

To: Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF)
From: Gerry Turvey
Date: 15/10/04

Please find enclosed my report and photos of my project. The funding was for me to undertake a research trip to Nairobi, Kenya, a four-week stay from 30th August until 27th September 2004.

The Award made it possible for me to undertake the trip and I would normally have covered all my travelling expenses. An unforeseen event meant that in fact I did have to purchase a single return ticket back to the UK for which, so far, I have not been able to get any compensation.

It was a truly rewarding experience and I continue to learn and grow from it, and I was constantly amazed at how much we take for granted when we work in our own culture, that is so completely different in another! I am planning to write this up as an article for *Animated* magazine and to discuss further events or possibilities with both Yorkshire Dance Centre and ADAD. I am also still in discussion with British Council East Africa and the dancers there.

Thank you so much for making all this possible for me. It was a very easy process, and the travel agent was amazing too. If you would need any other information please do let me know. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warm wishes

Gerry Turvey
www.turveyworld.co.uk
turveyworld@yahoo.com

Choreographic Encounters of the East African Kind.

Nairobi Sept 2004

Four weeks of a learning, giving, challenging, richly rewarding and totally stimulating experience.

Background:

In 2001 Jan-May I worked with a group of young dancers in Nairobi with a bursary from UNESCO. Following this in Dec 2002/Jan2003 I ran a similar project in Kampala Uganda, and also with Makerere University Dance and Drama department. During this trip I also returned to Kenya for a short visit, where I saw clearly the development, dance was not only growing and strengthening, but they had formed their own company 'The African Arts Ensemble'.

This visit was to continue the work I had been doing but also to record, write and document the work of this project, and look at the aims and aspirations of the East African dancers.

Contemporary dance is an infant in East Africa. The last six years has seen the emergence of this new Art Form, a fresh shoot emerging, and rapidly growing. It now needs feeding and nurturing in order to grow and blossom. It is so new, that even in a culture rich in dance forms people are still not sure how to respond to it.

Encounters 04:

My first two weeks were spent following and participating in *The Encounters Festival* a workshop and performance exchange with dancers from many African countries. There were performers and participants not only from Kenya and Uganda but also Madagascar, Ethiopia, Tanzania The Congo and South Africa. This proved to be an amazing mix of people: ideas, techniques and skills were shared discussed and explored. It was a wonderful opportunity not only to teach such a rich mix of cultures but also to witness the range of performances and choreographic skills. The performances were well attended by a very appreciative audience, and it is this enthusiasm that needs guiding and nurturing. Some choreographies and technical abilities were clearly underdeveloped; while countries with longer history in contemporary dance showed more sophisticated choreography. It was notable that those from East Africa with less background in the Art form came across as more raw, elemental, and lacking in structure. This is an area that, with some guidance, will change and will emerge within a contemporary dance context in its own unique cultural style.

Kenyan Encounters:

During the following two weeks in Nairobi, I ran a workshop, comprising of open class in the morning and intensive choreographic sessions in the afternoons, culminating in a small sharing of the ideas. The whole event took place at the GoDown Arts Centre, a massive open warehouse located in the industrial area of Nairobi. A series of old workshops converted into Artists' studios and offices, and two dance spaces. The dance space has open walls and is surrounded by sculptors, painters, musicians; add to that the acrobats next door and you have a rich creative environment with open access and exchange. Some artists attended the open classes and had input into the workshops. This ability to easily cross art forms and be creative on many levels allows for greater freedom in making work and is a fundamentally different approach to how we separate and segregate our Art forms.

Communication and facilitation of the learning process was challenging on many levels. As a teacher I aim to foster understanding, self-development, and openness to question. The rigid Kenyan education system, at times makes it harder for people to fully trust that there is another way. This in turn, due to lack of questioning and feedback, made it at times hard for me to trust that I was going in the right direction.

Being an infant, contemporary dance is fresh and coming into a culture already rich in dance forms should perhaps require a different approach to teaching and training. It is easy to want too much too soon, and impose preconceived ideas and notions of what should be expected in contemporary dance. At this point it is useful to offer suggestions, seeds, ideas, and then let the germination process take its natural path. It was also clear to me as a teacher and facilitator, through observation and discussion with some of the dancers, that I needed to approach my work in a manner that could allow that to happen, challenging my methods of communication, and suppositions within a Western culture.

Questions:

Following the results of an interview/questionnaire with the dancers, all of them acknowledged similar desires, concerns and dreams for future development.

- Most had been involved with Contemporary dance for 4-6 years, from the time that Garra Dance Co. run by Opyio Okach was formed.
- They were all committed to having dance as a central part of their lives.
- They all stated that dancing had changed their lives, opened new horizons, and crossed cultural borders.
- Many stated that contemporary dance gave them more ability to be expressive and creative as an artist than did the more traditional forms of African dance.
- Statements were made about lack of training, that it was insufficient and sporadic. Often dancers have had to travel in order to train (this was also seen as a positive)
- There is a lack of role models for the work, and lack of peers and counterparts to inspire and exchange with.
- Space to work, train and play are limited as are recourses, funding and administrative assistance.
- There is a limited and underdeveloped audience for dance (again at times seen as a positive as this can be developed alongside the dance/choreography).
- All of them agreed that it was vital to keep the African culture as a root for the contemporary dance work. Not only is it there anyway, but also it allows for a sense of identity and ownership of a new Art form.
- An interesting cultural concept is the lack of women involved in dance, those that are (with a few exceptions) have less confidence than the men. Women dancing are perceived to be 'masculine' pretty much the reverse to the Western stereotypical notion that men dancing are 'effeminate'.

Dance is a child that needs feeding, space to grow, time, sensitive input, development and nurturing. It is an exciting moment, watch this space, this baby is going to grow into something amazing!

***Encounters** funded by French Cultural Centre, Garra Productions, Alliance Francais, Italian Inst. of Culture, Ford Foundation and The GoDown, it is due to happen annually, we had better wake up, get involved and work towards making it a global event.*

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Gerry Turvey.

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