

## 'LISA ULLMANN:

### **My friend, my mentor and my companion'**

Athalie Knowles talks about Lisa Ullmann at L.in.C 2007

(Athalie Knowles took classical ballet lessons at the age of 6 and continued these until she attended Bedford College of Physical Training in 1939 - where she was tutored in dance by Joan Goodrich. Laban and Lisa Ullmann visited the College and conducted classes during this time. From 1942 to 1947 Athalie taught dance at Paston House RC School and Queen Elizabeth's Girls Grammar School and during this time attended Modern Dance Holiday Courses. From 1945 she danced with the Demeter Dance Company, based at Toynbee Hall, giving performances in LCC Schools whilst attending classes at the Sigurd Leeder School of Dance. In 1947 Athalie was appointed Lecturer at Whitelands Teacher Training College and thence in 1954 as Lecturer at Dartford College of Physical Education. After taking the one-year Special Course at the Art of Movement Studio, Athalie was invited by Lisa and Laban to join the staff in 1957 - where she spent eleven years and was designated Deputy Principal. In 1968 she became HM Inspector of Schools with a 'Special assignment for dance in schools' from 1974. Athalie initiated the Report on Dance in Secondary Schools in England which was published after her retirement in 1981). Ed.

I felt very honoured when Sam & Susi asked me if I would talk about Lisa. Much has already been said about her as a teacher, but I would like to add this: she was, I am sure, the greatest teacher of Movement that England has ever known. She understood the secret of expression through moving. It is not wriggling about - however skilful or flailing the air with your limbs - it is a deep feeling inside the body which extends into personal space giving every movement and gesture meaning: that is the Art of Movement.

Lisa had hoped to spend Christmas 1984 with her old friend Sylvia Bodmer; she kept on hoping, but Sylvia had all her family to accommodate and so Lisa spent it alone - stubbornly refusing all other invitations. She came to Goring for my New Year's activities - not particularly important to a German. On New Year's Day we went for a walk by the sea as often before. After a short time she turned and started to talk about the pains in the lower part of her chest. She was adamant that she wanted to get back to Addlestone as soon as possible, nothing would change her mind. I saw her to the London Road and said 'Good-bye'. In the evening I 'phoned to make sure she was alright and was horrified to learn that she had turned off to Horsham and got lost. Why did she do this? She knew the route so well.

Fortunately, an ex-student, Barbara Ford (nee Hitch), lived nearby; she helped Lisa with her shopping and secretarial work and when it became necessary: fetched the Doctor, got her to hospital and did everything she could to look after Lisa - including letting friends know. She was in a crowded ward; none of us realised that she belonged to BUPA and could have had a private room. I went with Ellinor Hinks to see Lisa; her last words to me were "I dread people coming to see me, all they want is to question me about Laban and his research writings, I cannot do it anymore". She was so sad, ill and lonely. She died on January 25<sup>th</sup> 1985.



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I know what you are all thinking: we are here to celebrate, but for me it is to commemorate. I have started at the end of her life so that I can return to happier times - although most of it was the result of much hard work, achievement and disappointment. What I call the 5-year curse brought change and destruction; time and again she strove to build her life.

Lisa was born, as we all know, on June 17<sup>th</sup> 1907. Her parents were, I think, very clever; they named her ELISABETH, MARIA, MARTHE ULLMANN.

Lisa enjoyed people, she tried to understand their needs, help them by giving hours of her time to listening to their problems. She was intensely loyal, observing confidentiality, loving and affectionate - she was a 'Maria'. On the other hand she was practical, efficient and capable; when the boiler failed at the *Studio*, Lisa was there to get it going again. She cooked, sewed, worked in the garden, made jelly. Oh yes, if you haven't tasted her Quince jelly you haven't lived - she was a 'Marthe'.

When Lisa was 7 years old, war broke out in 1914 and four years later when it ended she was still a child. The young life (now called a teenager) was spent in a country trying to recover from war. When she left school she chose to train as an artist at the *Berlin College of Art*. She always referred to her father as an 'artist' - talking of happy times spent out walking with him with their sketch books. Was he the inspiration for her interest in art? His portrait hung over her desk at Addlestone - was it a self-portrait?

**(Included here is an extract from a tape recording made by Lisa in 1984 in which she describes her training and the teaching appointments which followed).**

Now I want you to listen to Lisa's voice and to remember her inimical way of speaking English:

*'Actually, I had danced already since little childhood and went to a layman's course in a Laban School whilst I was studying painting. I also joined the Movement Choir at the same school. The people there thought I was gifted in movement and dance and encouraged me to attend the professional training. After long hesitation I did this for a time; I went to Art School for half a day and the other half day I went to the Laban School for training. Then the Laban School insisted that I gave up my painting for a while until I had worked and passed my exam; I did that and I have never gone back to painting apart from in my hobby-time.'*

**Question: "Was the exam the Laban Diploma?"**

*'No, no! After two years of training you would do the exam and be entitled to teach laymen in the name of Laban and conduct a Movement Choir - a Movement Choir leader. In order to get the Diploma you had to study for two more years and during those two years you had to do practical work; so I ran my own classes in Berlin. After two years at the Laban Choreographic Institute Diploma Course, I passed my Diploma, and the last four weeks we had Laban himself all day long. It was so terribly exciting that I decided not to paint but to dance and to teach dance. I was always more interested in teaching and working with others than to dance myself. However, as I had gained my Diploma, Laban recommended me to one or two theatres where I could have become a Ballet Mistress. I also had an offer from Breslau to come to the States - to the Municipal Theatre, but I declined it because I really was more drawn to teaching. So I favoured a post at Nurnberg at the Laban School which was a professional school. I had hardly arrived when Jooss wrote to me and said: 'I am in need of a person to train my dancers, would you come to Essen?' Of course I jumped at this opportunity; it was really very exciting to be asked to do that so I moved to Essen.'*

Lisa, in her twenties - a fully qualified teacher of Laban Dance - her choice! Lively, energetic, in charge of Jooss' students and their training.

After five years it all began to change: her father died, the *Jooss Ballet* (what remained of it) had to leave Germany - so Lisa came with the Jooss students to England. Fortuitously, the Elmhirsts had seen the *Ballet Jooss* in London and they offered Jooss a base at *Dartington Hall* in Devon. Lisa came with them and she described Dartington as:-

*'It was like paradise, so beautiful, everything seemed to be so quiet, harmonious, smooth and well-cared for.'*

Facilities for Dance at Dartington were good: an indoor theatre (*The Barn*), smooth lawns, well-cared for - outdoor classes, dressing rooms for performances, make-up areas and class-rooms. After some initial problems they were all well-housed and everyone was happy.

**(A second extract from the tape-recording describes her experiences at Dartington and what was demanded of her - training the Jooss students and performers).**

*'Jooss was travelling and touring in various countries, but*

*when they came home, so to speak, they performed in the Barn Theatre - a converted forge. The performances were very well received at Dartington and in the whole South-West; that was the whole idea of Dartington - to give cultural opportunities to the people of Devonshire, Cornwall and the South West.'*

**Question: "Was it at this time in 1935 that you held your first Movement Choir in Plymouth"?**

*'Yes. In Plymouth the Workers' Education Association (WEA) asked me to take classes for them - classes in Movement and Dance, which I did as a Movement Choir enterprise. It was very exciting for me, because I learnt so much about my new country. I had to learn everything because the mentality of English people was very different - the way of living and all that.'*

**Question: "Did you speak English"?**

*'Well, I had my school English. I could understand and express myself, but I didn't learn much English because there were more foreigners than English people in the Dance School, so we spoke a very queer language which was nobody's language - it wasn't Dutch, it wasn't English, it wasn't American. We had an enormous group of Americans who were there already and had worked with Louise Soelberg; but Louise gave up her work and became a member of the Ballet Jooss at that time. These Americans were all very new to me, because I hadn't come across many Americans until then - another language, another way of living, so it was a very peculiar time.'*

War-time regulations in 1940 England declared that aliens, and especially Germans, could not live near the coast - and in particular near the South Coast. This caused the dismantling of the *Arts Department at Dartington Hall*. It also ended Lisa's teaching of professional students and dancers. She had already been considering a degree study in psychology, having approached a tutor in France and enrolled at the *Sorbonne*. (Laban had arrived at Dartington in 1938 and Lisa renewed her study of his movement theories). She said that:

*"She had discovered that Laban's approach to movement, expression and the importance of understanding such, gave her the insight into human psychology for which she had been searching"*

The five-year change was starting again. Lisa and Laban moved to London, but as the bombing became more disturbing, they moved to Newtown in Wales. That period for Lisa and Laban was very hard. Lisa found classes to teach; the average fee for a class was two shillings or half-a-crown an hour if you could find a group to teach. This often meant travelling (Lisa had a bicycle) but I can't think that bicycling in Wales can have been much fun - added to that: if either of them moved out of Newtown they had to report to the police. Lisa was the provider, Laban continued his research into movement in Industry. This led to working with Charles Lawrence and the necessity to move to an industrial area - so in 1942 they moved to Manchester.

Here once again Lisa started to give classes and working

with the *Lancashire PEO* and *HMI Myfanwy Dewey*; she founded the *Art of Movement Studio* - blessed by Laban and financed by Lisa - showing her courage and determination!

By 1946 the Trustees were starting to think of moving the *Studio* nearer to London and eventually a site was found at Addlestone billed as:-

*'A country house in 16 acres of beautifully laid out grounds, 22 miles from London. Facilities for outdoor work, practice and lecture rooms and a beautiful hall.'*

It had been the home of a *Choir School*. Part of the house had been gutted by fire; the grounds were lost in brambles and weeds up to the front door - neglected and overgrown all down the drive. Nothing daunted, and stoical as ever, Lisa set about to make a home for Laban and herself. The fire damage had been sealed off and was never rebuilt. Plans for more residential chalets to house students were shelved. Cost of building in this area of Surrey was prohibitive - controlled by laws of land-rights. The grounds, weeds and brambles were attacked by Lisa, one gardener, and help from students and friends; two grass areas were mowed and prepared for outdoor classes.

For Lisa and Laban it must have been a dream come true, not quite a *Monte Verita* in Ascona Switzerland, but with the same possibilities for an *International Arts Centre* - a permanent school for experimental living - according to spiritual artistic and anarchistic principles. There followed a period of stability and continuity - longer than ever before in Lisa's life in England, nineteen years approximately (1953 - 1972).

### Choice Subject at L.in.C

*(Wendy Hermelin reflects on the stimulus for her choreography at the LinC Summer Course as well as her strategies for 'Dance Training'.) Ed.*

*Northern Lights* was a choreography I made that was deeply influenced by a holiday in Finnish Lapland last winter; the exhilaration of the freezing temperatures, minus



Photo by Trevor Skinner

That is not to say it was without worries. Student numbers varied according to government control of grants. Extensions to buildings were required, additions to staff with the requisite knowledge and experience were difficult to find. **The 5 year curse struck again - LABAN died in 1958.** Lisa was left alone to carry the full responsibility for the *Studio* and *Research Centre* - now hers in every sense except the *Trustees*. She had hoped and expected to be there until her dying day - like so many founders of *Dance Academies* had done before her. She resigned as Principal in 1972. The *Trustees* had decided to sell the site and transfer the students to an old building in SE London, adjacent to *Goldsmiths' College*. To a Londoner, this was one of the least desirable areas of the capital.

A small house in Addlestone was provided for Lisa retaining her nearness to Laban's grave which she tended with such care and affection until she died. After her retirement she was again in demand to teach and lead - now the requests came from abroad. In 1984 she was invited to join the staff of a course in Germany. It was a great success. I met her at Heathrow, tired and dragging her luggage behind her, but there was a radiance about her that I had never seen before. She had been back to teaching her own people, in her own country - students of varying ages, whom she understood and who understood her. **This is the memory which will always be with me of this amazing and unique being - LISA!**

I would like to end this talk by quoting from Susi's paper at the Guild day last March:

**'Lisa's Mission was to keep INTACT Laban's teaching and research.'**

Lisa often appeared concerned that Laban's work could be betrayed and/or sentimentalised.

*Athalie A. Knowles*

30 degrees, the beauty and strangeness of the snow-bent trees, the excitement of watching skiers whipping down the slopes, the thrill of guiding speeding huskies over frozen lakes and through winding paths in the forest and, finally, the utter stillness and silence as the snow fell.

The dancers I worked with explored movements alone and in small groups, identifying various aspects of these ideas and translating them into sequences which I then gathered, arranged and coalesced into a group dance that began with energetic flights into the space, moved through skiing, snowing, northern lights flashing in the sky and into a final lengthy stillness representing the forest as three dancers stepped delicately as reindeer across the space in front.

The dancer from Iceland felt she had discovered a new view of her northerly land and for me as choreographer it was a vital experience to see the feelings I had had whilst in Lapland portrayed for me by this willing and enthusiastic group of people. Thank you.

### Dance Training at L.in.C

Being older now and less regular in my personal dance exercise, I felt a very small sense of uncertainty when asked to teach this year - "Will my back hold out?" "What about my knees?" So care and gentleness to start the session became vitally important for the participants and for me. Breathing one's way into movement and gradually becoming aware of all parts of the body working in concert is my way into dance training. With stretching, bending and twisting, the three most basic types of whole body movement, I ease the body into more flexibility and then develop these aspects into more energetic movements that involve swings, turns, jumps and travelling. Through this gradual increase, the body learns holistically about the dance. At the end of the week I feel so alive I wonder why I don't do this every day of my life.

*Wendy Hermelin*

*(Hazel Francomb, Head of Dance at Hills Road Sixth Form College Cambridge was asked to teach some classes at this year's L.in.C Summer School. Hazel opens up the debate on dance training and body preparation in the context of Laban's work.) Ed.*

The issue of dance training is close to my heart because I normally teach teenage students who are studying for *G.C.E. AS* and *A Level* courses. The challenge is that they regularly need to get ready to dance, create, and work together sensitively and in a way relevant to the course aims, but very quickly. I am an older dance teacher, so the issue of long-term healthy dance training is particularly important to me. For these reasons, I decided to share some of my ideas, stimulated by the *L.in.C Summer School*, to perhaps open up the debate about dance training and body preparation in the context of Laban's work.



Photo by Trevor Skinner

As I planned my sessions I considered the particular nature of that dance preparation task. In most of my teaching the body preparation is dictated by the nature of the rest of the session, a focus on spatial awareness when teaching the "A" scale, particular care on weight transference and leg strength development to prepare for jumps, engaging core and arm muscles for weight taking pairs work etc. For the Summer School I would need a different strategy as I would



Photo by Trevor Skinner

### Prepared to Dance?

not be teaching the main content of the morning sessions. The dancers I would be working with come from a range of dance experience, personal confidence, age and level of fitness. The course itself includes an exciting array of dance, drama and therapeutic sessions - preparing such a wide range of people for their varied summer school programme offered quite a challenge.

As a participant on and off myself for over twenty years, I considered my own changing needs. Many years ago, as a young dancer, my main aim was to improve my physical and artistic skills, whereas now, as an older participant, I am hungry for a chance just to re-ignite my inner dancer - but safely! Overlaying this was, and is, the desire to engage with myself on a deep level, and with the distinctive nature of the Laban Dance experience. I wanted to address these slightly contradictory issues in my own teaching on the Summer School.

My overall description of the sessions was fairly vague - this was the outline I sent to Susi Thornton.

*A gentle meditative start to the day that will move into dance patterning and fairly energetic travelling.*

*Each Session will:-*

- o Include gentle body and mind preparation using floor work and core training; this will lead into lifting, travelling and elevation.*
- o Build on the skills learned in the previous day.*
- o Focus on a different spatial theme.*

In my planning I decided to include seven different aspects of dance preparation

1. A safe body and mind preparation
2. Relaxation and loosening of the joints
3. Engagement of the core for strength
4. Exploration of spatial orientation (lifting and dropping, opening and closing, using diagonals).
5. *Dancing*, including elevation
6. Engaging in some group /pairs awareness
7. Using patterning