

Dear LUTSF

Please find enclosed the requested report following my trip to the FREQUENT FLYERS AERIAL DANCE FESTIVAL in Boulder, Colorado. I attended from 28th July until 6th August 2005. I apologise for the late arrival of this report and hope that this will not forfeit my award.

The purpose of my project was to gain and develop existing dance and aerial skills, using them in performance and choreography. It was fascinating to see how practitioners based in the US and also other countries such as Austria, New Zealand, Canada, France and several others, all differently interpret the generic term 'aerial dance' and practice it.

I took part in several classes during my stay and also took the opportunity to observe a class entitled, 'Poetics of aerial performance'. This gave me the perfect opportunity to observe Keith Hennessey work with the group to investigate where aerial dance movement comes from, how to generate it and most importantly (and my area of concern when choreographing aerial dance theatre work), the intelligent use of equipment to enhance a theme rather than glorify the piece of equipment being used.

I attended the 'bungee dance' class, and while learning this concept in a very different form to my own, I was also able to share my technique by teaching the other participants of the group certain elements of it, enlightening them to other ways of using bungee when also combining dance.

Observing Keith during 'Poetics of aerial performance' was one of the highlights of my time at the festival. He paid attention to detail of transitions between movements, concern over the use of 'circus' equipment to organically lift movement into the air and focussed on how to use it when there. I was so excited that there was someone from my field that was concerned with exactly the same focus as myself. The subsequent post-session conversations we had together and discussions about how to handle this very issue, teach and make people aware of its importance in every aspect of their work was a real high point for me.

Another wonderful element of the festival was having the freedom to become absorbed during the session, to be guided through and follow an idea from beginning to end, exhausting possibilities and physical choices without the pressure of producing a finished result. I was inspired by Keith's teaching and took the opportunity to soak up his knowledge and unique ways of working in the hope that I may consider these in my own way in the future. In addition to this, to attend such a specific event with experienced practitioners who are all willing to share ideas, knowledge and specific techniques was a rare and incredible experience. I feel extremely fortunate to have been a part of the festival.

I would recommend this festival to any other dancer/aerialist and even to dancers who wish to begin learning aerial skills and are interested in exploring 'dancing in the air'. Classes ranged from beginner level through to advanced, so allowed all participants the chance to develop at their own level. By attending the festival I achieved so many things. Not only the goals I had set out to, but I also took advantage of the networking possibilities that this event brings with it. I made some good friends, forged links with performers and experienced teachers from all over the world with whom I am regularly communicating; all this as well as introducing my technique to an audience eager to explore and understand it.

I also feel that through the support from the LUTSF I have been able to promote the work that you do, and in turn support a unique festival helping it to grow to provide even more opportunities each year.

Totally inspired by the teaching of Keith Hennessey and in addition to my aerial technique classes, I hope to provide 'aerial choreographic workshops' to share my newfound information. His teaching also drew attention to the fact that you learn an awful lot by 'doing' so by teaching these new findings I hope to develop my own approach the more I do it too.

I am also exploring the possibility of writing an article that explores the term 'aerial dance'. I am aware there are many interpretations worldwide and I personally feel that clarification and more descriptive terms would benefit everyone's understanding of this genre.

As I explained in my application I have been commissioned by Dance Northwest to create a piece of aerial dance theatre and the devising period began in August 05. I returned from FFADF to begin working on it. It is without doubt that my work was influenced by my findings and experience from the festival. My concerns lay with using the bungee purely to enhance my theme and I focussed on the transition on and off of the bungee during the piece; the subtle details that in essence provide the essential foundations for a striking piece of work.

I can't thank you enough for the opportunity to attend this festival. It has been the most wonderful experience and one that has without doubt enlightened me to how other countries and practitioners approach 'aerial dance'. It has answered many questions, but more importantly for me opened up many more doors and questions to continue my journey of discovery in this relatively raw genre. As well as learning new skills and experiencing different approaches to teaching it also filled me with confidence. Bungee-assisted dance is something I wholeheartedly believe in, and having shared it with both experienced practitioners and participants I am now more confident than ever that I must continue its evolution until it is seen worldwide as an aerial technique in itself.

I have enclosed two photocopies of this letter and the report along with the CD with both of these documents copied onto it. I regret to inform you that we were not able to take any photographs or video footage of the classes. Most tutors felt it an invasion of privacy.

Kind regards

Wendy Hesketh

P.S. I am very pleased to announce that I have recently launched my website. I would love you to have a look at it. There is a mention of The Lisa Ullmann Travel Scholarship Fund in it too – flying your flag high!
www.wiredaerialtheatre.com. Thanks again.

THE LISA ULLMANN TRAVELLING SCHOLARSHIP FUND REPORT

In July 2005 I was lucky enough to attend the Frequent Flyers Aerial Dance Festival (FFADF) in Boulder, Colorado. After patiently waiting for the list of workshops to be advertised on the website I eagerly signed up for *bungee dance*, *poetics of aerial performance*, *contact improvisation* and *womyn's work* which carried me through from 9am to 7pm each day. In addition to these classes there were also discussion groups, lecture demonstrations and performances by the class tutors.

Before I left I received all the information I needed through the post, and had to laugh when the first sheet warned me of the high altitude and oxygen usage. Performing at height at various sites, in all sorts of weather conditions for several years now, I had to giggle at the thought of me being concerned about the altitude. The smile however quickly faded, as I found myself puffing and panting

up one of the hills on the university campus on my way to the second lesson of the day! I was pleased though at how quickly my body adjusted to the change of altitude and I found the rest of the cycle journeys relatively painless.

I had many reasons for attending this unique, emerging festival. I wished to gain and develop existing aerial and dance skills as well as take the opportunity while surrounded by like-minded practitioners, to explore and develop choreographic possibilities when combining both dance and aerial skills.

I had set clear goals to achieve during my visit. I wished to develop my aerial dance performance and seek choreographic guidance from international aerial practitioners, with the possibility of sharing the technique I have been developing since 2000 (bungee-assisted dance) with other aerial artists. You can imagine how elated I was to find 'bungee dance' as one of the workshops on offer on the programme. Armed with my specially designed (hand made) bungee harness I traveled to the USA ready to learn 'bungee dance' and swap notes of my technical findings with the teachers too.

As I entered the workshop space on the first morning of the festival I was totally shocked to find a scaffolding tower (being used to access the loops of bungee cord hanging from rigging in the ceiling) and the teachers bouncing around in what can only be described as adult sized, glorified baby bouncers. Feet did not touch the floor and movements comprised of vertical bouncing, forwards and backwards somersaults while holding onto the bungee attachments at the sides of their body. This instantly made me question the title of the workshop, and in fact instigated an interest in the necessity of the use of correct and accurate terminology when labeling elements of a new art form. I realize that 'aerial dance' as a form in itself is relatively new and as such has many interpretations, but when combining the words 'bungee' and 'dance' in explanatory phrase, my expectation was to see a good balance of both of these skills.

I suppose 'bungee-assisted dance' and 'bungee dance' could sound like they were one in the same but in actual fact they couldn't be more different. *Bungee dance* involved being connected to two equal lengths of bungee cord, attached to either side of the waist. Participants were taught to use their own body weight to produce a bounce in an upward and downward motion. Vertical, forward and backward somersaults were possible and other upward and downward bouncing movements. As you were totally suspended and had a bungee cord connected to each side of your waist the hands are for the majority amount of time, tugging them in order to propel the body back up into the air again. This limits arm and leg movements. With *bungee-assisted dance*, one connection at the back of the harness allows the arms free range of movement and allows the arms and legs to be used creatively and expressively instead of functionally. It is also ground-based.

As the week progressed so did the lengths of bungee cord, enabling participants to manage to touch the floor with their feet for a fraction of a second if they put enough power into it. This meant more height and possibly more somersaults, but I was still searching for the 'dance' element within this concept. Music was played and as I understood, to the instructors this was dance movement on bungees.

As we hit our third day I asked if I could use a small area of their rigging set-up in a different way to show them the technique I have been developing. I call my technique, 'bungee-assisted dance' and I feel this is an absolutely accurate description of the technique. The bungee enables me or *assists* me to dance in a particular way. There was a rush of interest towards me as I began to show the possibilities of what my technique allows, and within the hour most people had tried the technique for themselves. We turned climbing harnesses around and used them in the way that I had originally, five years ago at the beginning of my research. People were eager to experience the feeling of ground-based flight that this technique gives you, even if it meant a little discomfort in their rather unsuitable harness setup.

Speaking with participants afterwards brought to light that by having their feet on the floor and being able to perform dance movements with the 'option' of using the bungees assistance, enabled them to really explore a whole new world of aerial movement possibilities with ground-based dance as the source.

For me, *bungee-assisted dance* is about having the choice of when to use it within a dance. I can dance normally and not engage the bungee at all, but then decide to use it in some massive or subtle way to assist my movement and theme. And at all times the bungee is never referenced, I very rarely hold it or touch it with hands at all as this removes the illusion of natural yet exaggerated flight.

With my experience of the *bungee dance* set up I would reference this as 'bungee bouncing' I felt no opportunity to convey any emotion or bring my own expression to the movement but instead found myself performing a range of tricks of a gymnastic form, the element of freedom and choice vanished into the distance. In saying this I by no means attack the form, only question its technical name.

This has thrown up massive questions in my practice and has alarmed me as to future terminology in the artistic world that I live. Could a person who had no aerial experience, wear a harness and hang in the air moving their limbs around to music and expect the audience to realize this as aerial dance? This of course is a much larger issue to tackle but it stresses my argument for a more accurate use of terminology at such a crucial stage of development in the aerial world.

Although initially disappointed at the bungee dance lessons the consequences of participating in the classes opened up many more issues I am interested in, allowed me to expose my technique and collect crucial feedback of it for reference at a later stage. There were several other classes I had enrolled on and the most inspiring of these was 'poetics of aerial performance' led by Keith Hennessey, a charismatic, feisty Canadian, "physical performer" (his own words) that enjoyed using aerial equipment but was, "by no means very strong or an expert in the air" (again, his own words). I chose to observe this class as a major focus point when choreographing using my technique is that I don't use it as an opportunity to perform tricks and therefore glorify its presence, but simply wish to enhance dance movement. The majority of participants were circus performers and very skillful on silks, rope, hoop and trapeze. Keith led the group through numerous stimulating exercises of exploration making them aware of different things that each of them do habitually. He worked on breaking habits down, seeing the apparatus/piece of equipment not as something to climb on or hold a position and present for applause, but as an object that had a specific theatrical use within an improvisation. I saw also that with each lesson he gained more trust from the group and as a result could ask more from them, really stretching both physical and theatrical skills to the limit. As a spectator this was beneficial in two ways, firstly I was able to note down his method and exercises as they happened – when participating it is difficult to remember everything in detail and in the correct order, and secondly it provided the opportunity to watch how participants interpreted information, and dialogue with Keith during these sessions made clear why he was setting such tasks, where he was hoping to lead them on their individual exploration and the conclusion of why go through it all anyway?

Keith was an inspiration both as a performer and as an educator and he was honest in his aerial abilities, but the way in which he approached aerial equipment and used theatre and dance in performance, far exceeded any virtuoso on a trapeze looking for applause after each obviously technically demanding move.

Keith and I share the need for honesty in performance and the chance to engage in conversation that included this as well as further investigation into his teaching methods and where he gets his inspiration from was literally priceless.

The rest of the time at the festival was spent learning specific skills, approaching contact improvisation differently and spending time absorbed within a woman only group entitled, *womyns work*. These all informed me of different approaches to teaching and also made me aware of how I as an individual would approach each learning process. [This connects with Keith's lectures on formed habits of performers, creators and teachers]. The feeling of freedom and liberation engulfed me from the outset and the cycle ride home each evening would feel similar to how I imagined Julie Andrews to feel when running across the open mountain tops of Austria ready to break into 'The Sound of Music'.

There was an amazing sense of family-like support, an open mindedness and sharing to the whole event, which is something I have never experienced before in similar setups. I believe the reason for this is that we are all searching. There are no rights or wrongs, only possibilities and avenues to explore. This emerging aerial world is an adventure playground and I believe it is within our role of adventurers/explorers to be as clear in our findings and teachings as we possibly can. I found confidence in sharing artistic opinions and concerns for the academic development of this exciting and relatively new genre. I hope that festivals such as this go from strength to strength, uniting many more professionals to source, develop and promote this form.

LUTSF made it possible for me to attend this festival. Without their help I could never have hoped to go. My findings, research and physical goals were all accomplished with much more besides. The most exciting result of all is that I now have different goals, different questions and ideas to improve *bungee-assisted dance* technique. I am eager to provide more opportunities for people to learn this skill, to widen their skill base and to develop the new teaching methods learned from Keith and Kim (amongst others) for myself. This festival inspired me creatively and my findings have without doubt fed into my work since my return, helping me approach the devising period of my next aerial dance theatre piece, "She lies with me..." very differently. Some breakthroughs were immediate but the most satisfying breakthroughs are those which I experienced a couple of months after my return. I am excited in the belief that I still have a few more around the corner.