

Dear LUTSF

Please find enclosed my project report. The project is focused upon my time as a participant studying on the Axis Dance Company's 'summer intensive' course, which took place in California from 3 August to 11 August 2015 at the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts 1428 Alice Street,
Suite 200 Oakland, CA 94612

I have also included a supporting video of interviews with other participants and course leaders / Axis company members.

I feel that the purpose of my project was fully achieved. I have learnt new improvisation techniques and wish to apply to them to my physical theatre work. Also, as a performer with a disability, I have enjoyed many opportunities to further explore ways I might be able to translate another person's movements to suit my own body. In addition, I have made new professional contacts.

I intend to screen the video I created to share it with my various networks, in order to encourage others to work in the field of dance. The screenings will take place in October 2015.

These include a screening for peers and other dance professionals at Farnham Maltings in Surrey including the stopgap dance company and a screening at the Colchester Buddhist Centre in Essex.

My project highlights include assisting with choreographing a duet for performance and participating in highly energized 'dance jams' accompanied by atmospheric live music.

I would like to offer the following advice for future awardees:

- Really make the most of your time by making new professional contacts and friends.
- Talk with people local to the area you are visiting. This will not only enhance your enjoyment your project, it could also give you new ideas for future projects, and encourage others to set up plans of their own by applying for funding too. Share your enthusiasm and inspiration.
- Where possible record your experiences so that you can review them at home. Find some quiet time for reflection at the end of each day of your project, in order to think about what you might want to achieve the following day. Allow yourself time to simply be present and enjoy and absorb your experience.
- It is always okay to ask for help, especially if you need an extra pair of hands or someone to support you. (I was frequently 'borrowing' people to video sections of workshops for me so that I could directly participate in them rather than simply observing them.)
- Have fun! Appreciate where you are every day, because opportunities like this are amazing. Enjoy!

Thank you so much for this wonderful experience.

Tom Thomasson
Tuesday, October 13, 2015

This report focuses on my time with the Axis Dance Company as a participant/student on the company's 'Summer Intensive' dance course, which ran from August 3rd to August 11th 2015 in Oakland, California.

What does the space need?

When asked this question by the course leader during an improvisation, it prompted a whole cascade of useful exploration points, both personally and professionally for me. I'll admit, it also prompted a less relevant thought, that is: 'I think the space in my stomach needs lunch time', however I'll keep to the dance based activity. Most of all, this question inspired me to consider releasing some of my inhibitions when dancing and forget whatever insecurities I may be holding around my movement. This then prompted further internal questions such as, how do I wish to challenge myself in this moment to achieve what is needed in the space, whilst also looking after my body?

I remember points during an improvisation at an early stage in the summer intensive, where I recognized that I would need to move at a faster pace in order to pursue what I felt the improvisation required. This meant addressing certain habits like wanting to move my whole body slowly whenever I felt physical tension (in that moment I was experiencing leg tension, which frequently occurs as a result of Cerebral Palsy).

I chose to work on the floor to relieve the discomfort in my legs and also to isolate the parts of my upper body that I could move quickly with ease. Doing this allowed me to answer 'what does the space need?' by changing my energy dynamic to offer something new to others, whilst also respecting my own physicality.

The improvisations also allowed me to explore not only my physical habits, but also my cognitive ones.

By day three of the summer intensive I was becoming aware of an old negative mental pattern that still occasionally finds its way into my thinking. I can sometimes associate the term 'challenging myself' perhaps too far with simply pushing my body. That is, seeing how much tension I can endure before needing to sit.

I knew deep down that this approach would not serve me well as it is not kind to the body. I also knew that no amount of 'post dance banana pancakes ' would genuinely soothe the discomfort, no matter how delicious they may be.

So I began to change internal conversation I was having with myself, from how do I push my body, to the much more helpful: how do I question my body in new ways? Thereby putting the focus back into exploration. Above all the improvisation modules with Axis reminded me of just how many constantly changing moments we are able to enjoy as dancers.

Such as new pace, new partners, new points of contact, new qualities, new levels, new interaction with a prop or space itself. The list continues.

Choreography module.

Creating diverse and interesting choreography, no matter what the exercise on the course, was always rooted in some of the basics of good dance practice. Basics such as: being clear with the intention of your movement, creating a dialogue with your partners around safety and/or comfort (whether this is verbal, e.g.: using a 'safe word ' to indicate when a threshold is reached, or non-verbal). Therefore, each person within the dance is aware of just how far someone may wish to explore a movement. I found this to be very helpful, as sometimes for me, the line between feeling challenged and just unsafe can be a thin line when I am working with testing my physical stability or balance.

Another good practice basic in choreography involved taking time to always look for an opportunity. Whether this is an opportunity to be inspired by the lines of another person's movement for example, or, for an opportunity to offer another dancer something. Perhaps we offer a new energy, or an emotion to add story to the dance, or perhaps we offer a means of physical support that can allow our partners to travel a movement across a space. This support, or 'ledge' for taking weight may also allow our partners to expand their comfort zone into previously undiscovered movement.

I found this to be the case when taking part in the 'ledges' exercise.

I had greater opportunity to explore what balance meant to me when supported by another person. Therefore, it was a constant lesson in letting go of fixed ideas and conceptions about what I felt my body could and could not do. In letting go, I was also able to focus simply on physically 'listening' and offering to whomever I was dancing with. Through clear communication trust develops so we can go further, we are able to challenge ourselves a little more.

From contact, to breaking contact, to no contact at all: all these provided pathways for choreographic exploration. I particularly appreciated getting to know 'negative space'. (The emptiness or air around a dancers physical form.) This often sparked off an exchange of quite playful movement.

Whether creating or learning choreography, one of the greatest personal benefits of the module was having room to consider my translation process. This process involved taking one individual dancer's movements and applying them in my own way to suit to my own body.

A key part of translating for me comes down to asking questions. The module has prompted me to add new questions to this list, which is:

What habit do I wish to challenge in this moment?

What movement qualities do I wish to embody?

What points of inspiration do I wish to use?

What do I wish to offer to the space/to the other dancers?

Where are the opportunities for listening to my partner's body and my own, so that we are both safe and challenged in equal measure?

Teaching practice module.

What I noted about the Axis dance company's approach to teaching was the flexibility of it, particularly relating to demonstrations and language used within these. Language would utilize a balance of both technical and non-technical dance terms on a regular basis. (For example using the word 'bend' as opposed to Plié.)

Demonstrations would be broken down into basic movement qualities first. Thereby increasing accessibility by offering a basis for any translations needed. (For example, words such as loose, sharp, swing, or open, might be used to describe the essence of a movement).

Dancers were encouraged to take this word and apply it to whatever body area that they felt able to work with, as opposed to focusing on a specific physical part of themselves. For example applying a movement to an arm instead of a leg if using a leg was not possible, or appropriate. Pre existing translations were also offered as avenues for development.

Options for building on basic qualities would be offered as starting points for refining a

movement and as a means of challenging ourselves. Such as: how far can you take this movement, or this energy, this line, this focus? etc.
Those leading a demonstration would offer physical markers to encourage participants to develop their timing. Such as 'twisting in your own way to one side by the 8th count'

We were given the opportunity to practice describing another person's improvised movements using words alone. (A second dancer would then listen to my voice and attempt to replicate the improviser's dance without looking). I was struck by how complex my descriptions became. I began to wonder whether my particular lengthy explanations would be helpful if I choose to use this exercise as a tool for aiding a blind or visually impaired dancer for example.

In contrast, removing spoken language and simply using sounds, was surprisingly effective. I applied pitch changes to convey higher or lower movements. I also altered the pace of my voice, or the emotion to suggest different qualities, (like the sound of laughter to imply a light, playful gesture).

This exploration in sound is certainly one I would like to repeat and use as an impetus for devising in my physical theatre work given the results. By working with sound alone, and releasing the constraints of specific instructions, dancers were encouraged to open up their intuitive creativity in order to interpret what they were hearing.

I am intrigued to see where else this intuitive creativity could lead.

Conclusion

After such a varied and exciting exploration with Axis, I feel I would like to continue to develop my practice as a performer using following reflections ':

- Translation is a process of ongoing exploration.
- Continue to look for new options, whether performing or teaching, as the results may be surprising.
- I will continue to challenge any fixed ideas I may hold about what my body can and cannot do.
- In groups scenarios, have the courage to open up a supportive dialogue with other participants.
- When teaching or simply communicating in general, maintain flexibility. This could be flexibility in the use of language or perhaps something in the way an exercise/ exploration is structured.
- When devising, always focus on offering to other dancers/performers in the group. (Whether this offering is technical skill, openness of communication, time, courage, humour etc) In doing this we create a new space for a truly engaging performance to develop.
Such offering may be the very thing that allows a group to set up really supportive conditions, so that the work is creative, exciting, and challenging, whilst also being genuinely welcoming and accessible for all.