

Kathryn Brant Report June 2002

International training - Dance, drumming, percussion & song with Danza Libre, Guantanamo, CUBA

29th March – 12th April 2002

My Cuban training experience turned out to be very different to my initial expectations. Guantanamo is quite a sleepy place with not that much going on. I had imagined my evenings would be filled with music and dancing - this was not to be. Guantanamo is quite a poor place, hence people cannot afford to 'go out much in the evenings and as there is little or no tourism, entertainment is only really available at weekends. Consequently my evenings were spent desperately trying to learn Spanish, as few people spoke any English. Dance and music are not such an integral force in the community as I had imagined. However, dance and music are a celebratory pursuit and are a major part of social activity. Not so much the traditional/folkloric dances, but certainly Salsa, which is popular with both the young and old. My days were very busy. As I was the only person on the course my training was quite intense.

The company I was training with (Danza Libre) also have a very intense day, beginning at 8.30a.m with a contemporary class, followed immediately by a folkloric class. For the rest on their day (up until mid-late afternoon) they work on company repertoire. The dancers work extremely hard, are very fit & are very skilled technicians, they always dance with great energy, even in rehearsals - I never saw any movements being 'marked'. As well as the dancers, there are also several musicians, who are full-time company members. They play and sing for classes, rehearsals and of course Performances - they are an integral part of Danza Libre whose roles are equally as important as the dancers. Members of Danza Libre get wages from the government, and funding wise that's about it! The dancers all pay (out of their own wages) into a 'syndicate'. This money is for costumes, props, tours etc. I found this quite shocking especially as their wages are only equivalent to about \$19 (U.S.) per month. One of Danza Libre's main objectives is to keep tradition and culture alive, thriving and accessible. One of the things they do to achieve this is to give a free performance in Guantanamo every Friday night. These performances are full of people from the local community. They also offer evening and weekend classes for both adults and young people. 'Community dance' as we know it does not seem to exist in the same way as it does in England. I observed a few of the community classes at Danza Libre and found the teaching style was very didactic.

There was no creative element to the classes, the main theme of the sessions was learning steps & technique. The contemporary classes the dancers undertake are Graham based; they have a set class, which varies little each day. The style of the Contemporary repertoire/choreography, I felt was quite obvious and predictable and in my opinion quite dated. Whilst I was interested in their contemporary work I did not opt for this as part of my training. In my first folkloric class (led by the co. director) we studied Gaga. Gaga is from Haiti, it is a strong, happy dance, sometimes used in the context of a carnival. I really enjoyed it and picked the movements up quickly, but 'getting' the style was a different story! I felt like a robot compared to the Cuban dancers. The class structure consisted of a warm up, centre work, traveling and partner work.

After this I had a private gaga lesson with one of the female dancers, where I got chance to learn the movements slowly and in more detail. She also watched me a lot and gave me corrections. It was really useful to just give it a go in the company class ('in at the deep end') and then break it down afterwards, as I got the feel of the atmosphere with the other dancers and live music in class. Each day I also had a one to one drumming/percussion lesson with one of the company musicians for 2 hours (in the 2nd week the last hour was spent on singing lessons). As with the dance I just chose a few styles and it made sense to work on the same music as dances.

My first music lesson was also Gaga, I learned 4 rhythms (& playing techniques) on different instruments and learned how they each fit together. My teacher made sure I worked really hard playing the rhythms over and over again, even the next day - pretty exhausting! After a few days he then introduced the next style - Vodou. I was taught 3 Vodou rhythms one of which I struggled with, 'Legate', (it was played on the Conga with sticks). I could play it slowly but I found it difficult to play at the required speed, which was extremely fast. My final class each day was Salsa and for this I was lucky enough to have two teachers (one male & one female dancer), all to myself! We went over the basic moves - my teachers were real sticklers for detail (& rightly so), nevertheless it was great fun! Cuban Salsa is danced with bent knees & is very low, the hips, ribs and shoulders are always moving. Initially it felt like trying to spin plates, I'd get certain parts of my body moving and others would stop! These sessions were my favourite, as they somehow seemed more light-hearted, probably because Salsa is a social dance.

Over the first few classes I began to link some of the moves and then went onto partner work. The following day folkloric class with the company introduced me to a new style - Vodou. Vodou again is a strong Haitian dance and is highly energetic, I found this day much more difficult and felt my movements looked incredibly stiff next to the others. There are some truly amazing dancers in the company who move with stunning speed and agility. This class ended in a circle with different dancers (soloists) coming into the middle and improvising with the Vodou moves we'd done in class. They worked together with a drummer who accompanied their moves, this improvisation also had a competitive edge with dancers dancing one another out of the circle, they were brilliant and I felt that no amount of training would ever get me to that standard - but hey, it was only day 2! In the folkloric styles, which have mostly Haitian roots, I felt an African influence strongly coming through. The movements are nearly always grounded with emphasis toward the earth and are almost tribal.

Much of the folkloric choreography is based around stories, which are often religious. During my stay in Guantanamo I saw Danza Libre perform several times and either in performance or rehearsal saw most of their repertoire. My general opinion is that they are stunning dancers as individuals but do not perform well as an ensemble - most of the pieces are far from 'together' and never seemed 'slick' enough. Choreography is usually done 'in-house' often by the director, but on occasions some of the dancers have this opportunity. On the whole I felt the choreography was weak, especially in the contemporary work. It was very interesting for me to see the styles I had been working on in a performance context. I very much enjoyed watching the folkloric/traditional pieces as the dancers perform these with great joy, they are really 'in' the dance and it feels very real. Sharen Wray from Birmingham's Jazz Exchange choreographed one of the pieces 'Rhythm in time'. This was one of the stronger pieces. It was in the style of 'tapdogs'/'Stomp' and was quite an obvious piece, but nevertheless good fun & far tighter than some of the other works. I was initially keen to learn all the Cuban styles, but soon decided that this was not realistic and not the best use of the time I had. I was a little disappointed but I knew it would be more beneficial to focus on fewer styles in more depth. My first day was spent observing classes and rep & finally the performance in the evening for the locals.

My first lesson was after the performance in the cultural centre, where there was traditional live music. This was probably a good place to start, as after a few glasses of Cuban rum, I was much more relaxed! Cuban salsa is different to the 'tasters' of salsa I've had before. I initially found

ithard to pick up/hear the rhythms they were dancing to. One of the dancers told me afterwards that Cuban salsa is often danced over/across the music - this is probably why I couldn't feel a clear rhythm. At first I was very concerned about the language difference being a problem, as only one member of the company spoke good English. It all worked out well though and we managed to communicate - I guess that's one of the brilliant things about dance, we can say what we need to say through our bodies! There were only a few occasions when I wanted to ask my teachers questions about the finer details of my studies, where I felt verbal communication was needed. Every day I took part in the company folkloric class the main styles I focused on were Gaga and Vodou, whoever was leading the class asked me to wear one of the traditional skirts, as these are used with the movement. My private folkloric class was now with an ex-company member, who was my folkloric teacher for the rest of the course. He went over the Vodou moves in more detail and again corrected me - he even donned a skirt to show me the way the women dance it. This was all a very different way of moving for me and a great deal of co-ordination is needed for all the dances I was learning (head patting & tummy rubbing style). i.e. shoulders circling, ribs going forward and back and hips moving side to side - not to mention what the arms and legs are doing. After the first few company folkloric classes we began to include both Vodou & Gaga. I was still finding the steps easy but the style very difficult. The atmosphere in these classes was fantastic; the dancers throw themselves into every movement and even in the class perform with great energy and enthusiasm. I began to enjoy these classes more and more.

The private sessions also began to cover both Vodou & Gaga and really moved me on, I was starting to feel that I was grasping the style. I felt like I relaxed into it more as I became more familiar with my surroundings and became more settled. As the days went by I began to enjoy the folkloric styles more & more and felt I was really getting into the style. It is more than apparent that the dancers and musicians in Danza Libre take great pleasure from these classes too. In the drumming and percussion sessions I recapped Gaga and continued working on Vodou, learning more new rhythms, which were very challenging. I felt that I needed to keep them slow until I got more familiar with them, but the teacher was encouraging me to go faster and faster. At times this became frustrating and this was a time where the language barrier came into play. I also would have liked more corrections and more focus on my technique, sometimes I wasn't sure if I was playing correctly. The next percussion & drum class felt much better. We recapped and rehearsed all the rhythms & I felt like I had established them a lot more - both Jose (the teacher) & I felt satisfied and relieved. Over the following few days we moved onto 'Son', a traditional Cuban rhythm similar to Salsa I began with just one rhythm, it was very complex, but I gradually developed more patterns. I was keen to play Salsa, but Jose thought I needed to learn Son first. In my final few sessions with Jose I got a little irritated by him playing and not really teaching me, I couldn't even join in as he was playing much too fast for me. I wanted to talk to him about this, but with my limited Spanish, I found it difficult to communicate my learning needs.

The Salsa classes were going really well, each day I was building on a solo section and the partner work. I loved the partner work, but was not very good at letting the man lead, I had a great time being whirled, swirled and twisted around! I needed to relax a lot more with this style, especially in my shoulders. At one point during my training I began to wish the classes would move forward a little faster, this was possibly impatience but I was getting a little bored and frustrated by the same material. On reflection this way of working was more useful, as I feel I developed stronger foundations. In the second week of the training I began the lessons in song. The first class was very challenging as the teacher spent a lot of time talking (in Spanish). Despite me constantly telling her I didn't understand! I learned a Haitian song (again gaga to complement my other areas of study). I later asked one of the dancers who spoke English to explain that a more useful approach may be for her to just sing and for me to repeat. The subsequent singing lessons were much better - less talking and more action! I had soon learnt two songs and knew them well unaccompanied, but when I sang with the percussion it totally threw me. It was a very tricky rhythm but I found it a big help to practice the song whilst doing the basic Gaga step.

By the end of the week I felt much more confident with the singing, but I still needed a lot of concentration when accompanied by the instruments. The feedback I was getting from my teachers and other company members was good, I was told I move "like a Cuban, not an English" (I was very flattered by this). The director asked me if I would perform with the company at the end of the week, I was delighted and of course accepted, but felt very nervous at this prospect! So now with the performance looming, all my lessons were focused on this. I had begun to feel much more comfortable with the style & was really enjoying it. At the beginning of the course I had thought I would never feel at ease with the style. The company also asked if I would teach the company a contemporary class one day, again I was nervous, but agreed. I didn't have any appropriate music with me, but I did have the live musicians available. I was a little apprehensive about using them as this was a new way of working for me. Despite my nerves the class was very well received. The dancers are used to a very strict Graham class and I wasn't sure what they would think about my eclectic mix of techniques. I only used a little recorded music as it was fantastic having the musicians there - a real joy, they were brilliant! I was surprised that they found some of my class difficult especially some of the more 'released' styles of work. The dancers are all technically brilliant, however at times could be a little 'wooden' when executing contemporary movements.

They are also very serious and found it amusing that I keep reminding them to relax their faces. The language difference was only an issue when it came to corrections and feedback, I found I couldn't just 'chip in' in the usual manner. I had someone translating, but it was very time consuming. The final few days of the course were spent preparing for the performance. I practiced with the rest of the company, putting the pieces I had learned into the context of their 'show'. I was to do 2 duets in the folkloric styles, Vodou & Gaga and a Salsa piece with the rest of the company. I also sang the two songs I had learnt including some solo parts. I only played drums and percussion a little in the performance as I wasn't quite proficient enough to play at the required speed for the dances. I was extremely nervous and felt like my head was full of all the things I had to remember, which I had only learnt in the last four days. My last day at Danza Libre was the day of the performance. I was kitted out with costume and we had a dress rehearsal. I made a few mistakes, which heightened my nerves. Soon it was the real thing, I was very anxious. The performance went very well and I enjoyed every moment of my 'guest appearance'. I got much cheering and applause and at the end a representative from U.N.E.A.C (the National Union of Cuban artists and writers) came up on stage and presented me with a certificate (see attached) for taking part in the course. It was a brilliant way to end! During my training I compiled a video of all the rhythms and movements I learnt. I also filmed several classes and performances. Including the dress rehearsal of the pieces I had performed. Once I have transposed these tapes they will be an extremely valuable resource. I also kept a 'learning log' and took many photographs (some of which are attached). I am maintaining contact with Danza Libre with possible links for the future. I have already begun using the songs and dances I have learnt. I am currently using recorded music as I do not feel 'fluent' enough to play live. But I am continuing to practice and hope to integrate live music when I gain more confidence and speed with the rhythms. Further development of this work will hopefully take form through fusion of styles. This course and cultural experience has been a highly valuable experience, which will be fully utilized in my work & will stay with me for years to come. Kathryn Brant 12th June 2002

Dear LUTSF Secretary Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund

Please find enclosed 2 copies of my report on recent international training involving two weeks intensive studying of dance, drumming, percussion and song. The aforementioned training took place 29th March – 12th April in Guantanamo, Cuba. I have achieved the aims of this

project through developing my dance training and challenging my body to a different way of moving. I feel refreshed and have new inspiration. I have also gained a lot of new teaching material and a realistic insight into Cuban culture. I have already begun disseminating my new skills through primary education and intend to further this through in-service training. I will be informing North West and Yorkshire dance agencies of my recent training and will make my contact details available for any artists wishing to share these skills. I also intend to transcribe and edit my video to make this available as a resource. Future awardees planning to undertake training in Cuba should get a student visa as opposed to a tourist visa, to avoid a lot of unnecessary bureaucratic hassle. Also knowledge of the Spanish language would be advantageous. I would also advise awardees with a limited timescale to focus on covering smaller learning areas in depth as opposed to trying to cover too much. Thank you and all involved in the L.U.T.S.F once again for your support, it has been hugely valuable and greatly appreciated!

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Brant Dance Artist