling they may be, they allow us to take an entirely new journey and discover things we might not have otherwise. What an incredible gift.

**Get out of the studio** - My confidence in tackling difficult issues has grown, and though I am aware that the context in Namibia is unique, I feel my understanding of the process will only enhance my practice, and how I work with others in future, regardless of what culture I'm in. Additionally, as one of my aims was to understand the culture, I believe it is imperative to get out of the studio and actually get out to meet other people and see other areas. This wider exposure to the country and its people supported the more formalized learning I'd undertaken on the project, and offered a more holistic perspective on the culture as a whole.

**Take a break** - Finally, I must mention the incredible value of the reflective time, as it is one of the hardest things to initiate in a busy freelance practice at home. The chance to take time, away from regular environment and routine, to digest what's just happened and to think about the wider picture of my practice has been vital to recognizing how the project has contributed to my own professional development. As a result, I have returned with a clarity of purpose and future goals that build directly on this incredible experience.

### **Future Development**

Opportunities for sharing of this project include:

- Coverage in Confidante Newspaper in Namibia
- Public presentation in UK in summer 2014, details TBC
- Writing an article for DanceUK online magazine (2014)
- Written article for OYO magazine on my experience, to be published in 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 2014
- I have maintained a blog about the project and continue to add to it – [www.ironincinafrica.blogspot.com](http://www.ironincinafrica.blogspot.com)
- The project is being featured on my website – [www.jenniferirons.co.uk](http://www.jenniferirons.co.uk) and my Artist Page on Candoco Dance Company's Website – [www.candoco.co.uk](http://www.candoco.co.uk)
- I have been invited to a cross-cultural residency in Egypt that will utilise some of the choreographic approaches developed on this project
- The focus resulting from the reflection time has enabled me to apply for R&D of a new project in the UK
- I am currently in discussions with fellow Lisa Ullman Award winner, Louisa Pestell on leading workshops on developing international projects
- I hope to see OYO perform at this year's 2014 Commonwealth Games taking place in Glasgow

As part of this trip, I was also able to take part in a 2-week traditional dance and choreographic residency with Guerrilla Arts in Uganda, and began discussions with Dance into Space in Kenya and the Dubai Arts and Culture Festival in Dubai. Though not part of my initial application, the Lisa Ullman Travel Scholarship Fund enabled me to develop and strengthen future international links with these and other arts organizations in the Middle East and Africa.

Thank you again for this wonderful opportunity. It has fed my artistic and professional development, allowed me the chance to work with some wonderful people, experience a fascinating culture and it will continue to strengthen my future work with ironINC in Africa and beyond.



What to do when you reach the summit of the world's oldest and driest desert? Dance. Of course. Sossussvlei, Southern Namibia.