

To: Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF)

Title: 1 month intensive dance training with Zab Mabongou, Nyata Nyata Danse Company

Date: 19th April 2004 to 16th May 2004 in Montreal, Canada

My research and development into understanding the aesthetics of contemporary African dance, its origins and developments as an art form has empowered and enthused my practice as a dance practitioner. The scholarship has allowed me to embark on a program that has helped me question, observe and free myself from the dance form that I am passionate about. I have felt restricted and isolated in a traditional dance form that has specific fixed rhythms, sequences and rituals. Let alone being based in Dorset!

Zab Mabongou, a pioneer in African dance, has shared her expertise, knowledge and reawakened my spirit and energy capacity in movement. Each day was not easy and the continuous corrections sometimes draining. The sense of achievement and thorough understanding of the body's movement mechanisms within African dance has paid off, is paying off and continues to pay off for my self and the people who attend my classes. I have increased my regular dance programme to include a technique class that is attended by other dance form dancers and non-dancers. I incorporate Zab's principles when teaching at community classes, schools and colleges. It has allowed my creative process to flow more easily when creating work, by giving me a sense of where to begin and where to return back to.

The month in Montreal also informed my Masters Degree thesis into provisions for African contemporary dance in a Western context. The thesis is held at Dartington College of Arts and will be distributed to organizations such as Dance Africa and ADAD and Dance South West.

The time allocated felt short, three months to a year would have enabled me to grasp all of Zab's principles and embed them in my body but, with the use of video to capture her principles, I am able to continue training and reinforce body alignment techniques to inspire my creativity.

My advice to future LUTSF scholarship winners is to use your time wisely to make as many contacts as you can before you go, book appointments early if possible. Everything you learn - return to the studio before your next session, go in on your days off. Explore your new skills with your existing, just keep reinforcing. Be flexible even though you have only got a restricted time, relationships need to develop organically. Trust, you will get everything you need even if it's not what you originally wanted.

With much thanks

Natasha Zubida Player

Report/ Evaluation on trip to Nyata Nyata Montreal, Canada in April – May 2004

In the four weeks of my intensive training I took part in Zab Mabongou's two-year pilot training program which is funded by Heritage Canada. The program was open to performing arts professionals and semi-professionals, who intend to orient their careers towards teaching or performing in African dance. It comprised of theoretical and practical training in African dance and music, namely Congo.

The aim of the course is to highlight African dance and music influence in all aspects of contemporary artistic expression and to show that it is not merely an alternative course, but also an opportunity to learn some of the principles and specific techniques that have contributed to the multi-disciplinary cultural development of contemporary dance and music.' (Zab Mabongou)

The program comprised of:

The fundamentals class:

Introduces formation – the understanding that 'one must begin again'

Zab taught me that the very essence of African dance and music requires a solid base where the dancer and musician always return. This principle she has called 'grounding' is described as not just a technique element of African dance but constitutes one of the key characteristics of the aesthetic of African dance. This could be broken down into – weight – breath – equilibrium (elements)

The fundamental techniques for achieving this were through classes that I attended involving stepping or placing of the foot, changing direction – weight exchange, releasing weight – elevating, turning and jumping.

To build on this technique I was introduced to the importance of 'breath', by directing the breathing through the body, to the body parts, in movement. This created a rhythm within itself, a natural rhythm that exists continually but is heightened when the mind, body and breath are knowingly working together to create movement that is working in equilibrium with its surroundings (space). This continual rhythm (breath) is duplicated from the sounds of the drum and emphasizes the connection between the dancer and the musician.

The pilot programme fundamentals also included working on body weight and its' transference through the body. This has introduced me to understanding the term 'projection' in movement. By transferring weight and using the principles 'Loketo', I am able to understand how I can travel, change direction and jump higher with a 'grounded' control (focusing on using the earth's energy or kinetic energy and realigning the body weight and using the breath).

Another key element of my training was to attend RHYPAAD classes– Rhythm, Posture, & Alignment in African Dance. It involves observing how we move our body in movement, raises awareness, and develops the knowledge of what is necessary to organize my movement and posture, including identifying the movement's elementary rhythm in order to move adequately and freely appreciate the discipline of dance.

The technique used was called 'Loketo' – from the Lingala language from Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville meaning 'hips' it serves as a reminder that there are three levels of the main rhythm-posture of African dance. This posture is activated by supple knees and involves focused rhythmic movement beginning with the feet, falling; bending the knees, transition and hips, the return and rest. Speaking the term 'Lo-ke-to' aloud enables the dancer to visualize the breath going into the feet to ground-entering the knees for the transition (bending) and returning the breath to the hips to begin the sequence of movement, rhythm and breath again.

This session enabled me to identify my body's axes, lines and levels, to work the body in complete isolation and to moving the body as a whole within the body's own lines and directions and the directions of space. The class also worked on posture and the positive effect on the body-mind relationship providing me with a clearer understanding of what movement is about. I have also been able to correct or be aware of bad posture habits for example: contracted pelvic region, shrugged shoulders and stiffened ankles. There are ten basic principles of the Loketo movement that enable the dancer to view and understand how the body moves within African dance.

Each class was attended by dancers who had enrolled on the pilot programme. There were also open classes attended by the general public, that pilot programme students had access to. These were usually basic principle classes and specialist classes' i.e. Haitian dance. I attended the Haitian classes to enjoy a dance form I had never experienced before and to put into practice the technical aspects I was learning. The dances were powerful and intricately delicate, forming seamless movements to conjure up images of moving snakes through the whole body in dances such as the Serpent dance.

Another of the pilot programme classes was Rhythm and Voice. As a group, we developed our vocal abilities in relation to movement, for example, using tonal sounds to resonate the breath through the body for each movement we made. This intensified the placement of the movement through space and within the body itself, creating a more controlled and powerful body movement. Through this class I was introduced to the origins of African dance through chanting, calling, resonance and the body's receptivity to exchange. This built on my understanding of the body's movement within African dance and the connectivity and importance of other dancers or group involvement, i.e. audience to heighten the response and performance of the body in movement.

Theory played a regular role in disseminating information on the culture and history of African dance. We mapped its' travels across the world from the many countries that make up the continent, mainly through slavery. There was also a discussion on the importance of Haitian dance in relation to its' historical developments as a successful slave-led revolution and its' economical implications. We also touched on critical discourse on art and aesthetics of dance in general. The students were made up of mainly dancers, professional and semi-professionals. Our countries of origin ranged from Haitian, Canadian, French, Tanzanian and British. Our ethnicity was of Caucasian Canadian, Mixed Heritage and Black African, all of a similar age and only one male out of eight students. With a variety of cultural backgrounds and knowledge of dance the discussions were always interesting, sometimes intense and often bilingual!

Included in the programme were drumming and percussion. I was able to build on my appreciation and understanding of drum rhythms (Congolese and Ghanaian) by learning basic drum languages in isolation and working on polyrhythm within a group. Chanting also played a part in the musicology of African rhythms.

Some of the dance classes I attended were accompanied by live percussion. Zab was able to teach the relationship of the drums and dancer by

practical discussion. For example: who leads the dancer or the musician? Where is the entrance/beginning of movement in timings of musical accompaniment, rhythmic relationships within body movement and the importance of connectivity in relation to musician and dancer in African dance.

I also attended advanced dance classes featured in the pilot programme. Discussions took place within the theoretical element of the course on exploring traditional African dance forms and their vocabulary to neo-African dance forms such as dance forms that had been recon-formed with a view to transposing them outside their habitual context in order to bring out their creative potential in a present-day context. Further to this I undertook some research into the understanding of contemporary African dance in a western context and challenging African dance choreographers in their understanding of 'contemporary'. This has been documented in my M.A. degree thesis.

The practical elements of the advanced dance class further concentrated on the relationship between movement/space and musicality, affirmed the usage and importance of breath to increase endurance and rhythmic progression of dance movement, and gave examples and opportunities for dance improvisation based on the fundamentals of African dance.

Conclusion

This trip has empowered me in my understanding of African dance movement, its' origins and its' vocabulary. It has given me a firm foundation to work from when creating and exploring new movement vocabulary which I have been able to pass on to participants who attend my classes. It has enforced the importance of using live music when creating dance and further opportunities in exploring rhythmic relationships in movement and music.

Ritual plays an important role in traditional African dance forms and to be able to use vocal chanting and symbolic movement within a contemporary African dance vocabulary I can relay the link between traditional and contemporary. Since completing the course I can understand and incorporate ritual in the performance pieces that I create.

I feel the basic principles of African dance are transferable within other dance forms such as Latino dance forms and they have also enabled me to study the movement of the body in a range of dance styles and body movements, i.e. catwalk models, Moroccan traditional dance, Cunningham technique, Alexander technique, Tai chi, Capoeira. I have also been able to identify some of the differences and similarities of execution within classical Ballet and African dance. All these elements have/are helping me to open up my practice to a wider audience by applying RYPAAD techniques to participants who have bad posture, lack co-ordination, require an insight into mind body centering, drama students and dancers.

Choreographic training was at the heart of my original application for the scholarship. I feel it has been fulfilled in building a stronger base to work from where I can draw on my traditional dance experience, understand the mechanics of movement and develop new vocabulary in a modern setting. My frustrations as an African dance practitioner living in Dorset, creative restrictions of specific African dance traditions, and the lack of opportunity to access African dance technique in the UK, have been drastically reduced by going on this course. To be able to pass on the developments of African dance from Zab Mabongou's work through to my own creativity empowers my identity as a mixed heritage person and my place in African dance.

I was able to converse with African dance practitioners living in Montreal such as Regina from Haiti and we would have conversations on her dance form and its' development, perception and categorisation in a western country. The challenge of being type cast as 'traditional' African dance was far from Regina's idea of her choreography and whether her work is neo-traditional or contemporary opened up areas of the misunderstanding of 'traditional' and 'contemporary' African dance and to who was defining these terms her own country people or foreigners.

My time in Montreal was also spent researching contemporary African dance and its infrastructure within the Canadian dance scene. This was part of an ongoing enquiry into shedding some light on the terminology used to define contemporary and traditional African dance for my thesis into Contemporary African dance in a western context. The report is detailed drawing from British and Canadian based choreographers, arts managers, organizations such as The Arts Council England, ADAD and Dance Africa to Dance Immersion (Toronto), Heritage Canada and Canadian Council of Arts. I was also able to build links with venues in Montreal who presented contemporary African dance forms.

The one-month was not enough time to embed all of Zab's principles but what I have touched on has transformed my practice and knowledge of African dance into a more rooted ability to spring from process of creative choreographic enquiry. I feel if a dancer/choreographer wishes to understand the processes of body movement in African dance Zab Mabongou's pioneering creative practice and understanding of African dances historical developments are highly recommended. Zab is one of the highly respected international leaders of African dance practice and her insight and dedication to the development of African dance on an international level is inspiring. For further appreciation and insight into Zab Mabongou's work, she has recently written a book 'HEYA: an historic, poetic and didactic treatise of African dance'.

I hope there comes a time that Zab's work is more accessible to UK based dancers and choreographers. I am very blessed to have been given the opportunity.