

30th October 2012

Dear LUTSF,

I attach a report detailing my visit to Taiwan in order to accept an invitation to undertake a project as guest artist in residence at the Tainan Community University, Tai-jian campus, Tainan City, Taiwan, which the award of your travelling scholarship fund very kindly made possible.

The Che-Gu dance group was formed 5 years ago and is directed by dance artist and choreographer Kuei-Ju Tung, who began by exploring new ways of expressing local cultural life through the language of traditional Che-Gu dance. Kuei-Ju states that "through the exploration and application of contemporary dance, they are transforming the performing element of traditional Che-Gu into textural and rhythmical dance". The group are endeavouring to pass on the traditional art of Che-Gu, which is gradually disappearing, by performing it to a wide audience.

The residency took place from 13th - 29th July 2012. We explored the notion of cultural heritage through the language of dance, culminating in a performance in Tsao-Huang Temple, which the community dancers use as their stage and which is the centre of community life in Tainan. This was followed by a symposium, facilitating reflective discussion and feedback regarding our mutual experiences.

After the residency, I had the good fortune to enjoy a short period of study with a local T'ai Chi master. The practice of T'ai Chi has informed my creative teaching over a period of thirty years and I am grateful to LUTSF for affording me the opportunity to study this ancient Chinese art form with a champion martial artist, who is a true master of his art.

Thank you for a truly memorable and enriching experience. I have returned with renewed energy and enthusiasm and hope to continue my passionate lifelong quest to enrich people's lives and empower them through the joy of dance.

Yours sincerely,

Iris Tomlinson

Sharing Cultural Heritage through dance *as guest artist in residence at the Tai-Jiang Community University, Tainan City, Taiwan*

July 2012

As guest artist in residence at Tai-Jiang Community University in Tainan City, Taiwan, my brief was to formulate and lead a series of workshops with the Che-Gu group of elder dancers, exploring cultural similarities/differences through the language of dance. My co-artist in residence, Katy Pendlebury, dance artist and film-maker, was invited to devise and lead workshops with local children from the Tsao-Huang Temple Community School in their summer dance camp. The residency was to begin with a press conference at the Tsao-Huang Temple, which is the local community dancers' stage and the heart of University life. This was to be followed by six days of residency. A symposium, to which Taiwanese dance teaching professionals were invited, would mark the end of the residency. The subject of the symposium was to be the concept of cultural exchange through dance. The occasion would facilitate the possibility for reflection, exchange of ideas and mutual feedback regarding our experiences throughout the residency.

Before accepting the invitation, I was advised by our colleague Kuei-Ju Tung, dance artist and teacher at the Community University, that community dance in Tai-Jian is a regular educational dance project, supported by Tainan Community University in order to create extraordinary opportunities for the community in Tai-Jian to work with international dance artists and teachers. The purpose of our visit would be to expose the participants to another culture, to explore the concept of cultural exchange through dance and in conclusion, to reflect on ideas around 'community dance', what it is and how it is perceived respectively in Taiwan and the United Kingdom, through the symposium.

My report will attempt to document this memorable experience, the impact it has had on me and how it will enrich my on-going creative work.

Preparation in Taipei, Taiwan

After arriving in Taiwan, we spent a few days planning our workshops with Kuei-Ju Tung, and sightseeing. As I was anxious to clarify the role of the temple in community life, Kuei-Ju took us to the Lung Shan (Dragon Mountain) Temple, which is Taipei's oldest and most popular temple. Known as the "meeting place of the gods", it was originally constructed in the 18th century as a temple for Kuanyin, (goddess of mercy). It is a fine example of classical Taiwanese architecture. Lung Shan is a genuine place of local religious culture and community activities. It hosts numerous colourful festivals and celebrations and has served as a focal point for political unrest.

On entering the main building, I was overwhelmed by the pungent smell of burning incense and the colourful spectacle in front of me. The atmosphere was serene yet full of peaceful activity. The walls and stone columns were richly decorated with numerous ornate and detailed carvings and paintings.

There were tables adorned with flowers, food and other offerings for blessing by various gods.



Photos from the Lung Shan Temple, Taipei

People of all ages were sitting reading, kneeling or standing praying and offering incense, which they burned in enormous scarlet and gold bronze incense burners. There was a sense of reverence as well as a sense of informality as groups of people sat in the cloisters quietly chatting and passing the time of day. Many tourists visit this most popular Temple. However, it is clearly the centre of daily life for this district of Taipei, both as a place of worship and as a place where friends and family congregate.

After visiting the temple, we walked in the Wanhua District observing life in the busy streets and sampling the local cuisine.

The Community University

The Community University is located in Tainan City on the south west coast of Taiwan, a short distance inland. It has several campuses, one of which is in the Tsao-Huang Temple in Tai-Jian. A former farming and fishing community, Tai-Jian is situated on the outskirts of Tainan City and is surrounded by rice paddies and irrigation channels.

We travelled to Tainan in the evening by high-speed train from Taipei. Sadly we were unable to see anything of the countryside en route as it was already dark. Tainan, the capital of Taiwan until 1885, has the greatest number of temples of any city in Taiwan and is particularly famous for its street food.

The morning following our arrival we visited the Community University accompanied by Kuei-Ju. We were warmly welcomed by Mr. Gin Thez Wu Director of the Temple, Mr. Mao-Cheng-Wu, Director of the Tai-Jiang Campus of the Tainan Community University and Mr. Guan Chou Lin, Executive Director of Tainan Community University, who had organised a press conference to publicise our residency and the symposium to follow. One of the dance groups directed by Kuei-Ju, the Che-Gu adult dance group, with whom I would be working during the residency, performed their traditional Che-Gu dance for us in the temple courtyard. Katy and I were invited to join them after their performance and learn a few steps and moves with a beautiful fan. Kuei-Ju, Mr. Chen and Mr. Mao-Cheng-Wu then showed us around the temple and the university, explaining the university's role in society and the kind of education it provided for local residents.



A press report announcing the beginning of our residency with Iris and Katy learning excerpts from a traditional Taiwanese dance.



The Tsao-Huang Temple Courtyard in Tai-Jian (above) and lanterns inside the Tsao-Huang Temple in Tai-Jian (right)

After the morning press conference, Chin-Fan Tasi, one of the dancers from the Che-Gu group took us on a short tour of the surrounding area. We walked around the neighbourhood from the Temple to the Community University building nearby. It was the middle of the day and extremely hot and humid. There was not much activity in the streets. On the way back to the Temple, we stopped to observe a woman working alone in a shop assembling some car parts.



Katy Pendlebury and Chin-Fan Tasi near the Tsao-Huang Temple in Tai-Jian

Education and Society

The Community University was established in 2001 and provides over 200 educational courses and community projects in environmental protection, social policy, languages, agriculture and the arts. It provides life-long learning opportunities to the people of Tainan and encourages them to be involved in public issues and to take their place as responsible members of their society.

This concept of education was in evidence at the Community University's end of year fair and performance which I attended. Student groups from the University, including music, theatre and t'ai chi, together with a women's dance group directed by Kuei-ju, performed their work on an outdoor stage. An enthusiastic audience stood or sat in the rain, watching from under their umbrellas. Craft work, gardening and environmental projects were displayed on stalls around the performance site and there was a general buzz of excitement and sense of achievement.

“Under the direction of, and with a great deal of hard work on the part of dancer and choreographer Kuei-Ju Tung, the Community University is building a portfolio of dance activity that local people can become involved in. With the Che-Gu dance group, Kuei-Ju teaches and reinterprets Taiwanese dance forms from a contemporary dance perspective and with the Tainan Community University Dance (women's) Group she utilizes contemporary dance to help the students build a relationship with their bodies, with dance, and as a starting point from which to devise performance material. The Tainan Community University Dance (women's) Group is developed from the regular contemporary dance courses of the community university. They often devise site-specific work together, exploring connections to their lives and surroundings. You can see some of their performances here <http://youtu.be/4mo76S5Ms8Q> and here <http://youtu.be/T-t1ONGepZc>. “ (Katy Pendlebury's LUTSF report, September 2012).

The Che-Gu dance group was set up five years ago. Under the direction and passionate professional leadership of Kuei-Ju Tung, this group of dancers learn and perform traditional Taiwanese dance through the exploration and application of contemporary dance, in order to preserve their cultural heritage, to pass this cultural heritage on to subsequent generations and to make it known worldwide. They have transformed the performing element of traditional Che-Gu into textural and rhythmic dance. Over a period of five years Kuei-Ju has witnessed a major development and transformation of the students' intention for learning. The dancers are between 25 and 70 plus, years of age. Ninety per cent of them have regular daytime jobs and come to classes and rehearsals in the evening. Kuei-Ju believes that in the beginning the students came to Che-Gu dance class in order to exercise for health. However, through learning contemporary dance and Che-Gu dance they have discovered pleasure in dancing and how to communicate with and through their bodies. They have developed a passion for dance and also now understand the importance and value of passing on the traditional art of Che-Gu by making it known and appreciated by a wider audience through their own performance.

The Residency

The duration of the residency was six days, culminating in a performance in the temple on the final day, followed by the symposium.

On hearing that Tai-Jian was a former fishing community, I was immediately transported to my birthplace on the north shore of Edinburgh in Scotland – the fishing community of Newhaven-on-Forth. I was excited at the possibility of discovering much in common with the community in Tai-Jian. I grew up among fisher folk and spent my early childhood playing on the seashore, gathering mussels and crabs and endeavouring to catch mackerel, with a piece of string and a safety pin, from the end of the pier. Community life revolved around the local kirk (church) and the fisherman's hall, where families would gather to worship, socialise, eat together, sing and dance. In his book 'Newhaven-on-Forth, Port of Grace', Tom McGowran remarks that "the Newhaven men were described in the last century as pre-eminent for their industrious and frugal habits, employed on oyster fishing through the winter and in summer, in line fishing in the firth, or herring fishing off the north coast". The women supported the men, mended the nets, worked in the fishmarket and sold seafood from small wicker baskets (creels) which they carried on their backs, travelling to various areas of the city in order to sell their wares.

On arriving with Kuei-Ju for my first session at the Community University with the Che-Gu dance group, I was warmly greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Chang, an elderly couple who danced with the group and who farmed locally. They had already prepared the dance studio for the session and organised refreshment for everybody. Thirty more members of the group arrived shortly afterwards, all with smiling faces, eager to meet me, share their culture, learn and create new dances. Kuei-Ju had arranged a support team of her student dancers to assist and interpret, which enabled me to focus on the enjoyment of dancing and leading each session, without concerning myself with organisational management.

Being a practitioner and firm believer in the physical and mental benefits of T'ai Chi and Chi-Gung for over thirty years, it seemed appropriate for me to begin with a Chi-Gung warm-up, (Chi-Gung being translated as 'energy work'). I carefully prepared a series of exercises with the aim of balancing body, breath and mind, stretching meridians, loosening joints and vertebrae

and thereby releasing physical tension. I then created a simple short contemporary dance phrase which focussed on reaching up, dropping down, bending side to side, with small jumps, turns and travelling steps, which we developed together with partners and in groups over the course of the week. This became known as 'the apple dance' and was arranged for performance in the Temple on the last day.

By way of sharing my cultural heritage, I decided to teach two traditional Scottish dances, which are enjoyed and performed at social gatherings – a reel for eight and a couple dance. The Eightsome Reel involves, dancing with a partner, dancing in a group and also gives every dancer an opportunity to create and perform a solo. There were four groups of eight dancers and Kuei-Ju assigned one of her student helpers to assist and interpret for each group. Initially many of the dancers were a little shy and embarrassed when encouraged to create their own solo and perform in the centre of their group, but by the end of the week, everybody enjoyed improvising their solo and worked together to practice and remember the sequence of the dance.

The couple dance involved simple walking with changes of direction, spinning and polka. Some of the dancers found the polka rhythm challenging and the spinning a little fast, but all managed to find their own way to adapt the steps and enjoy the dance.



Reel for Eight



Couple Dance

We arranged the dances in such a way that all the dancers who were able to join us in the Temple on the final day of the residency had the opportunity to perform both dances. There were two performances - one set with two groups of eight and four couples, followed by one set of eight and eight couples.

On the night before our performance in the Temple, the Che-Gu dance group prepared an amazing feast of Taiwanese food and invited Kuei-Ju, her student assistants, my colleague Katy and myself to eat with them. There were many different dishes of exquisite cuisine to enjoy, including the most delicious oyster dish. Their kindness and generosity throughout the week was overwhelming. Each day members of the group brought a gift of some special beverage, tasty morsel or soothing balm to refresh body and soul. Mr. and Mrs. Chang were always first to arrive in order to prepare the rehearsal space, greeting us with a huge smile and a cup of tea and were last to leave after clearing up.



Mr. and Mrs. Chang at the Temple on performance day

On the final day, the dancers arrived at 8.30am dressed in their finest colourful clothes, looking radiant and busied themselves around the temple, calmly preparing, until it was time for their rehearsal and performance. There was a real sense of team spirit, quiet confidence and a joy of dancing in that very special place – their Temple, which is their stage and the centre of their community

Link to performance

http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=FLZ5Y6CazRNi9ltQdDd0Us6A&feature=mh_lolz

The Symposium

On the final Saturday of the residency, the performance began with the site-specific piece my colleague Katy Pendlebury had created with the children in the Temple. The Che-Gu Dance Group then performed the dances they had learned and created during my residency. In the spirit of exchanging ideas about dance, community dance and education, Katy and I were invited to talk about our experiences of teaching and to share some of our previous work on film. Kuei-Ju also presented film of her work at the Community University and some of her students talked about their experiences of discovering dance through working with Kuei. After the formal presentation, a discussion group shared ideas about how work might be presented informally. Professor Ann Tai, Associate Professor, Department of Dance at Tainan University of Technology, attended the day's proceedings. She contributed to our discussions and gave constructive evaluation of the outcome of the residency. The whole day was inspiring and enlightening. For some of Kuei-Ju's students, discovering dance had had a profound effect on the quality of their lives.

It was an enormous privilege to be given the opportunity to share my cultural heritage, to teach, and work with so many committed and generous people and learn about their culture. This experience has served to reinforce my belief in the value of community spirit and the

importance of preserving and passing on cultural heritage to the next generation, while striving to make it relevant in our time.



*The Che-Gu dance group, Community University, Tai-Jiang Campus, Tainan
(seated in the centre, from left to right, Katy, Iris and Kuei-Ju)*

T'ai Chi Study

After the residency, Kuei-Ju arranged for me to study T'ai Chi with Master Jheng Syumin, who teaches at the Community University. He was on summer break, but generously agreed to work with me for the remainder of my stay in Tainan. He collected me each morning and took me across the city on the back of his motor scooter for my lesson. This was an exhilarating experience. Having not been driven in this fashion for forty years, I was a little nervous at first as we joined the droves of motor scooters racing across the city. However, I very quickly relaxed in the capable hands of this humble and calm champion martial artist and looked forward to my morning ride from day two. After a couple of hours each day, we were joined by another of his students, who kindly brought fruit and cold drinks, joining us for the remainder of the session.

Although a very short period of study, I found it rewarding and enriching, enabling me to reflect on my own practice and inform my ongoing creative teaching work.

I am extremely grateful to LUTSF for making it possible for me to re-visit and share my own cultural heritage with the Che-Gu dance group. Their generosity, enthusiasm and community spirit is humbling and my life is richer for knowing them. Thank you too for affording me the opportunity to study the ancient Chinese exercise art of T'ai Chi in Taiwan with a champion martial artist, who is truly a master of his art.

Notes and Credits

Photos taken by Katy Pendlebury, Iris Tomlinson and the Tainan Community University.
Video footage by the Tainan Community University

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