

To: Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund

Covering letter from Katie Phillips

I am terribly sorry for sending the report in so late - I moved house not long after I came back from the USA after our flat burnt down and I must have misplaced the original forms. Please accept my sincere apologies - I by no means meant either to disappoint you, or treat the charity badly. I fully appreciate that the LUTSF works on a voluntary basis, and should have realised my mistake earlier instead of having to be reminded again last month. I am very, very grateful for the award and really feel that it has benefited me in my career, and has led on to further participation in a young Critics scheme with the British Council during which I often refer to my experiences at the Dance Critics Association (DCA) conference.

It was such a privilege to meet with prestigious and established New York critics such as Clive Barnes and Elizabeth Zimmerman to discuss dance criticism and also to attend performances with them - contemporary works at the Joyce Theatre, as well as classical works by the New York City Ballet at the Lincoln Centre. One of the highlights for me was seeing the matinee of NYCB performing Balanchine's Jewels at the New York State Theatre, before rushing to the Joyce to catch Moses Pendleton's Momix the same evening.

It was also a great opportunity to network and exchange information, and I came up with numerous ideas to bring back home with me - for example on the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre (who later came to London to perform); Mikhail Baryshnikov's new dance school White Oak; The Glass Contraption Arts Group, a NY based company who work with children living with HIV in South Africa, and an American 'sponsor-the-dancer' scheme amongst others.

The DCA conference provided yet more performances, contacts and information exchange. There was a range of discussion topics from the role of the critic in contemporary society to the problems with new media in dance criticism, and how to avoid ethical traps. These talks, workshops and discussions were led by prestigious American dance experts, and I felt that I learnt a lot through participating in them. Just being immersed in an environment of dance writing for a concentrated time was incredible for me and I felt able to soak up 'inside' tips from the top - from reviewing styles to new enthusiasm for writing about different kinds of dance and how to get more work in dance criticism. And all this whilst staying in Hollywood and soaking up the bizarre culture of LA!

I was recently nominated for a Young Critics scheme with the British Council for a group of 12 young people from the UK, Palestinian Territories, Lebanon and Pakistan. I really felt able to 'bring to the table' a range of topics, discussion points and recommendations from my conference experience in LA. I had my report published in The Dancing Times and would also like to write a further feature article on the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund, as well as profile further awardees in a new column in The Stage called 'The Ones to Watch'.

The only suggestion I can think of for future LUTSF applicants is to research beforehand, and then follow up specific leads whilst you are in the States - the dance scene over there is so rich and diverse that you could get lost in everything that is going on. Be clear about what you want to do, then keep following up your contacts.

Katie Phillips

Report:

CRITICAL UNITY IN CRITICAL TIMES

The driver for our afternoon trip to a reception at the Getty Centre, Los Angeles, gets on to the coach and quips "So this is the Greyhound route to Vegas, huh folks?" He is met with stony silence. It is not wise to make a joke to a bus full of critics. Yes - on this trip - everyone's a critic. Literally. The Critic's Association of America has brought together for the first time the Dance Critics Association, the American Theatre Critics Association, the International Association of Arts Critics/USA and the Music Critics of North America for a joint four-day conference in the City of Angels, California.

The Dance Critics Association*, founded in 1974 has evolved for the benefit of some 300 members who network and exchange opportunities for professional development and information. It exists to serve the needs of professional dance critics and aims to advance the field of dance criticism by publishing newsletters, books and research guides and holding workshops as well as its annual conference.

So, whilst most are out in Hollywood celeb-spotting and hitting the beach, I find myself ensconced in panel discussions, performances, workshops and cultural receptions about the ideas, concerns, practice and process of writing about dance with over 400 critics, academics, editors and arts writers from all over the USA. Now this might sound like every dancers worst nightmare, but instead of a group of fang gnashing literary lions just waiting for a bad performer to step in to the ring, the atmosphere and ethos is supportive, enveloping and inspiring. It transpires that through written criticism of dance, enthusiasm is infectious - if you write about dance with animation and passion then you will make people want to follow you into that auditorium.

All forms of dance are experienced - from the Carnival Choreographer's ball at the Key Club on Sunset Boulevard, showcases of new contemporary work and dance film showings, to salsa lessons at the Annual World Salsa Congress at Hollywood Park. I take part in Dance Editor of Village Voice, New York, Elizabeth Zimmers' Kamikaze Workshop which trains participants in the battlefield of the over night review. I visit performances including Matthew Bourne's Play Without Words, currently on its world tour. From copy tips and punchy openings to philosophical meandering about the nature of criticism or the future of electronic arts coverage, the approach of the DCA is fresh and encouraging. Mindy Aloff, editor of the DCA News and critical writer for (amongst others) the New York Times and The New Yorker, describes now as "the golden age of dance criticism." Back in the UK, I had noticed a similar thing - a way of writing about dance that, in today's multicultural, globally aware society, has an ability to create a context for understanding the world in which we live. This dance writing is for a broad audience - not just specialists - in a language specific yet accessible; knowledgeable yet enjoyable, with fluent analytical skills and sound critical judgement.

Good dance writing can be a crucial process in the understanding of dance; a particular piece of choreography; a style or genre, or, the wider context of dance as a universal art form and the nature of performance in general. So when I heard that Michael Barnes, chairman of the American Theatre Critics Association had echoed the DCA and said: "At their best, critics lend perspective on human issues, create context for understanding our culture and our times. It is crucial that critics reclaim their roles as vital cultural observers." - I knew that I had to get across the ocean and find out what else they had to say.

Many of the issues that arose during the conference were very America specific - well known choreographers, their funding and newspaper systems for example are completely different to the UK, and their censorship laws and political currents are a big issue. But one discussion point that will be the same all over the world is the role of the critic in today's society. It is a big question for a four-day conference, but suffice to say we manage to scratch the surface. Of course, to try and pretend that we speak to everyone through dance criticism is a myth. But in today's artistic climate where more people are attending dance than other art forms such as classical

music and opera, it is becoming increasingly relevant to the world in which we live. It is our job as dance critics to explore and explain where contemporary dance choreographers are coming from, predict where they might be going and question why. Good dance writing also has the ability to encourage people who may not previously have thought they had any capacity to become involved in the arts.

Jack Miles, Pulitzer Prize Winner and critical writer for the New York Times, The Boston Globe and The Los Angeles Times underpins the importance of good criticism when he says: "Journalism is the first draft of history, and, as such, criticism is a part of that draft." Inevitably, some of the discussion points revert back to the argument over the Bush administration and USA politics. If you'd have played spot-the-Brit you'd have seen me rolling my eyes and muttering "so American..." But - and Lord knows I am not in the habit of pioneering American attitudes in the UK - this conference seemed to me to be a remarkably good idea. To make contact with other artistic disciplines as well as to rejuvenate the debate on dance, and wipe away the grey matter in the definitive gaps between dancer and critic. Believe it or not, critics function like artists - they are involved in a progressive and laborious discipline that needs to keep reinventing/renewing itself. The dance critics' responsibility is as vital, fragile and volatile as the dancers and choreographers themselves.

So at the risk of sounding like a crank, and criticising criticism, my question is this: Do we, over here in England want to remain "Best of British" and keep anonymous critics slipping unseen in and out of dark auditoriums? Or is there room for a similar forum of sharing ideas that will allow the debate on dance criticism to diminish as the art form expands?

* For more information about the Dance Critics Association (DCA) please visit www.dancecritics.org.uk