

Dear Chair of the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund

Please find enclosed a report of my trip to Sweden to work with Lisa Torun. The project started from 16th July – 4th August 2007 at Dance Centrum, Malmo, Sweden. The purpose of the project was to develop my choreographic skills and particularly focus on elements that are not in my form, Kathak, to generate ideas that could potentially lead towards furthering the artform without diluting its essential characteristic qualities.

The trip was an enriching experience and I have come away with a palette of tools that I can use as part of my own choreographic process. The aims that I had set out in my application to the scholarship were met and in addition have learnt other creative possibilities such as composing text for dance; hearing it as rhythm, soundscape, texture as well as the significance of the words. I also learnt how to assess my own vocabulary from an external perspective and by what means to examine my decision during a creation of work that will indeed have an impact of my future works consciously and subconsciously.

It has been exciting working with a choreographer who is generous and passionate about dance and music and curious to know where I as a dancer comes from and how the two vocabularies and cultures meet, inform and borne new ideas. We presented a sharing of the ideas at the dance studio in Malmo and hope to present it at The Place in London as part of Touch Wood where key dance VIPs witness the results of the research. Support from LUTSF has been, and will be, announced/printed in all presentations. A short statement will be loaded onto the Sonia Sabri Company website along with images and LUTSF will be credited for its support. A mention also will be added in its newsletter. The research has been so stimulating it has created a foundation for a new solo as part of my repertoire and I am currently looking into the possibility of creating a dance on film or live performance. As part of all performances and projects, programme notes promotion materials printed and electronic with LUTSF logo will be distributed wherever presentation of the work will take place including national and international venues. LUTSF will be kept informed of future progress.

I hope you will find the report an interesting statement of my experience. I would also like to take this opportunity to say "Thank You" for supporting this project.

Yours sincerely

Sonia Sabri

Report

Choreographic Development Project with Lisa Torun 16th July – 4th August 2007, Malmo, Sweden

Introduction

I decided I wanted to do a research / Choreographic development project with Lisa Torun as she has produced and continues to now in Sweden produce exciting and refreshing work for the contemporary dance scene with a strong focus of combining movement, visual design and live music. The key ingredients of her work especially that of live music are very similar to that of Kathak, yet the cultural and artistic vocabulary are so far apart that it would make an interesting research and development project. I have reached a point in my career where I feel I need new stimulation and further guidance in my choreographic development in order for me to experiment and create original work, which currently excites my audiences. Lisa was approached to lead exploratory sessions for three weeks musician Sarvar Sabri who plays a range of percussion instruments and myself. Her particular skill in creating fresh and intelligent work using Live music and involving musicians as part of the choreography as opposed to sole accompaniment with musicians situated on one side of performance space as in Indian dance performances was our starting point.

Aims

- Artistic understanding – familiarise with each artists' skills; their unique qualities and to engage with high profiled artists for possible future collaboration;
- Collection of new key ideas/ development of choreographic methods. Explore the Kathak vocabulary using choreographic tools of a contrasting dance genre. The key aim here is to reinvent the form from within. Lisa identify quality material with particular focus on dynamic range, pace, texture and presentation values;
- Collection of compositional ideas – working further than simple accompaniment is the emphasis. The musician/ composer will explore vocal and rhythmic ideas to interact with and physicalise the movement material and tease the role of dancer and musician.

Achievements

In the first week we had many discussions about what is unique about our respective forms, why and how they are the way they are and why we have chosen to work in those disciplines and what our artistic visions are. From these points we looked at various tasks to highlight the "uniqueness" which provided a clear foundation and understanding about the way we move, sound, inherited and 'trained' skills and its application in a variety of creative scenarios.

Lisa taught me a selection of short movement phrases, which to begin with were so alien to my body as not only it was in an unfamiliar movement language but also it was much more a personalised style, which looked amazing on her body. It was clear that Lisa had created a language of contemporary technique to suit her and her aesthetics which was fascinating to hear about an eventually physicalise. I was prompted with various images from photographs that Lisa had collected and personal visualisations to help understand the seed of movement phrases. Learning a phrase using a technique somewhat confused and challenged my body but also invigorating to try something outside my 'safe' zone and encourage me to think differently about moving as dancing in kathak is second skin and I would say a subconscious activity.

I was then asked to create various sequences within given tasks by Lisa using my own vocabulary. This was comparatively easier and yet the nature of the tasks inspired me to create sequences beyond my usual choices. The relationship of recited rhythms with the musician Sarvar Sabri was also explored a new and dynamic way. We explored the relation of two people who don't know each other and my movement and his rhythms to become the anchor of the sequence although we were not to relate intentionally what each other was doing. At first it was quite strange as traditionally in kathak the dancer and the musician are always in dialogue with one another if not playing together. Here this relationship was teased and pulled apart and it still worked on so many different levels and leaves the spectator wondering about the two existences in the same space. A few improvisations around this theme opened up so many possibilities and the first week on an exciting note.

The second week comprised of working with music as a stimulus for choreography including live instruments Tabla and Stumna through to processed sounds from the computer. Live vocals including mnemonic syllables, song and text were explored with different functionalities such as soundscape, accompaniment, stimulus, dialogue, contrast, etc. We tried a variety of possibilities and it was just a mind-blowing experience. Various grooves, tonal qualities, textures were created to provide a canvas for movement to begin and develop. A text written by Lisa was used to initiate a movement phrase and it was fascinating and inspiring to witness how an idea comes to life and how it builds into a something more substantial. The text made it easier somehow to engage with a range of dynamics of the body and added a completely different feel in the space usually Indian music. We explored using my voice while moving reciting text or singing a song in English and in Urdu, Punjabi and Hindi and what that did to me and my dancing. It was noted that dancing to song sung by myself during dancing added an intriguing and emotional quality. Maybe something to develop in my future work

Sarvar and Lisa worked together on creating a rhythm scape for me to improvise only using my upper body and absolutely no legs/footwork, which is inconceivable idea in kathak especially when you are asked to perform to rhythms. This was probably the most challenging aspect of the project. I had to think about Lisa's movement aesthetics and marry them with my kathak. I also set myself a personal challenge to try and do things which I would not normally do i.e. seen other kathak dancers use as part of their vocabulary and experiment how it would engage with my body. A lot of mental work was put in to create this section. We then tried me reciting the now composed rhythm whilst dancing. This was so difficult. Various musical ideas were coming to light and already it began to sound like an original sound score for a new work. We explored this on several layers including the tonal qualities of male and female voices and at one point got a child's interpretation on the rhythms and recitation of the text. Lisa commented it had the making of a humorous piece if I ever needed to think further about humour in dance. We experimented with reversing movement sequences, slowing the pace, animated expressions, etc. We experimented with mime and childhood memories and this brought further dynamic and range of movement qualities and interesting spatial designs.

In the final week we consolidated all the segments of material we mutually felt were successful representations of our research and collaboration. We further developed some of the segments of work in movement, music, text and also discussed potential costume and set designs for this type of 'hybrid' work and whether it could be the seeds of a dance on screen work/ site specific/ intimate spaces – how would the choreography develop, what thematic, structure, vocabulary choices would we make for a piece for different contexts and approaches. It was very useful to discuss these aspects with a choreographer who is experienced in creating acclaimed work for film, site specific, large theatre spaces (with orchestras!) and intimate rural spaces. It certainly revealed so many different methodologies of creativity and presentation, which was so refreshing and inspiring.

Lisa managed to arrange a small gathering to share our ideas on the final day of our project. We had some dancers, promoters and dance development personnel from various organisations in Malmö and Stockholm. The feedback was very positive and some were asking when the final work would be ready and if we had any plans to tour, etc. The curiosity and interest from our audience was a good indication that this work had potential and it was a good concept especially with kathak, contemporary technique and live music in an abstract setting.

Conclusion

This project was much needed at this time in my career. For the last ten years I have been working within my form and collaborating with choreographers and dancers of the disciplines and producing work and touring it internationally. I was beginning to run out of fresh ideas and felt my creativity needed revitalising. This was an excellent project to do just that. It particularly worked well because Lisa has a similar artistic training as required of a kathak dancer i.e. ability to sing, compose, act, mime, play a musical instrument as well as dance! The similarity was the perfect foundation and it was amazing to see and experience the virtuosity of all the artists working together in different genres and everything working is one whole creative unit.

The creative possibilities that spontaneously happened and then were developed in the short time are excellent examples and has provided me with choreographic and compositional methods that I could use in my work. The various tasks and stimuli have helped me to assess my own movement vocabulary from other perspectives and again I hope I can use to develop my dance technique and content from this. I have come away with so much on a creative, spiritual, musical, and emotional level with which I look forward to using and informing my work for a long while.

I would recommend this approach to any dance artist or choreographer who is looking to create and perform work on a longer-term basis. There is only so much one can give and if one wants to produce original and quality work it is very important to relieve oneself from the pressures of making work and find a way to 'recharge' one's creative battery, and to take time to absorb and be inspired by observing and experiencing other artists' work and seek forms of stimuli.

Sonia Sabri