

From Alan Miller

Covering letter:

Date of Travel 12th May – 22nd June 2003
Length of stay 6 weeks

The Aim: To make as many contacts as possible – teachers, practitioners, dancers - in the field of dance in Jamaica, and to see how dance is used within the wider society as a whole.

There are a few major highlights to the trip. The first was going to a major stage show performance with the best music artists in Jamaica. Being in a park partying with 6,000 screaming fans until 6.00am is definitely something you don't get with reggae music of this kind in England. Another highlight is going to an actual Kumina session, and a real Revival session. The Kumina session was so special I didn't want to violate it by suing a camera. Instead, I tried to remember as much as I could and write it all up the minute I got back home. The other highlight was seeing the kids in competitions throughout the island in the various traditional dances. The work that Joyce Campbell started has become absolutely monumental to the continual survival of a heritage slowly dying due to continual mechanisation and globalisation.

It is wonderful that an organisation like LUTSF can offer this programme for dance researchers, but I think it would be worthwhile if there were also a charity that could provide a similar bursary for accommodation. Expenses are definitely something that the researcher should be able to cover for themselves. However, the cost for accommodation is one of the main determining factors to how long a person can stay in a country.

At present I teach a dancehall class at a studio called the basement for adults. I am also choreographing a dancehall piece for *Resolutions*. I am also in the process of producing an education pack to promote Jamaican Dance in schools planned for the new year. These are just some of the ideas of how I am disseminating information to the wider public.

Report to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF) from Alan Miller

The Jamaican Exploration of Dance

As a visiting performer to the island I had some prior knowledge about who were the major players in the Theatrical sphere of dance in Jamaica. There is Professor Nettleford, the artistic director for NDTC (National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica), and L'Antoinette Stines, artistic director of L'acadco Dance Company. However to really gain anything from the experience I needed to seek out the unknown heroes of Jamaica. This meant going to organisations like JCDC (Jamaican Cultural Development Commission) ACIJ (African and Caribbean Institute of Jamaica). It also meant seeking out those who have spent time in the field studying the various dance forms that thrive in Jamaica. Through my links with NDTC I got the chance to meet Joyce Campbell (Head of Traditional Folk forms at JCDC), Marjorie Whyllie (Musicologist, Head of Music Unit at University of West Indies), Cheryl Ryman, (independent dance researcher and teacher), and others.

In order to get the best out of the trip it wasn't enough just to watch and then process after returning home. I needed to do the classes with the companies, go to the clubs and learn the latest moves, and go into the countryside and see the places where the continuum of the displaced dancing African began. So although one section will inform the other, I have split the types of dances into three sections: Traditional, Theatrical, and Contemporary.

Traditional: I had previous knowledge of dances like Kumina, Dinki Mini, Revival, and these are the dances best known to outsiders who have any awareness of dance in Jamaica. What I didn't know was the quantity of different traditional dances that exist in Jamaica. There are also Zella, Gerreh, Burru, Candomble, Warrick, Ring Games, Maypole, Jonkunnu, Tambu, Ettu, and the Maroon. These dances also served different purposes and functions.

Kumina and Revival are religions where dance serves as a way of praising God or the earthly spirits. They also serve to prepare the dead for their passage into the other realm as spirits. Revival has two aspects, called Zion and Puk-Kumina. This is because the use of Christianity played a major part in this religion, however Puk-Kumina is more Africanised in its approach.

You then have the secular or social dances that are performed for enjoyment, entertainment and at death observances. These are the Tambu, Ring Games (predominantly plated by Children), Gerreh, Zella, Dinki Mini, etc. A lot of these dances are partner dances that symbolize the creation of new life as one has passed away. They are usually lively dances accompanied by boisterous drumming that plays from sun-down to sun-up.

Then there are the dances of the secret societies. The Jonkunnu has been explained as a dance that allowed the slaves to revel and mock the slave owners. The Jonkunnu Festival is very elaborate and steeped in tradition, in much the same way as carnival. The costumes and the type of dancing however are designed to scare and keep the audience in fear of the characters. The roots of these characters (Cowhead, Pitchy Patchy, Belly-Woman, Devil, etc) go back to Dogon and Ibo tribe practices of the secret societies. It is important to note that, although female characters are prevalent, men perform these characters. The Maroon is a society within a society. They reside in the mountains of Accompong, northwest of Jamaica. Their dances are done purely by secret societies behind closed doors, so information on the Maroon is extremely limited.

Theatrical: It is with this extensive backdrop that we come to the backdrop of the Concert Dance of Jamaica. The first thing to hit me is the emergence of two modes of philosophy that dictate the actions of the two major forces in Jamaica's Dance Theatre. The first is to represent a flavour of Jamaica's heritage to the world through the technical application of Modern Dance (which in essence has African modes of physical application) and artistic interpretations of Traditional/Secular Dances of Jamaica. This has definitely been the way forward for NDTC, and it has been successful for them for the past forty years. The second mode of thought is to learn not only

the technical requirements of Ballet and Modern Dance, but to learn and perform the Traditional/Secular as they are seen in their normal habitat. This is the viewpoint of L'Acadco Dance Company.

Being with both companies left a strong impression on me. Although I spent most of my time with NDTTC, and saw how the accompany is as much a community as a performing group, the class with L'Acadco left a spiritual, as much as a physical impression, because of the way the company was so grounded in its culture. It should be no surprise to know that the one Kumina session I witnessed is with L'Acadco, whereas the younger members of NDTTC that live in Jamaica have never been to a Kumina session.

Contemporary: This part of the research happened throughout the time I was in Jamaica. Dancehall, the generic term for the social music scene in Jamaica has been in existence since the 1950s when Disc Jockey took over from house bands as the most common form of entertainment. In its present state a whole subculture has emerged that has varying types of reggae music, an equally varied fashion sensibility, and dances that draw both from the traditional as well as from the influence of Globalisation. Such dances with names like world of dance, Jerry Springer, Matrix, Drive By, Signal The Plane, are typical of Dancehall. This is probably Jamaican dance at its most creative because the minute you learn and master one dance, within a month a new dance has emerged. Within a year the most popular of those dance moves (at least six a year) will go global, reaching everyone of Caribbean descent who is devoted to the Dancehall scene.

These are some of the things that I learned while I was out there. It was a great experience and one from which I am still disseminating information through education and artistic projects.

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