

21/12/07

Dear Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund

Please find enclosed my report from my recent visit to Dusseldorf, supported by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. I travelled to Dusseldorf to attend the Ruhrpott Battle, and take Hiphop training at Dusseldorf Tanzhaus from 3-6th November 2007. The trip aimed to investigate the Hiphop dance scene in Germany, develop my own skills as a Hiphop performer/choreographer.

I took a great deal from the short time that I was in Germany, reaffirming why I work in this dance style for its energy and involvement of such a wide audience, as seen as the battle, and developing my own skills as a Hiphop performer. It has also increased the network of Hiphop practitioners I can work with, and I am in discussion to bring some of the dancers I met to the UK to collaborate on future projects.

With lots of footage from the battle event, students of my company of dancers and myself will have the opportunity to watch high quality Hiphop dance from across Europe. Currently the footage is un-edited and will be done in the New Year.

To help other awardees, I think a 'city guide' would be helpful if someone has travelled there before. For example, which area to stay in or avoid, any accommodation recommendations, food places, transport help.

May I take this opportunity to thank you for supporting my trip.

Yours sincerely

Anna Olejnicki

Report: An Englishwoman in Dusseldorf

A 3-day trip to Germany to gain as much knowledge as possible on Hiphop is a tall order – it's going to be a busy trip. So, why have I chosen Dusseldorf? Well, Hiphop Dance, although becoming more and more popular, is still in its embryonic stage here in the UK. We are fortunate to have UK pioneers hosting events, community dance Hiphop provision growing fast and more emerging choreographers and companies. So often the level of tuition and Hiphop classes can be hidden behind more traditional forms. Not in Germany, where I visited a battle event just outside Dusseldorf.

Ruhrpott Battle is well established in the German Hiphop Scene. It began 9 years ago in the very same venue where it is held now, in a suburb near Herne. It really is a popular event – this year 1,000 people were inside to watch - if you were lucky, in the main room, if not then in a separate room watching the action on a big screen. This year 300 people were turned away as the event was sold out! Luckily I got in, and got to the heart of the action albeit balanced high up on a railing with my video camera. Not safe at all, but at least I could see the action on the dance floor. The things I do for Hiphop.

What I noticed was obviously how busy and popular it was, but what an incredible mix of people who were there. Families with young children balanced on shoulders, real Hiphop heads and friends and family of competitors. Not one bit of bad atmosphere at all at any point in the night. The atmosphere was great.

This battle had competitors in Popping, Locking, New Style and crew battles. Lots of competitors, lots of dance and lots of music, all held together by an amazing MC, who could human beatbox with great skill – you don't see that very often. This year dancers not only took part from Germany but also France, Italy, Belgium, Poland, Spain and Turkey. Where is the UK I wonder?

Chris Griffenbach was one of three judges at the event this year. He himself is a very well known and experienced Hiphop dancer, specialising in New Style.

"The battle started because there weren't many battles in Germany. There was just the battle of the year. The youth didn't have much to do in this area. We wanted to make the dance scene bigger in Germany, and show the 'normal people' that Hiphop has got potential to get bigger and give the people an opportunity to do something. So we decided to start a new battle that puts the German b boy crews together. "

If you're unfamiliar with the battle scene, let's enlighten you. Competitors have done preliminary knockout rounds or qualification to get to dance at the main event. The rounds are one against the other, and each person has two tracks of music to dance to. At the end of each pair, the judges pick the winner, usually 3 judges to keep it fair. If you're successful, you're in the next round, until finally there's a winner.

I saw some amazing dancing. Really inventive use of choreography and amazing musicality, which can often be lost at battles as dancers dance out their pre-prepared routines without listening to the beat the DJ gives. Highlights for me included Reckless Crew from Germany who combined great 'party piece' tricks in their throw-downs, but great solo Bboying, Bubble Zoo in the Locking section – animated and entertaining,

New style was Aldo who showed great skill and all of the poppers were great! Interestingly in this section the old school guys with great technique were passed by with lots of commercial popping and waving – I think this a trend we will start to see.

Any Hiphop battle is the perfect opportunity to see a range of skill, style and performance. Having the opportunity to watch others, see new ideas and try to push personal boundaries to win is really entertaining to watch. This battle gives the chance to see it from several European countries. I'd like to see battles in the UK extending the arm to Funkstyles. It's starting to happen and I believe that the more skills coming together helps everyone's understanding of the endless limits of Hiphop dance.

So where do all these German Hiphop dancers train? Training in Hiphop dance is about getting together with like-minded people in a space and training hard, but there's also a need to go to be taught by someone who themselves has a good technical knowledge. Sundeep was recommended to me as a skillful popping tutor. So, the day after the battle, where I've seen him compete (he was good), I go to his workshop at Dusseldorf Tanzhaus. The Tanzhaus is the most amazing building; I think an old tram depot once upon a time. Very modern, very welcoming and with a professional dancers discount for classes very affordable!

The workshop was great, and it surprised me how much German I grasped, although he taught in German and English to help me out! It's really hard to find strong tutors in the Hiphop disciplines, especially being based in the north of England. The information he gave was great, and included helpful drills to practice at home, takeaway dance. The advanced workshop was tougher – first, there were only 3 of us and, second, I was the only female – no hiding. Thankfully, the other two dancers spoke English, so a full workshop I could understand. At the end of the workshop he took time out to go over some drills and give me advice on how to improve my technique. You never stop learning in dance, however skilled you (think) you are.

The very short time I had in Germany gave me time to reflect on Hiphop dance. It has universal appeal, that's highlighted by how many nationalities were at the battle event, and how far people had travelled to be part of it. There is an audience for Hiphop dance, yet do many of these travel to see Hiphop Theatre? And, if not, why not? The dance style needs tutors with the passion and good foundations of the style to be teaching the next generation – and the older generation who still want to learn, but why is it a struggle to access this in my area? Where are all the female dancers hiding?

This question made me think about my own work and how I really want to open the door of Hiphop dance to new audiences – the families that were at the battle and younger generation so desperate to learn at the Tanzhaus. The determination increased to continue to push female dancers into the forefront within Hiphop performance. It also made me wonder how the battle was so well supported with sponsors, yet so many Hiphop battles and dance companies face an uphill struggle here in the UK for support.

Although it was a whistle-stop trip, I returned to Sheffield enthused for what I do, armed with an hour's battle footage, filmed at great risk to myself for my dancers and students to watch. Next year I definitely want to return – to show Sundeep my improved technique and also to go to the battle. Who knows, maybe I can be instrumental in getting the UK represented, watch this space...

Anna Olejnicki
December 2007