

To: Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF)
July 2006

Covering letter from Rohanna Halls

The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund supported me in taking a two-week workshop with the choreographer and teacher Yuval Pick. The course was based at the Centre National De La Danse in Lyon, from the 22nd of May until the 2nd of June 2006.

I attended the course principally for a sense of gaining new information for my own professional development but also with the view to drawing on new ideas for teaching. The former objective was met with immediacy: I was challenged in new and unfamiliar ways of moving and improvising and strengthened the link I had with the teacher Yuval. In terms of teaching, I was aware while taking the workshop that this was part of my focus and was observing how Yuval structured the work and brought different elements together. The content of his classes and the type of imagery he used will be most useful in providing a source of information for my own teaching.

While taking the workshop, Yuval was also beginning some research for a new production he will be starting in July '06. He invited me to take part in these rehearsals, an unexpected and hugely rewarding invitation.

Another unexpected benefit was seeing the dancers in Lyon. This raised my awareness the fact that my own practise is largely a result of the kind of training I have had. It was interesting to see other dancers in a different environment, and to subsequently see myself from another perspective. Additionally, I managed to see some performances, most memorably an installation performance by a collective recently formed from dancers of the Lyon Opera Ballet Company. One thing I would suggest to future LUTSF Awardees is that they should make time to find out as much about where they're going as possible. I managed to find some performances by chance, but felt this is something I could have planned better before leaving.

I am hoping to investigate some of the ideas I worked on with Yuval at the summer school 'Con-X' supported by Dance in Devon, which I will be helping to run in July with students hoping to pursue a professional career in dance.

I would like to thank the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for its decision to support me in this course and I will endeavour to acknowledge it wherever possible.

Report

Thanks to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund, I was supported in taking a workshop with Yuval Pick at the Centre National De La Danse in Lyon.

Yuval Pick

I had previously met Yuval in August 2005 at a workshop in Sicily. I was struck in this first meeting by the physicality in his classes and the quality in his movement. From this first workshop I was eager to work with him again. Yuval is originally from Israel, beginning his dance career with Batsheva Dance Company. He then went on to work with the Lyon Opera Ballet Company, and has since remained in Lyon teaching and making his own work.

The range of his experiences has given him an extraordinary sense of movement: animalistic, full, round and powerful movement, with an ability to shift through space low to the ground, and from the centre is combined with an ability to utilise form and the extremities in being long and linear, using balance and stability. It makes for an unusual and multifaceted combination.

It has been incredibly useful for me to build upon this initial connection and work with him some more. I have been able to reflect more clearly and work in greater depth on the principals within his approach. I feel incredibly lucky that I have been able to do this as it seems that often a new experience is an isolated event. Working with Yuval again provided a rare and invaluable opportunity to develop something previously experienced.

The Workshop

The workshop included a combination of some quite disparate elements. We worked on very specific, small and detailed exercises, perhaps drawing on Feldenkrais principals. I have that idea because the emphasis was on doing as little as possible and trying to sense how small amounts of movement could create a change or shift within the body. We would do an exercise then return to lying on the back in order to sense if anything had changed.

This was followed by exercises more aligned with classical principals, finding form and balance and working on specific body areas. However Yuval shifted the focus away from a concern with 'making shapes'. For example, there was an exercise which was simply reaching an arm and opposite leg away from the centre onto a rise. This was repeated to the front, side and back. Yuval emphasised a sense of pushing through the floor, imagining a fountain shooting out through the top of the head and having a sense of inflating and deflating. This meant that movement didn't come to an end-position which I would usually associate with this type of exercise.

We spent a significant amount of time improvising with imagery, one memorable image was of popcorn 'spewing' out of the torso, allowing the movement to begin from the core and then affect the arms and legs. This was started alone, and then would be guided to a partner, attempting to get close without touching and then eventually coming into contact. Another image was of lying on the beach and imagining waves rolling up the sand and over the body as a starting point for a sense of waves and rolling in the spine.

These exercises culminated in extended movement sequences, which were highly physical and visceral yet precise. The sequences were of Batsheva ilk, shifting through space, coming in and out of the floor and moving from the centre. The combination of the elements explored at earlier points such as the improvisation and finding stability and balance helped to create a lead into the sequences. I find the highlight within a class is to reach the point of putting everything together and really going for it. I found it slightly frustrating that we would only do one sequence at the end of each day, when we had spent so much time building up to it. This was perhaps the only frustration which arose from the workshop.

Observations and Outcomes

Having talked to Yuval about his expectations of the workshop it became clear that he had been given the impression by the class that they wanted to have some 'technique' within the workshop and subsequently why he had included more formal aspects into the class. For me it raised a question of what we consider to be 'technique'. It seems in the minds of most dancers, even contemporary dancers, that we consider ballet to be what we would call 'technique'. It seems strange that we divide things into technique and something else, I'm not sure what. Surely everything is about technique, learning the skills to do something even if it is

rolling on the floor or improvising.

One other thing that came out of this conversation was that I felt that, as a teacher, sometimes it's easy to be affected by what you think the class wants and to change things accordingly. The danger in this is that you lose the coherency of what you're attempting to get across. This was a good thing for me to think about for my own teaching as I recognise in myself the desire to want to try and please everyone all the time which isn't always possible.

His work seems to me to be very different to the techniques I have experienced in London. My training has largely been in Release Technique and I found one difference in Yuval's work to be the kind of imagery used. Instead of anatomical images they tend to be quite visceral, such as the image of 'popcorn spewing out of the body'. This forced me to investigate movement within my core in a way I hadn't experienced before.

I realised that often within a release technique class you might be working with the ideas of 'emptying' and 'dropping'. I found Yuval's work challenging because he is often working with qualities which are soft, but which also explore a sense of volume, expanding and swelling, and particularly difficult for me, in a way which was sustained. I realised I'm quite good at releasing and gathering again, but finding a sense of sustained movement is challenging for me.

These were interesting ideas for me to explore as they were things I don't seem to 'know' in my body. They have given me new avenues and textures to explore in my dancing. It was interesting to work at things which felt difficult, and that weren't necessarily mastered and filed with speed and ease. The workshop was a good reminder that sometimes things take time and investigation before they can be understood and assimilated, and that taking steps in learning new things can be very small but still of great value.

Rehearsals

Apart from the workshop it was fantastic to have the opportunity to work on some research for Yuval's new production. We worked on three different afternoons, with a dancer he is working with for the new production, an actor who will be involved at the research stage and with the beginnings of a set he has in mind for the piece.

It was particularly interesting to work with the actor. He was incredibly tactile and imaginative in the way that he used his body, but completely unable to reproduce movement that was shown to him. It provided food for thought on the advantages and disadvantages of formal dance training! The set is currently a huge sheet of material made from a layer of cloth sandwiched between two layers of paper. This created an odd material with the qualities of both paper and cloth. Part of the research was working with ways of moving and responding to this material. We worked a lot with wrapping, folding, moving under and over and closing and opening. It was wonderful to be involved in the very first stages of the project, to be playing and trying out ideas, without the pressure of 'coming up with the goods'.

Conclusion

I'd like to say a big thank you to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund in helping me to take this workshop. As previously mentioned it was invaluable to be able to work with Yuval again, and the opportunity to do this doesn't happen very often.

I have gained new information and remembered and built upon things I had learnt from him before. Yuval was extremely open and was happy to enter into a dialogue about the workshop, his work and dancing in general. This generous attitude made the whole experience much more useful and worthwhile.

Rohanna Halls