

19th February, 2008

Dear Chair of LUTSF

Project: International Contact Festival, Israel, 19th Nov-22nd Dec 2007

Please find two copies of my report as required. I stated the purpose of my project as being a desire to refresh my own contact practice and inform my teaching of contact improvisation. I wished to be part of a creative exchange in an otherwise politically volatile country in order to experience Israel's rich cultural environment.

The festival offered me rich and intense opportunities to achieve my aims for my project. The culmination of attending 3 different weeks of the festival left me feeling I had been submerged in contact and had absorbed a massive amount of information. It is hard to explain how much I learned. One measure could be the improvised dances in which I performed at the end of the festival. I was asked to perform by a number of practitioners. At the end of the festival, I felt I was able to be more *present* and conscious of my dance than at the beginning of the festival. There was a wealth of information on which I found myself able to focus during my dances because I had soaked up so much information in master classes. This meant there was little room to allow the dance to become habitual or thoughtlessly repetitive. The idea of developing a future collaborative project with an Israeli teacher was born from the physical exploration we underwent together during the festival.

Another measure of the wealth of creative exchange I experienced was in the quality and depth of conversations I enjoyed on the topics of art, performance and politics. Prior to travelling to Israel I read a large number of related books. Conversations offered me forums to challenge or strengthen what I had read. My understanding of the complexity of Israel has greatly broadened.

I would recommend this festival to any dancers with a serious interest in contact. I got the impression that much of the psyche of Israelis is hugely influenced by the political situation there. Therefore, developing an understanding of Israel's political context was integral to understanding their approach to creativity. I would recommend the book 'Holy Land, Unholy War' by Anton La Guardia to any other awardees planning to go to Israel.

I have written an article about my experience in Israel for a dance information website called www.article19.co.uk. I also intend to create a photo gallery for the same website.

I'd like to thank the Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund for supporting the project I undertook in Israel. It was a rich learning experience I will never forget.

Yours sincerely,

Vanessa J. Cook

Report from Vanessa Cook

Awardee of Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund, 2008

As a lucky recipient of the Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund, I chose to go to Israel's International Contact Festival because I wanted to learn from established teachers and 'jam' with dancers from around the world. Israel has a complex identity and a rich cultural environment and I wanted to experience these by being part of a creative exchange in an otherwise politically volatile country. I hoped that dance would be a way of meeting people in as neutral an environment as possible despite Israel being a political hotbed. By living communally with the other participants I believed I would have the opportunity to engage in cultural exchange.

In a country that is dominated in western media coverage by political strife and violence something altogether different emerged.

The agenda for the festival showed a high level of creativity within its 3 contrasting weeks. The first was called "Contact on the Road" and was advertised on the website as an;

"Opportunity to travel around Israel while dancing. A five day journey to Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, Jaffa, and the new Ecological Art-Village of Vertigo. Participants will experience an abundance of places, teachers and friends. We will have a daily 3 to 4 hour activity with focus on the different places we will visit. Activities will take place indoor[s] and outdoor[s] as weather permits."

I journeyed to Heathrow airport, obeying the rules of the London Underground (complete silence, no eye-contact, no physical contact). I entered the corporate bubble of my British Airways 747 and spent isolated hours cut off by headphones and individually selected in-flight entertainment. The contrast of this to my destination couldn't have been sharper.

I arrived at sunset on a Friday, which is the beginning of the Jewish day of rest, (or Shabbat). This meant there was no public transport running. After a taxi ride into what felt like the edges of a wilderness, I arrived at the kibbutz which was the home of Vertigo Dance Company in the Ella Valley between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. I was taken to the communal sleeping area where 40 bodies and rucksacks were strewn all over a large open space. The eco-toilet had no flush, rather, a bowl of sawdust to cover all deposits.



After an informal Shabbat meeting (singing, reflecting, and blessings) and a delicious Shabbat meal, the evening of dance began. My first dance was with a landscaper, Eli, who wanted to improve his skills. He took his shirt off and we began. Such enthusiasm! I knew the rules of engagement on the studio floor more than I did the customs of Shabbat meetings so I found a level of familiar comfort in the dances I shared. It was the most at home I'd felt all day and where my real introductions began.

However, I had thoroughly enjoyed witnessing and being so warmly welcomed into a liberal Jewish Shabbat meeting.

That first evening introduced the two experiences that would thread through my entire trip; the familiarity of contact work and exposure to the unfamiliarity of Israel's many faces. Balancing these two engaged my interest completely for the duration of the month.

The pattern that emerged for the rest of the tour was that we travelled to a new place, had an intensive outside and enjoyed a jam in the evening with the local contact community before sleeping in Bedouin tents.

The places to which we travelled were varied and beautiful. Our first outside intensive was in a clearing up in the mountains near the kibbutz. I enjoyed eating olives and almonds from the trees and feeling the sun on my skin (trying to remember the incongruent thought that it was perhaps snowing at home). I enjoyed being in beautiful nature spots whilst having dance intensives. Some places lent themselves to dancing more than others. For example, there was a day that we spent at The Dead Sea where there was an unspoken consensus between all group members that the physical intensive needn't be our focus. At over 400 metres below sea level, it is the lowest point on the face of the earth with the highest saline levels of any body of water. The whole group stripped off and floated effortlessly in the thick, salty water. We then daubed ourselves in mud from the mineral beach and dried in the sun.

We looked like a cross between beautiful Greek ashen-grey sculptures and crude looking Neanderthal creatures. Our therapy started all over again as we washed the mud off and floated impossibly. This ritual absorbed our senses fully precluding any thought of dancing in that moment. However, the sensations would serve as a powerful, mental stimulus for dances later on.



The outdoor intensive setting I enjoyed the most was the Maktesh Qatan crater. Accompanied by only the sun, the wind and the occasional bird of prey, the landscape was vast and silent. At times, the huge, smooth rock formations made me feel as if I was on the surface of a different planet. The crater surfaces lent themselves to being climbed, pushed against, rolled along, hung off and balanced on. Dances with a partner and closed eyes enabled us to really explore the environment.

The intensives and evening jams were punctuated with the perfunctory activities of cooking and mealtimes, as well as other activities such as building mud walls in the eco village, climbing and abseiling a 50 metre summit over breakfast, hiking in the Maktesh Qatan crater, roaming the streets of Jerusalem and exploring the Luzit Caves. I found it utterly refreshing to be able to play and interact whilst travelling and participating in other outdoor activities. Everything we did fed into the dances that were shared with other participants.

When the end of week 1 arrived I reflected on its best features. I had thoroughly enjoyed all the other participants. Having spent 24/7 with the group, finding ourselves sleeping in Bedouin tents, sharing stories on the bus, exchanging ideas as we prepared and shared meals, we'd become a cohesive social group. The group members were all like-minded, open and friendly.

We rented 2 apartments together to stay in during the second week of the festival in Tel Aviv. The social group that formed remained an identity for the whole festival. Together we'd had an excellent introduction to some of the culture, customs, geography and practicalities of Israel.

One question that arose in my mind during the week was why all the participants were foreign, mostly European. Why didn't local dancers come on the tour? I think the content of the week offered the answer. Because a major focus of the week was seeing places, I imagine most Israelis had seen the places we visited (Israel being a mere 8,000 square miles whilst the UK, for example, is 94,000 square miles).



A friend offered another reason. To get value for money he said he would rather attend a week with more intensive classes and jams than attend the tour where we did one class or one jam a day intermingled with travel. This is the choice all the Israeli participants made, attending the 2nd and 3rd week in their droves. It seems that week 1 was tailor-made for the foreigner who is visiting Israel for the first time.

Week one's 'closing circle' reminded me of how unique contact jams are as a social sharing event. The tour closed in a field at sunset. Positive moments experienced between the group members were shared verbally.

All of the classes in week 2 were set in a studio, which meant there was an enclosed focus (unlike dancing in a crater for example). I enjoyed the classes I took with Ezter Gal (Hungary) and Ilanit (Israel). Both teachers took time to incrementally develop their strain of contact performance. They reminded me how to effectively teach contact using relevant exercises that build on each other. The jams were unavoidably influenced by the master classes. There were different spaces in which there were different conditions, for example, there was a silent room, a well-lit room and a space where there were musicians interacting with the dancers and vice versa. An additional feature of week 2 was the large number of Israelis that I met. Weighty and serious discussions about art, performance and politics took place. I felt as though I was constantly learning either verbally or kinaesthetically.

This process continued and intensified in week 3 (greenhouse week, where all participants lived together as a community in a school campus). I studied with Ka Rustler (Berlin) for the week, where a detailed analysis of anatomy was our stimulus. We explored bodily states into which the body can quickly slip in and out to achieve responsive dances.

The level of intensity increased each week. The degree of information I absorbed and the standard of dancing I enjoyed was directly proportionate to the intensity. Everyday offered me new information.

Part of the appeal of the contact community is that it exists spontaneously between participants and dissipates after the event. In a world of dislocated fast-paced living, I find I can only take pleasure in the exception that contact jams are to the pattern of modern life-styles lacking in cohesive communities. Part of the pleasure I derived from our bubble of mutual respect was that it took place in Israel, where for many, peace and good will remain an unachievable political pipe-dream.

My time in Israel was incredibly rich for this reason. I forged friendships with artists and teachers from around the world and discussed the possibility of working with both Israeli individuals and an established Israeli dance company, (Vertigo) in the future. I hope to return to Israel soon to realise these plans that were formed in embryo. I am grateful for the Lisa Ullman Travel Scholarship for affording me the opportunity I had to learn an inordinate amount about the practise and community of contact in Israel. My experience far exceeded my expectations. The knowledge I accrued has already seeped back into the teaching I do here in the UK and I anticipate it will continue to do so with time.