

25th October 2011

Dear Secretary of LUTSF

Please find enclosed my report from my recent trip to Johannesburg, South Africa for a community dance and music project *Ithuba*.

Title: Ithuba Community Dance Project

Dates: 31st July until the 29th August 2011

Place: Kathelong, Johannesburg South Africa.

This year I was invited to assist choreographer Tamara Mclorg mount a community dance project in collaboration with composer Chris Benstead with 100 young people from Ithuba Skills College. For one month students from the college took daily contemporary dance classes and creative sessions to build a 1 hour dance piece performed in the township. I had two main purposes for travelling to Johannesburg to be a part of this project; to experience a community dance project within a challenging environment and an area that is in post conflict and to observe the creative collaboration between live music and dance.

The opportunity has left a lasting impact on me both professionally and personally, as an artist it has informed my own practice in Northern Ireland showing me ways to engage the wider community and connect people who are marginalised in society and living in a post conflict area which draws some comparisons to that of areas in Northern Ireland. It has also opened up a new passion in music for me, creating a deeper understanding of how important music choices are and has allowed me to reflect upon my own work in Northern Ireland and future collaborations with music in my work.

During the month long trip there has been many highlights however one that has been the forefront of my mind since has been the reaction of the surrounding community. I observed not only how inspired and energised the students were by the project but also the local community who had a positive response to it. A story from one of the musician on the project who is local to the township explained how after one of the performances numerous local people arrived at his house to express their delight and praise for the performance saying that it was something that should continue. To me this shows the success of any community project that it engages and connects the wider community and not only the participants as it's this support that will allow a project such as Ithuba to continue to grow.

It was important for me to share my experience in Johannesburg with other dance artists in Northern Ireland therefore I did a presentation and question and answer session with members of Dance Resource Base an organisation for dance in Northern Ireland, the Elderflowers Dance Company Belfast and Sutemos Youth Dance Company Co. Tyrone.

For further information on the Ithuba Skills College please search the following link <http://www.ithuba.org/> and for information on community dance here- <http://communitydance.eu/>

Thanking You

Sheena Kelly



Report

Ithuba means opportunity in Zulu and that is exactly what my trip to Johannesburg offered me and the surrounding community. Ithuba was a large scale dance and music project which involved 100 young people from the township area of Kathelong about 35km South East of Johannesburg, an area that is geographically isolated and economically and socially deprived. The project was led by choreographer Tamara McLorg and composer Chris Benstead with the support of Ithuba Skills College and Austrian NGC research. Over a one month period, the secondary school at the college worked intensively to create a new contemporary dance piece to perform in the local township for family and friends. Each morning students had a contemporary dance technique class followed by rehearsals and creative sessions in dance and music to develop a one hour long piece.

During the project I assisted choreographer Tamara McLorg together with three dance assistants from Germany, Mexico and Austria. As assistants we taught morning class which covered basic contemporary techniques, focus, and discipline and performance skills. I observed how choreographer Tamara structured her morning class to get the most from each group, as well as how my peers used different methods to communicate, warm up and encourage the young people. Reflecting upon my own teaching within a community setting I saw different ways to use the voice and language to describe actions and encourage the most movement potential from all the young people. For much of the trip the temperatures were low with snow on several occasions, therefore working in a hall with a hard surface and no heating you had to be very aware that the bodies were safely and effectively warmed up under the extreme weather conditions. Alongside this I got the rare chance to work with live musicians. This was a first for me and an element of my work I am interested in developing. It allowed me to develop new skills in musicality and collaboration as well as realising just how important music is within a class. From this I now make more conscious decisions as to why I use certain music, how it works with a particular sequence whilst trying to use a wide range of styles within a class.



As a full project what I felt was interesting and something that I will take into my own practice is how much the project engaged all of the community and not just the young people involved. This was achieved by engaging locals in the costume making, cooking of food, bringing in local musicians and engaging the local dance coach within the project. An important decision was also made prior to the project regarding the venue in which the piece would be performed with the decision that a local venue in the township would engage the community more than a prominent venue in Johannesburg. All these decisions were integral to the success of the project allowing it to have a wider impact and sustainability afterwards. For me this is now something I am trying to include in my own projects in Northern Ireland so that I don't not only see the immediate picture of the dancers but outside factors which can support and sustain the project in the future.

Within the artistic elements of the project I respected how the artistic team were aware not to force a westernised view of what dance and theatre should be but allow the project to be fully devised and very much influenced by the young people and the culture. Previous to beginning the project the young people had wrote poems and raps around the themes home, hope and opportunity. Within this they discussed issues affecting them including poverty, family, HIV, sexual abuse and their own future. These poems became a part of the piece and allowed these young people to have a strong voice and opinion in their home area as the new generation. From chatting with the students you could clearly see so much potential in them and they spoke enthusiastically of high hopes for the future in social work, medicine and teaching, jobs which will make an impact on their community and the generations to come.



Conclusion

To live in and experience a culture far removed from my own was incredibly humbling and inspiring. Young adults and children who are faced with extreme conditions of poverty, racial differences and isolation yet who have this incredible ambition and joy in life is something I will take away with me. I witnessed how to work intensively within difficult conditions to achieve high professional standards whilst still recognising social difficulties and the importance of cultural identity. I have reassessed the ways in which I deliver projects, understanding how the decisions made prior to the project commencing are just as important as the creative side and saw different ways to inspire and engage young people who are surrounded by so many conflicts and contradictions in life. The legacy of the project will continue with weekly dance classes set up and the potential of future projects in South Africa and also within the community dance projects I choose to develop in Northern Ireland. This trip will continuously inform my own practice for years to come.

<http://www.ithuba.org/>



