

Gillian Comelius (LUTSF scholarship winner 2002) was awarded £350 to travel to Barcelona for a two-month placement with the Spanish Dance company, Senza Tempo. Gillian is a lecturer and freelance dance practitioner.

Report Gillian Comelius - visit to Barcelona in August 2002 Introduction Senza Tempo, the company I was lucky enough to visit this summer performed their first work in 1991. Since that small performance 11 years ago, the company have gone from strength to strength and their inimitable stage language has evolved into something very special. Ines Boza and Caries Maliol, the directors and choreographers of the company, are also the driving force behind it. They are performers/dancers, visual artists, technicians, publicity agents, photographers and wardrobe. The list of their skills is endless and this is often the way when a company starts out. Many roles are taken on out of necessity, but out of all of these their vision and talent as creative choreographers is rare and very hard to pigeonhole. In Spain, particularly in Catalonia, dance and theatre are compartmentalised and there seems to be great risks in moving freely between the genres, but Senza Tempo have achieved a balance that works and they have been accepted, even embraced, by their peers and audiences. If I was asked to define the work of Senza Tempo I would have to use a collage of words and let your imagination do the rest, expressive, sensitive, seductive, working with visual landscapes or postcards of life which are subtle and personal. Their work does not rely on the mastering of a dance technique (although all their dancers are highly trained) but their ability to speak, to express, to communicate with the body in its entirety is organic yet personal. Their most highly acclaimed work to date has been "Water trilogy" ("la trilogia del agua"). The three pieces entitled-- "Capticho", - the life of Mediterranean terrace rooftops where water is a fountain; "Lazurd"- the travel of exile from Spain. A circle of water to which paths arrive and from which they leave. "Zahories" - The Iberian dry land as a landscape of interior desertification, where the water is underground. The pieces are all performed outdoors and although parts were created in a studio, one was created on a rooftop in Barcelona. They have been performed in market places, streets, parks, gardens or whatever space will hold the company. In the case of "Lazurd", an 8m paddling pool.

As Caries Maliol states in an interview by Pablo Iley, "when we approach works we always do it by beginning with elements that are very close to us, it is very simple to explain it like that. The important thing is to turn simplicity around. Sometimes when one creates there is a tendency to want to go too far, when the best thing is what is near, what is right next to us, to forget about what is great. From my perspective, I did not really know what I would gain from my time working with the company, however as a dancer, a teacher and a choreographer myself I was fascinated with the organic yet personal way the company created and I hoped to gain an insight, my own postcard into the work of Senza Tempo and to bring this back to my own work here in England.

I kept a diary/record of my time working with Senza Tempo. Parts are personal and others are factual, however this helped me consolidate and understand the way the company worked and their practices. The language barriers proved to be a hindrance and my poor stilted Spanish let me down heavily. Often in rehearsals I became very frustrated as I could not understand what was transgressing, in fact a few times arguments or heated discussions would break out and I would have difficulty in determining whether this was in fact part of the piece they were rehearsing or just a lofty disagreement between the dancers. Rehearsals took place at 42 Torrent D'en Viadalet, Sala 2, a large dance studio with a number of floors and rehearsal spaces. The studio is used by companies as a place of creative development and is set in a very bohemian quarter of Barcelona. The day always began with a warm up in which I was invited to participate in. The dancers lay on the floor in silence and gradually through breath and exhalations they began a series of stretches. At first I found this very disconcerting as the dancers would be moaning or yelling and every stretch was performed with a huge intake and then outtake of breath. The movements start very small but soon move to sit ups, plies, tendus and more conventional warm up methods all performed in silence. I found the silence to very focusing as I began to work with my own body rhythms and breath. I made a mental note to use this channelling method with my students to start the day in a less hectic manner. The dancers know their own bodies very well and work on specific areas of weakness for themselves, in this way the warm up works very well for individuals. After about an hour and a half the company are ready to begin rehearsals. In the period I spent with them they were fine-tuning their piece Lazurd for an open-air performance in Tarragona. They began by running the piece from start to finish with no stops. Ines watched and took notes, but had to jump up from time to time to perform in sections of the piece. She moved seamlessly from rehearsal director to performer. They then began to break the piece down and work on sections. I noticed their attention to detail was meticulous and would often spend large amounts of time discussing the tilt of a head or the angle of an arm. This I found very interesting as the piece is relatively old now and the company have performed it all over the world. This is not obvious though and the company rehearse it as if it is new. The piece involves some very large props that take a lot of time to organise and set up, a heavy wooden wardrobe, that is used to store things in, to move over and around and to produce the feeling of another world (almost a feeling of Narnia, The Lion, Witch and Wardrobe) when the dancers appear from it. They also use an 8m paddling pool which is rolled out from the wardrobe and gradually filled with water half way through the piece. The dancers then move within this circle of water and the image is startling. I spoke with Ines about her reasons for using the water and she told me that she had planned it from the beginning of the pieces creation but had not told her dancers whilst they were making the piece. It was only at quite a late stage in rehearsals that they put the movement into the water and played with how it changed the dancers dynamics and style. She told me that she wanted it to be a place where paths meet, cross and depart. A calm water through which to travel, a path towards nakedness. The piece focuses on nomadic people such as the Jews and Gypsies and she felt water was symbolic in travel and the sustenance of life.

The company rehearsed without water however and I was very excited to be seeing the performance in its entirety and see how the water did in fact change the dynamics and feel of the piece. The day's rehearsals usually finished at about 5.00pm and I would often sit in the nearby square and drink coffee and chat the best we could in our pigeon English/Spanish about the day's work. The rest of the week took on the same routine, with class in the morning and meticulous rehearsal of Lazurd throughout the rest of the day. The company were also rehearsing a new piece which they were to be premiering at a festival in France later that month. The piece was choreographed specifically for a street setting and used a car which moved slowly along. The dancers appeared to be on an outing and props such as big hats, cameras and guidebooks were used. The imagery was captivating and the characters came to life with careful choreography and brilliant observation. They moved over and around the car as it moved and then would stop to discuss, take pictures and interact with the audience. It was interesting to see a new piece being born and the dancers seemed very excited with the new work. The rehearsal process was enlightening for me, as it was highly professional yet at the same time completely relaxed. After years working with students and young dancers I was delighted to remember what it is like to really know and understand your craft. Things that have to be coaxed out or explained in detail in my day to day life just happen with no thought or conversation, and the care and passion with which the dancers seem to view their work is inspiring. I also appreciated the way that the dancers would be happy to repeat phrases or even pieces over and over again without a moan, which I realise comes with years of training and discipline in their art and I hope to instil just a little of this mindset with my students. The alchemists said that the secret of magic is in repetition.

We travelled by car to Tarragona a small town about an hour outside of Barcelona. The company were to perform in a beautiful square overlooked by a pale stone cathedral. The technicians had arrived in Tarragona very early and the stage and lighting rig were already in place. The dancers had a light lunch and then began a warm up on the stage. Persian rugs were all laid out on the stage as the flooring for the piece Lazurd. These also help to soak up the water that is splashed from the pool and keep it in place throughout the piece. The performance itself was magical, the light was fading and the atmosphere was heavy with anticipation. The audience were bustling for places on the stone steps and people hung from windows all around the square. As the piece began I found it interesting to observe the audience, as at first people were talking, drinking and fidgeting but gradually they began to settle and were absorbed by the imagery before them. The piece unfolded seductively and the rhythm of the music hummed over our heads into the now night sky. It was amazing to see the piece with the water and the shadows being cast on it by the dancers and buildings around. After the piece had finished we all spent the next couple of hours de rigging and hanging the now sodden rugs up to dry over night in the square. One of the local restaurants kindly stayed open to feed us, and the night finished with lots of Spanish wine and good food. A night I will never forget. My time in Barcelona was very special and I feel I learnt a lot from Senza Tempo. I learnt a lot about the creative process and how so much of this company work is born from their environment and their experiences. Contemporary dance has a short history in Europe and this is the case especially in Catalonia. It seems to not only have a brief history, but also a short memory, it seems it is hard to leave an imprint in the local setting. I feel Senza Tempo are ground breaking in removing some of these barriers and have managed this by bringing it closer to its community. By taking their dances out into a pedestrian setting, and using what is close and real they are opening themselves to a much wider audience. An audience that once have been given the chance to view their work are as beguiled and enthralled as I was. I hope that I keep their honesty close to me in my work within teaching and choreographing and can pass on some of the skills in communication within dance to my students and peers.