

20th August 2009

Dear LUTSF

Please find attached my account of the *Dance Beyond Borders* programme, the project for which the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund supported me to participate in this year. *Dance Beyond Borders* is a programme for choreographic development and transcultural exchange. This year was the first time the project ran, supported by the European Commission. My report also forms part of the evaluation dossier sent by Dance Beyond Borders to the European Commission, and may be included in my own website in the future. As one of ten participants from all over Europe I was involved in a series of residencies:

1st Residency, Germany: February 16 - 28 / K3 - Zentrum für Choreographie

2nd Residency, Portugal: April 20 - May 1 / Escola Superior de Dança, Lisbon

3rd Residency, UK: May 26 - June 6 / London Metropolitan University, London

4th Residency, Belgium: June 22 - July 3 / Retina Dance Company, Antwerp

The project mentors included Angela Guerreiro (also the projects' Artistic Director), Francisco Pedro, Thomas Kampe, Stephanie Schober, Colin Poole, Filip Van Huffel and Natalie Gordon, and Gaby Allard. During the residencies we took a range of workshops in improvisation, choreographic tools, physical techniques such as Feldenkrais and Release, and production-related skills (sound editing, film). There was also a lot of discussion about choreography and related social and political areas such as the responsibility of the artist. In every residency we had a significant amount of time to research and develop our own choreographic work for presentation at DanceKiosk festival in Hamburg in July 12th-24th. We had the opportunity to present our work to our peers, mentors and the public at regular stages of the project. The most important outcomes of the project for me were:

- The chance to have so much support and mentorship within an independent creative process.
- The opportunity to travel to new cities to create, which allowed me a greater sense of freedom and risk-taking in my work as well as the opportunity for transcultural exchange.
- The opportunity to assess my practice and interests in a wider cultural context than previously available to me.
- New collaborations and networks.
- Renewed confidence, inspiration and practice.

The purpose of the project more than met its aims. My involvement was extremely valuable and rewarding, and has already opened up new opportunities for me to perform my solo installation *Towards Stillness*, premiered at DanceKiosk. I also have new ideas for future work, and intend to commence an MA in Choreography at Dartington in 2010.

I highly recommend that any choreographers wishing to participate in *Dance Beyond Borders* are supported in the future by LUTSF, as I think programmes such as this are one of the most valuable investments that can be made in the early stages of an artistic career.

Many thanks to yourself and the Fund. Without your support it is likely that I would not have been able to participate in *Dance Beyond Borders*.

Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions about the project.

Best Regards

Saffy Setohy

REPORT

Dancing Beyond Borders: A reflection. By Saffy Setohy

During my time participating in the *Dance Beyond Borders* programme I have found myself both inspired and challenged, reexamining existing, and gaining new, knowledge. I created a solo work entitled *Towards Stillness* performed by myself - a big stepping stone for me both as a choreographer and performer. This report analyses and reflects on significant moments and reoccurring themes during this creative process in the particular framework offered by *Dance Beyond Borders*.

Artistic Process



The first residency in Hamburg offered a very useful workshop week led by filmmaker Lutz Gregor. I had little experience of working with dance film. Lutz' approach proved to be incredibly relevant not only for the medium of film, but also in terms of thinking about choreography and composition. We worked through a series of tasks with partners and small groups, followed by periods of group reflection on the results of our tasks. Use of rhythm, timing, perspective and space, the relationship between the spectator and performer, were all considerations that were discussed. The importance of finding out what your interest is as a creator and therefore how that affects decision making arose. I found myself referring to these points of discussion throughout my whole creative process. Angela (Guerreiro) also introduced in Hamburg what was to be an extremely important element in my learning:



detailed movement research and analysis. She had given me a very specific task to work on which was the spiral of the spine, from pelvis to head. I spent several challenging days trying to discover all the possibilities within this movement pattern, task by task, and then with freer improvisation. I found that this spiral pattern had become less embodied by me than other patterns over time. Through doing this detailed research I was able to begin re-programming the pattern into my neurological pathways whilst also finding a methodology for taking a very specific movement idea and gaining a lot of choreographic 'mileage' out of it, with clarity and intention. I was able to move away from a cerebral

place concerned about the whole concept of the piece I wanted to make, and allow a level of body intuition to lead my research for a while. This is in contrast to my usual way of working. I do not usually start with the body's function, but rather a concept, emotion or image. I had not challenged myself to this detailed level (in terms of movement vocabulary) in my own choreography before, and was supported in finding methods to do so.

I had a crisis point in the London residency. I had got so far into the movement research that I had lost sight of my original concept for the work as a whole. The material I was presenting to my peers was not holding their interest, nor mine. I had lost the overall choreographic intent, so the material had become seemingly arbitrary. After a discussion with mentor Stephanie Schober during which she encouraged me to reflect on, articulate and rediscover my interest for making a solo in the first place, I recognized the desire to make something more intimate and experiential for the viewer. A decision was made to use all the material gathered so far, place it in an installation context as originally envisaged, with sound, video projection, the audience in the space with me rather than seated, and find out what the work would present, a notion that Thomas Kampe raised. It revealed the things I had hoped for in the beginning of my process. The close proximity of performer and audience enabled a level of intimacy and the perception of extremely minute detail in my body and changes in performative state. Peers and mentors commented that suddenly the material had become 'alive'. They could now start to see what I had been researching - movement vocabulary resourced from using imagery and sensation of various landscapes.

Through setting my work in this installation context, I also saw the potential of the installation as a very specific environment in itself, and how the role of performer and audience could interchange. I had a clear concept again to begin composing and selecting my material in relation to. This crisis was an important turning point in the process, and pushed me into some very clear decision making. It was also an important lesson in balancing looking at the bigger vision of the work with paying attention to detail, in working between rationality and intuition as discussed in the very first residency. In a later residency, mentored partly by Natalie Gordon, I remembered an approach to movement that is useful for both composition and movement analysis purposes. She utilized Laban theories as well as early developmental patterns. I had received this information before in my training, but realized that I had not referred to and practiced it in as much detail. With Natalie's and Filip

Van Huffel's rigorous and playful encouragement, I found myself paying much more attention to increasing the dynamic and rhythmic range of my work, as well as the actual vocabulary. Natalie encouraged us to assess what we were doing in Laban terms, and compare this to what we wanted to achieve. I also found myself drawing 'energy charts' in the same comparative way (a method of drawing the choreography rather than writing it). These were useful tools to see my work objectively, and to find out if I was really achieving my aims. I mentioned before that we had discussed the importance of finding out what our interests were, and selecting suitable methodologies to achieve this. Being able to objectively analyze my process and methodologies was important to find out if I was working appropriately for my creative vision and its advancement. By this stage I had made a decision to structure the piece in four clear sections rather than a collage or montage format, with each section having a very specific atmosphere and environment. I layered clear choices into my improvisational material, so that it could become as embodied and clear as the set material. The layers were spatial (which pathways, which planes or range of kinesphere was I using?), rhythmic, dynamic/qualitative and performative decisions (where was my focus, what was my mental and physical intention?). What movement vocabulary was I using? Did this serve my aim? I related my choices back to my atmospheric intention for each section. My collaborator and I had chosen which kind of images we would be projecting and what kind of sounds we would use to reinforce the clarity of each section. As the visual and aural aspects became finalized I was able to increase and practice the specificity of my choices, taking into consideration all the elements of the performance as a whole.



The value of transcultural exchange

Having the other participants at hand to observe and feed back on my work was so important in this process, allowing me to assess how my performance/the work, its meaning and intention was perceived compared to what I wanted to communicate. It was also useful to analyze other styles of work that were being created, to compare processes, methodologies and ideas. Workshops with the mentors in composition, improvisation as well as techniques such as Feldenkrais, allowed new channels of thought to open up in relation to myself as an artist, as a creative body, and in regard to thinking about methods of working, teaching, mentoring, communication and documentation. Through our interactions as a group we learned to refine our ability to articulate our ideas and opinions, question others, give and receive critical feedback, and reflect. All skills that I think are very important as a dance artist. This was partly encouraged through regular 'sharings' of our work in progress to each other and the public. The aspirations of *Dance Beyond Borders* to promote transcultural exchange had permeated not only my experiences with my peers and mentors, but also my creative product. Learning about our differences and similarities in ways of working and thinking, informed by our training and cultural background, enabled me to recognize my own position. Working in environments other than my home city (London) contributed to a greater feeling of freedom and willingness to risk-take. I also recognized even more the value and quality of the training I had received at Laban. Positive and negative aspects of the British dance scene were highlighted to me (for example an active and supportive independent artist's network). My suggestion for the future of *Dance Beyond Borders* is to attract applicants from a wider European geography, as half of us had come from British training institutions and working backgrounds. This would allow an even greater diversity of cultural exchange. The value of transcultural exchange in this project cannot be underestimated for its ability to help the artists involved in recognizing and assessing their own work in relation to a wider arts industry.

My collaborator Reynir Hutter contributed greatly to my inspiration and final decisions with his knowledge of other mediums in the latter stage of the work. After having been in a studio by myself, other peoples input was refreshing. I acknowledge in hindsight that whilst working on my own for so long felt particularly challenging at times, I needed to prove to myself that I was capable of finding methods to work effectively without relying on collaboration. I have worked collaboratively for most of my career to date. This project highlighted to me that my collaborator and I had come to a very positive place in our working relationship, communicating well, challenging but also supporting each other. Despite being more in a ‘commissioning’ relationship this time (my collaborator had come in to the work at a much later stage, with only two weeks left), our understanding of each other and the way we were able to communicate effectively made for an extremely productive and creative experience. The work also found a cohesiveness that I think is at a much higher level than some of my previous work because the content detail had been carefully considered, researched and realized at every stage. The one element that I could not really control in performance was the audience. I like this open aspect of the work however. I have not had enough varied audience (people who aren’t mentors or peers) to test the work and allow me to consider all the possibilities in the exchange between performer and spectator, and its cultural implications. In Germany I found that the audience did not move, however close I got to them. They made direct eye contact, with both me and each other. In London, where I had the only other opportunity to present the work to an ‘outside’ audience, people were much more reserved, moving out of my pathway. Yet this meant that they also moved through the space, away or toward me, forming different patterns and groupings, which could be compared metaphorically to ideas like migration, for example. I found these two experiences very interesting in their differences and what that brought to the work. Either way the audience were not passive, they were making decisions, and that was my aim.

Future considerations, and Artistic responsibility

For this particular project I intend to continue to develop the embodiment and complexity of the movement vocabulary, and further define the fourth section (in which a live feed is placed on the audience and I am responding to their physical behaviour). I see that now it is important for me to develop my skills further as a performer not only for servicing other choreographers creative visions, but for my own too. We spoke during Dance Beyond Borders about recognising your role. In the case of this project I had a multi-faceted role, which was sometimes very difficult for me in terms of confidence, motivation, identifying my aims and finding methodologies. This was to do with keeping objectivity. If I am outside of my own work, I can see what is happening in the space, I can direct others, I can problem solve much more easily. If I dance for someone else, I can follow their direction and offer my responses, trusting their decision-making. I think that by setting myself the challenge to be both performer and choreographer, I enriched my abilities in both roles, and found a renewed confidence and rigor. I found also a level of trust in my instincts: the difference between ‘digging’ for the choreography and allowing the choreography to emerge. I think the appropriate balance of the two approaches depends on what kind of work one is trying to produce and at what stage of the process the artist is at. Getting this balance right probably comes with experience. We reflected with Thomas Kampe on ‘goal setting’, even relating choreography to models of business planning. I can now define and articulate more clearly what my artistic concerns are, and why. One area in particular that I would still like to focus on, is finding new methodologies for realizing my work. I think this improves again through experience, and also I’ve found it is helpful to set myself smaller tasks throughout the process (such as working with one body pattern or one spatial pathway), boundaries which paradoxically give me a lot of freedom to create without negative value judgement.

Performing the choreographic work at DanceKiosk is an important aspect to Dance Beyond Borders for gaining a sense of achievement and also in learning how to work from research, ideas and process to producing and presenting. There are some questions that I have in terms of taking my work further afield. How do I find the right type of venues and contexts for my work to be shown in? Throughout my career I have explored a desire to stage contemporary dance in new realms and, through doing so, to find new audiences. I wish to make my work accessible through its context and delivery without compromising its content. This is in part my reason for an interest in collaboration. I find that collaborating with artists from different backgrounds encourages me to question my own practice, and move the parameters of what I think I can do with the expressive potential of the body. Eventually I would like to use gallery spaces, nightclubs, festivals, historic sites, warehouses - in short, non-conventional spaces - for presenting dance. I am also interested in how the conventions of the formal theatre can be subverted. In the context of DanceKiosk I worked with the facilities that were available to me to come up with the best compromise, retaining the conceptually essential aspects of my work: The audience should be in the performance space, there is use of multi-dimensional projection and the material is composed with no fixed front view.

The compromise meant that there was still a fourth side of the space that was left open to the seats, meaning that a small amount of audience could view the whole experience from the outside. Whilst this was not my choice, I got some interesting feedback about what that experience was like as a viewer, to be able to watch other audience members and the shifting roles of audience/performer. This is an aspect that I may like to take further in some way. To summarize on this point, there are various ways that I could present this work, and it would be interesting to see what arises from each. However, it feels important to keep the essential aspects. I have made life difficult for myself, having created a piece that is not easily transferable from venue to venue. I recognize though that I have a responsibility, and now the confidence, to stick to what conditions feel right for my work and seek those out as far as possible, rather than try to fit my work into a situation that is not appropriate. As a group we often spoke of the responsibility of the artist in the wider context of the world. Looking at the work produced by the Dance Beyond Borders group, I feel that it is important for us to keep reflecting on who we are making our work for, and why. I am still looking for where my work belongs, but I feel that being true to the work I want to make, yet always considering my audience, is a good step forward. I feel a strong sense of responsibility to contribute to making contemporary dance culturally recognized as being just as valid as other forms of art. Not through making issue-based or grassroots/community focused work necessarily, but to help it be appreciated as an art form in itself. I have discovered that my interest is no longer in making work that comments on natural and built environments, and the impact of these environments on humanity from a subjective viewpoint. Rather it is in using the mode of presentation as an environment in which performer and spectator roles are more intimately bound up with one another, and questions of collectivity and individuality can be examined. I am also considering the fact that I normally choreograph my work on other dancers. I am evaluating how I can achieve a more complex movement language through improving my level of direction, methodology and using my own body more as a research tool. I have never had problems realizing concepts, images or atmospheres in my work, but the physicality of the work, to my disappointment, has always been a bit underdeveloped. I feel that I have found the discipline and rigor now to allow the time and space for this aspect to

become more maturely realized.

Dance Beyond Borders has been an extremely timely and valuable experience for me, both personally and artistically. On the whole there was a good balance of independent and mentor-led time. The realisations and practices that arose during my time in the project will serve me well into the future. I have gained new inspiration as well as firmer confidence in my competence as an artist. My intention is to go on performing and choreographing, and gain a Masters in Choreography. The friendships and collaborations I have formed during Dance Beyond Borders have allowed me to feel less isolated and more inspired in an increasingly challenging and competitive industry. I am extremely grateful for being given the luxury of so much time and support to really develop and produce. I hope that Dance Beyond Borders lives on to support many other artists in their endeavors.

I gratefully acknowledge that the travel cost of my participation in this project was supported by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund.



Photo credits:

1- Lutz Gregor's workshop, taken by Anne-Careen Engel.

2- In performance, taken by Anja Beutler.

3- In performance, taken by Anja Beutler.

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