

14 September 2010

To the Chair of LUTSF

I'm enclosing my report regarding my Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship. With the help of LUTSF, I attended the teachers' workshop at The Cunningham Studios in NYC, USA 17<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> July 2010.

I attended the workshop to deepen my understanding and develop my teaching skills of Cunningham technique.

The workshop was led by Robert Swinston, Merce Cunninghams' assistant for the last 30 years, and offered a unique opportunity to study a very pure version of the form before the company commences on its final legacy tour.

At present there are no guarantees regarding the continuation of both the company and the studios after 2012.

Since my return I have only just begun teaching again, but I'm really noticing the development of my understanding that is passed on to the students I'm working with.

Rachel Lancaster

## **Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund 2010**

Attendance at the Teachers Workshop, Cunningham Studios, NYC, USA 17<sup>th</sup>  
– 27<sup>th</sup> July 2010

### **Background**

I'm at an important point in my career I'm steadily spending more time in education particularly with vocational students, from complete beginners on the national CAT programmes to students in the final year of training or on post graduate programmes. I felt I was at a point I wanted to reinvestigate my understanding, knowledge and methodologies as a teacher rather than a performer, as this is the context that I most commonly utilise Cunningham's work now.

It was a valuable chance to explore the company repertoire and the choreographic working methods that the technique was developed to support. A more profound understanding of the principles of the Technique would allow me to accurately pass on the intricacies and genius of Cunningham's work.

The teachers' workshop offered a unique opportunity to work with Robert Swinston, assistant to Merce Cunningham, interim Artistic Director, and the longest serving performer in the company, supported by company members and the key faculty members at the Cunningham Studio.

### **NYC July 2010**

Humidity, and a 35 degree heatwave met me on my arrival in NYC. Having been used to performing regularly in Japan at this time of year I was one of the only people in NY enjoying the bikram like temperatures! It also had the bonus of alleviating my muscles as it definitely was a tough physical challenge along with a mental one.

The course covered a number of areas during the week. It began with the essential components of Cunningham technique primarily a class focussing on the Back Exercises the core of the Cunningham centre work. During this class the development of the material was heavily discussed also all the possibilities for breaking them down for younger or less experienced students was incredibly helpful.

Following this was another technique class. We were encouraged to attend as many technique classes as possible during our times at the studios, and the opportunity to continue attending for free during the rest of my period there was a wonderful opportunity to continue to digest the wealth of information I received during this time.

There were a number of lectures with the senior faculty at the studios who had all been asked to distil the essence of Cunningham's Technique, an impossible task I think. However it was interesting because the same topics were often reiterated by all of the people asked to deliver this information. The discussion often became more about the man himself as much as the technique. I think it is impossible to separate Merce the artist from the technical form and I think this is the most important aspect to keep alive for students of Cunningham's technique - his excitement and curiosity about movement and the human form is what he found interesting, and igniting this in students will prevent it becoming stale and historic.

The K12 project was one aspect of the course that I found particularly interesting; I have a background in creative teaching and helped to establish *Re:bourne*, the education arm of Matthew Bourne's *New Adventures*. Discovering how they've developed the program to engage children and young people in work that is considered challenging was extremely enlightening.

They were very generous in sharing their methodologies and the fundamental ideas behind their development, the principal access point into the work lies with the physicality and they don't shy away from teaching the rigour of the back exercises. I found this interesting because I've been involved with Dance East teaching their CAT students who begin age 10 and I have often found it difficult to balance the basic technicality and the level of fun the teachers' workshop gave me. A huge new bag of toys to play with actually addressing fairly complex ideas in a simple and engaging way!

Other areas covered in the course were Dance Forms, the program developed for Merce from LifeForms that he used choreographically as his physicality was becoming increasingly more challenged.

The final sessions were spent putting mock classes together for different age groups and abilities; it was great to get lots of positive feedback from Robert about existing and new combinations that I had developed. This was a really important point for me as I've been teaching Cunningham at a very advanced level for a number of years. However I have never had the opportunity to spend any time at the studios in New York so I was sometimes doubting myself and choices I was making. This program renewed both my enthusiasm and my confidence as Robert Swinston, Acting Artistic Director, and Mary Lisa Burns, Director of Education, were extremely supportive, and offered further support or recommendations should I need them.

The final day I was in New York was fitting end to my journey. July 26<sup>th</sup> was the first anniversary since Merce's passing. Having been invited to continue to attend classes for free, I attended both technique classes that morning. The advanced class was bursting with many ex-company dancers, many of them reaching into their 70s. It was a very emotional day for the people whose lives had been shaped by this inspirational man. I felt very honoured to share these moments with them.

Later in the day a free concert was held in Battersea Park 'on the first anniversary of Merce Cunningham's passing, the dance community comes together to pay tribute to his influence by using his methods in his familiar spirit of rigorous play. On a simple raised stage five New York City choreographers will each present dance material from their previous work or created for the occasion' Choreographers: Lucinda Childs, Bill T Jones, Susan Marshall, Jon Kinzell, Faye Driscoll.

It was a beautiful ending when Bill T Jones took to the stage and performed a solo.