

Dear Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund,

Melanie and I have worked very closely together since 2007 to develop our approach to dance for Parkinson's, sharing many hours of putting our heads together, interspersed with "aha!" moments. For this reason, it seemed inconceivable that we would not fulfil our vision of visiting the Mark Morris Dance Group in Brooklyn as a twosome. and thus capitalise on the entire experience.

We are enormously grateful to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for making what seemed impossible possible. And, as explained in my report, having prolapsed a disc in my lower back on the very first morning in New York, had I been alone I doubt I would have been able to make much use of this amazing opportunity.

The trip was invaluable in helping Melanie and myself to evaluate and enrich our approach by viewing it in the much wider context of the work of the Mark Morris Dance Group pioneers, and the redoubtable Pam Quinn.

We were especially interested to learn about how David Leventhal and John Heginbotham are developing their training programme, as Mel and I, on behalf of the Dance for Parkinson's network UK, are currently working on a programme which is relevant for this country.

We believe that dance for Parkinson's is an extraordinary gift to the world. Countless thousands of people around the globe are affected by this devastating condition, and we have seen for ourselves over many years how dance can make a huge difference, both to everyday function and to quality of life.

So thank you again to the late Lisa Ullmann, and the current committee who carry on this invaluable work in her name. We hope very much that the work we do now and in the future will be better because of the opportunity that was made available to us.

Yours sincerely,  
Daphne Anne Cushnie

**CUMBRIA TO NEW YORK**  
**June 13-19th 2012**  
**Dance for Parkinson's with the Mark Morris Dance Group**  
**by Daphne Cushnie**

I woke early that first morning in New York in our dim, musty basement apartment, immediately aware of an irrepressible, bubbling, childlike excitement deep within me at being in this unfamiliar great city, the Atlantic ocean between us and home. Ahead of us stretched five whole days, and although we already knew the detailed itinerary for the dance for Parkinson's workshop with key members of the Mark Morris Dance Group, typically there were many unknown variables. I felt ready for the challenge, hopeful of deepening my insight and learning new approaches to dance for PD to carry back across the Atlantic, and transplant into our work in the UK.

With all this in mind, and Mel still sleepily in bed, I cheerfully put the kettle on for our favourite Earl Grey tea, briskly pulled up a chair to wait for it to boil, and promptly prolapsed a disc in my lower back. The pain and shock took me somehow to the floor, where I lay stranded for a few minutes, wondering if I could get up, and just how bad it was ... yes, no mistake, it was quite bad. That was the start of a strange, disjointed experience throughout our stay, a juxtaposition of pain and endeavour, limitation and exploration, all unfolding in the context of soaring architecture and teeming humanity. I remember remarking to Mel more than once that my predicament fitted our mission quite well. Anyone with Parkinson's can tell you how pervasively their daily lives are affected by being no longer able to take normal movement for granted.

I moved gingerly and painfully on and off subways, through the streets of New York, to the Juillard Centre in Manhattan and the MMDG studio in Brooklyn, cushioned by co-codamol, buffered and chaperoned by Mel without whom I'm truly not sure how I would have managed to do anything much.

That first day, she took me out on the Hudson River ferry, and we sat side by side on hard, narrow benches, sandwiched between all the other tourists, viewing the awesome Manhattan skyline and being regaled with tales of New York's history by a man in his seventies with a velvet, soporific voice. It was especially soothing to me in my current state of vulnerability and we agreed it was like a lovely bedtime story read by our Grandad. We noticed several of our fellow passengers beginning to nod off, which set us off embroidering our Grandad fantasy *ad infinitum*. I discovered something new on that boat trip ... that it's possible to be in a lot of pain but still be able to laugh uncontrollably, even though it hurts to do so.

***Unexpected Lesson Number One:*** *humour, a wider sense of perspective and the support of true friends ameliorate difficulties in life, and make possible what seems impossible. ( This could be extended to encompass living with Parkinson's for sure.)*

I slept fitfully that night, unable to turn right or left, and trying to work out how to lever myself into an upright position to hobble to the bathroom. In the morning it seemed my major back muscles had collectively agreed to form a splint around the damaged area, making any attempt at initiating rising from recumbent to two legged biped virtually impossible. I shouted for Mel who acted as a human hoist. Cue, more laughter.

Somehow we did get ourselves to Fort Greene in Brooklyn that day, to join in Pam Quinn's Movement Lab at the Mark Morris Studio. I had met Pam previously when she presented her pioneering work at the World Parkinson's Conference in Glasgow in 2010, and was intrigued by her insight and approach. She was herself diagnosed with young onset Parkinson's in her early forties, supporting a young family and maintaining an established career in dance at the time. As a dancer, she naturally began to explore for herself what would help her to move fluidly and counteract the myriad ways that PD commonly affects posture and movement. She was encouraged by the results of her endeavours and naturally wanted to share what she was learning with others similarly affected. To this end she established a weekly 'Movement Lab' at the MMDG studio in Brooklyn, which appears to have parallels to my own approach, in that it is rooted in, and informed by dance, whilst having an equally important problem solving aspect. The problem lies in the widespread way PD can affect movement, narrowing choices, dictating and directing from deep within the brain, cutting short expression and stiffening muscles and spine. Perhaps one solution lies buried in the experience of the condition itself, in sensual exploration of its manifestations and in harnessing our innate ability to adapt, create, and find new pathways for movement.

I was fascinated to see how Pam Quinn devised her classes, her delivery of material and its effectiveness in engaging participants. She herself is a most engaging person, disarmingly open faced and warm, generous with her sharing of knowledge, and has an air of a true pioneer about her, curious about the world around her and refreshingly free of artifice. Her class was not a disappointment, and it was a pleasure to move with her and the participants. As people filed in I noted within myself the now familiar sense of family that arises when I dance with those affected by PD. There is always a strong sense of community, almost tribal. People banding together to move and be moved, to simultaneously identify with others in the same situation, whilst experiencing themselves in another way, separately from their condition, as dancers and creators.

In this particular session Pam used balls as an intermediary to promote forward movement, challenge balance and foster connections between people. I longed to share with her the many ways Mel and I have developed work with balls of all shapes and sizes, not to mention jewel coloured saris, long lengths of stretchy bands, and great wide swathes of gold paper unrolled from wall to wall to act as corridors.

After class we repaired with Pam to a nearby cafe for more Earl Grey, and comforting cake. We had an illuminating exchange about our work, and she was most intrigued by our use of glass 'crystals' to promote eye-hand, and full bodied movement explorations in pairs and in groups. I had discovered these in a little craft shop in Kendal. They literally caught my eye, causing one of those cascade moments of possibility. I bought lots of them, all in different colours, about three or four centimetres in diameter, many faceted to catch the light when held up. Pam was interested to learn how these crystal balls affected people, stimulating delicate, focused movement between people in a most meditative small dance of orbiting planets. I gave her four crystal balls to experiment with, and we left feeling heartened by her work, strengthened by our exchange, and hopeful of more discourse in the future. To anyone reading this report, I would recommend a visit to this extraordinary, yet unassuming lady.

***Illuminating Lesson Number Two:*** *some of the best teachers have learned from a strict master ie visiting repeatedly their own limitations, difficulties and blind alleys, and finding from within themselves the ability and insight to help themselves and others .*

After leaving Pam and the cafe, we had a serendipitous encounter with three members of the Brooklyn Parkinson's Group. We had only returned to the MMDG studio to search for a toilet after consuming all that Earl Grey tea, and got talking to Manny, Carol and Mary who were seated in the small foyer cafe, having a meeting to discuss fund raising. They generously invited us out for a meal, and as we sat together at an outside table, over delicious Turkish food with the sunset turning everything golden, I felt a deep sense of appreciation for their company, for these moments, and for the whole opportunity afforded by working in this field. This was one of the highlights of the trip for me, this simple, genuine, heartfelt exchange, and the golden opportunity to hear about their efforts to organise events and raise funds on behalf of their neighbourhood group. I thought about our own group back home, and how they too, continually look out for each other, and work together for positive ends. We had a visit recently in Kendal from one of the editors of 'Frontline', the journal for physiotherapists who noted in his article.

'the spirit of camaraderie in the room was almost palpable with many acts of kindness occurring during the 90 minute session. Those who are more able assist those in whom the progressive neurological condition is more advanced. Faces that initially seemed rather unexpressive begin to light up'.

This sense of community appears to be a common phenomenon, no matter which part of the globe you find yourself in. As we said goodbye to our new friends, we felt buoyant and hopeful for the future of dance for PD. One of the important aspects of the mission statement of Dance for Parkinson's UK network is to make high quality dance experience available to everyone with this condition, and our exchange with Manny, Carol and Mary made this wish ever more real and pressing.

***Sensible Observation Number Three:*** *joining forces with others, and orienting ourselves in a shared positive direction, harnessing and harvesting our different, complementary strengths is highly likely to yield great things, and shield us from isolation and inertia.*

My own back pain had continued unabated throughout the long day, but it was possible to turn down its volume by becoming engrossed in more interesting concerns ... a kind of selective listening. Maybe that's one of the things that can occur in dance for PD classes, when the focus is not on the condition, but on the dancing and the laughter and the socialising. I hoped that this phenomenon would carry me through the next two days.

While I had felt very comfortable in the milieu of Pam Quinn's class, with its accessibility, pragmatism, smaller numbers of attendees, and general orientation, I expected to find myself more personally challenged by the coming weekend workshop led by David Leventhal, John Heginbotham and Misty Owens, all key members of the Mark Morris Dance Group, and each instrumental in developing their high quality dance

for PD programme across the USA, and beyond.

David and John have worked with the dance for PD network in the UK for several years now, and always impressed me with their combination of professionalism, expertise and approachability. Their programme is very well designed, backed by research, is forward looking, reaches high numbers of people and leads the field. All this is combined with unmatched generosity in sharing their work, a willingness to listen to others, and a fine honed sense of purpose in spreading the work, which makes them a force in the world. I was looking forward to absorbing some of the key aspects of their approach over the weekend.

Every early morning began in a similar way, with part of me feeling I couldn't get to the venue in so much pain, and another part encouraging me to keep going. Mel, with her combination of encouragement and irrepressible sense of humour helped to swing the balance. The small, funky, friendly cafe with its blue walls and great menu, situated close to Prospect Park subway was likewise another reason to get going, holding out the prospect (no pun intended!) of a substantial breakfast.

And, unsurprisingly, the workshop was well worth the effort of crossing the Atlantic for, just for the whole memorable Mark Morris experience with its scale and scope, for meeting so many other practitioners from all walks of life and finally for setting our own work in a much greater context.

New York has a huge population, and there are exponentially huge numbers of people living with Parkinson's, many of whom attend the weekly classes led by David, John, Misty and co. The workshop reflected this. The studio was vast and airy and the introductory circle was big enough to make those on the far side of circle look distant. It was interesting to note the preponderance of mature practitioners, something which is reflected in this field in the UK too. It could be suggested that one needs a certain wisdom and maturity in this work, although qualities such as empathy, logic and patience certainly do not belong exclusively to older people.

Numbers in the New York classes have grown so much that David and John have had to make extra provision for all this enthusiastic demand. Back in our rural area with its scattered population we face rather the opposite situation –that of attracting more participants, and also gaining the support of those members of the medical community in a position to understand and recommend our innovative classes. As each member of the circle introduced themselves it became clear that most of the other practitioners also ran smaller, grassroots groups across the USA, although they don't benefit from the strong community dance network that we enjoy in the UK.

I was surprised and quite honestly, briefly a little disappointed that many of the other practitioners had limited experience in the field of dance for PD, although they certainly weren't lacking in enthusiasm and commitment. However, we can each learn from everyone we come in contact with and often we learn a great deal from unexpected sources, not always the acknowledged experts. Without a shadow of a doubt I have learned the most from the countless people affected by PD and other degenerative neurological conditions I have worked with over the years, equally in my role as physiotherapist, as a community dance artist and most deeply as a human being. I am indebted to all of them.

I was relieved when we split into smaller groups to explore different topics,

feeling instantly at home with a more family sized exchange, and the opportunity to share some of our own practice. Each topic presented an opportunity to notice where our own practice differed from, and dovetailed with, the Mark Morris approach. Unsurprisingly, they are very strong indeed on storytelling and showed us how they had adapted a short section of their own choreography. It involved travelling in a circle formation and, central to this, was the use of flower imagery, with tossing of petals and opening of plants to the sky. They had addressed the problem people with PD have of difficulty turning and travelling backwards by keeping the motion moving forwards, using a triplet step which is another device which seems to be accessible to people who shuffle and stumble. It was immediately obvious how well this worked, and how we all felt caught up in the momentum and impetus of the stepping and throwing and opening. The accompaniment of William on the piano was obviously and marvellously integral to this experience. Mel and myself have been fortunate enough to have worked with gifted musician Anna Gillespie, who works closely with Joanne Duff in their London dance for PD classes entitled 'Musical Moving'. Working with Anna lifted our work to another level, enhancing, emphasising, supporting and encompassing the movement. To those who can afford it, do employ a live musician who has the ability to improvise sensitively.

***Another Worthwhile Observation Number Four:*** *live music, of the highest quality you can afford is an invaluable asset, and source of much knowledge. Collaboration is vital!*

During the same session Mel delighted everyone with her demonstration of a section she had developed in one of her more recent 'AHA!' moments (she has many such moments). This particular inspiration had come to her the previous morning as she sat on the hot stone steps outside our brownstone basement, escaping its interior dimness. She began with a string of similes forming a narrative which described feeling states such as:

*I am flat as a pancake*

*Going this way and that*

*I'm heavy as lead etc*

She then interpreted this in quirky movement with elements of humour and pathos ... and then set the whole thing to an extract from 'Swan Lake'. It was priceless! In terms of PD and its effects, it was cleverly designed, using familiar imagery and feeling states most people can relate to, plus relocation in a well known musical setting.

The improvisation session was another such opportunity to make a strong contribution, as the whole body of our work is infused with invitations to create images and movement for each individual, in pairs and often as a whole group. I have a particular interest in the mediation between people and their external environment afforded by interposing various objects. We have seen time and again how effective this can be in the forging and re-forging of connections. From a physiotherapeutic perspective the word 'connections' can be translated as 'neural pathways' and refers to the neuroplasticity of the brain. It was interesting throughout the weekend workshop, and also in Pam Quinn's class, to step back and employ the neurophysiotherapy perspective, to try objectively to assess the aims and effectiveness of particular activities.

There was also a session devoted to developing safe, fun exercises which travel. This held out the promise of something exciting and useful, as walking, even just forwards in a straight line can be fraught with obstacles for many people living with PD. And in the past I have taken part in travelling sequences led by John and David from the narrative of West Side Story which were snappy, fun and creative. Unfortunately, this particular session was the only one which I did not find especially useful, being perhaps a little uninspiring and prescriptive, not drawing particularly well on the experience of the participants to enliven and diversify it. I noticed Mel looking similarly unconvinced, and when we compared notes later we both agreed on the importance of employing the experience of workshop participants and using collaborative teaching methods in this context. It did warn me, however, to be aware of this pitfall myself when devising training programmes. One of our key objectives for this trip was to learn more about the devising and delivery of training in this field, which as a network in the UK we are still developing.

By the close of the second day, my back pain had gained the upper hand in the mind-over-matter battle, and exhaustion began to envelop me. Surprising then that we managed to complete the day by wandering into the fringes of Central Park and later visiting Macy's department store with its wooden elevators. I was bowled over by the extraordinary sight of the Manhattan skyscrapers jutting above the green spaces of the park but by the time we reached Macy's the shoppers and the merchandise had taken on a surreal quality. As Mel indefatigably searched for shorts for her daughter, I felt an almost overwhelming urge to sink to the ground and not get up. I was more than relieved to reach our basement, which even in its underground mustiness felt welcoming. I dare say we had a cup or two of Earl Grey when we stumbled in but after that it all became something of a blur.

The following morning was our last and, as I was definitely on my last legs by then, I had to dig quite deep to accompany Mel to the Juillard Centre where David was leading one of their weekly groups. The studio location was stunning, high up on the third floor and the splendour of Broadway, and the group was enormous, filling all of the space. I think we had the full, glorious Mark Morris Dance for PD experience that morning with all its professionalism and magnitude. I was so tired, and in so much pain from my protesting back muscles, that I think I just let myself bathe in the atmosphere unresistingly. It seemed a fitting end to an extraordinary journey.

And that was it ... apart from the long, arduous marathon journey home when 'beside myself' took on new meaning. We were too exhausted to talk much or reflect on all that had happened. That took place later when we had recovered our equilibrium, and after our return to the weekly dance for PD group. They were eager to hear about our adventures and interested to learn about their contemporaries in the Brooklyn Parkinson's Group.

We did bring back a great deal from New York, not the least a determination to keep on learning so that what we bring to our work in the UK is the very best we can offer. Everyone with Parkinson's who wants to dance deserves that, I'm sure you would all agree.

***Final Observation Number Five: let's all agree never to offer less than our best, and to keep on learning to achieve that end.***

Daphne Cushnie, CUMBRIA DANCE FOR PARKINSON'S