

2nd October 2006

Dear LUTSF

Please find enclosed two copies of my report for LUTSF detailing my participation in **The Solo Performance Commissioning Project UK 2006, led by choreographer Deborah Hay**. This took place at the Findhorn Foundation Community between 30th August – 8th September 2006.

The purpose of the project was multi layered, but primarily it was hoped that new stimuli and challenges could be sought, new tools and processes could be developed and fresh inspiration and freedoms would be highlighted.

The impact of this opportunity was a major personal wake-up call.

I feel freed from the burden to ‘create’ by acknowledging that perception is the dance. I have felt totally challenged and yet hugely supported and nurtured.

I would like to express my gratitude to LUTSF for helping to provide me with the opportunity to take part in this fantastic experience.

I plan to take part in a shared platform of SPCP performances in the future (there were at least five other artists from England on the course). This will need to take place at least three months from now, due to the nature of the project which requests a daily practice for that amount of time before any showings can take place. I would also like to prepare a performance at The Place where I work, which could take the form of a Research Lab presentation, and could invite discussion and debate. These could be filmed and forwarded to the Fund if required. All performances will state within the programme that the travel cost of this project was supported by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund.

The nature of the project has been quite radical for me, and it has highlighted my practice as a teacher of performance, questioning my role as an arbitrator of the technique which too often concentrates on the ‘what’ and allows too little time for the ‘how’ of performance. I am just embarking on an MA in Professional Practice at Middlesex University and would very much like to use my experiences at Findhorn to fuel this personal debate concerning the appropriate practice of performance techniques.

Once again many thanks,
Yours sincerely

Lauren Potter

REPORT BY LAUREN POTTER FOR LUTSF

THE SOLO PERFORMANCE COMMISSIONING PROJECT UK, 2006 LED BY DEBORAH HAY

This project involves a group of 20 performance artists invited to participate in a choreographic commission, instigated and led by the choreographer Deborah Hay. I use the term ‘invited’, when in fact the successful applicants were required to be resourceful and creative in their ability to fund-raise the fee for the course, one of the requisites being that the project fee could not be self funded. This condition alone set the tone for a project that was to prove seismic in its outcomes.

I originally became aware of the projects’ existence through conversations with a number of performers whose work and processes I admire and respond to. The ideas and challenges that were talked about sounded intriguing and exciting and I fancifully wondered if there could be any possibility of my embarking on such an adventure.

The fact that I have full-time work responsibility and two children to care for has always been a priority commitment and often left me with no space or energy for anything ‘other’. I knew though, as a teacher and rehearsal director in the field of performance, that I desperately needed ‘feeding’ and ‘nourishing’ in terms of new approaches and directions for myself and my students. This seemed like a golden opportunity.

Funding became available through a trio of sources.

1. The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund
2. The Rebecca Skelton Fund
3. The Staff Research and Development Fund at LCDS

The timing of the project gradually appeared to be ideal, it was during the end of the school holidays and my partner was available to deal with childcare. All that was necessary was for me to take the plunge and do something I needed to do.

Susan Foster who writes a foreword in Deborah Hays’ book ‘My body the buddhist’ describes the choreographer as “an experimentalist in soul and body” and “a phenomenon capable of expanding and diversifying the language of movement in the most striking and unexpected ways”. Her choreography, from exquisitely meditative solos to dances for large groups of untrained and trained dancers, explores the nature of experience, perception, and attention in dance.

Hay has received numerous awards and fellowships in recognition of her groundbreaking choreography. In 1960, at the age of nineteen, she moved from Brooklyn to Manhattan. Her choreographic work developed in the midst of the most radical cultural revolution in the United States. Hay was one of the early members of the Judson Dance Theatre. In 1964 she toured with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. By 1967 she was choreographing exclusively for untrained dancers. Hay left New York in 1970 to live in a community in northern Vermont. It was here that she began to follow a rigorous daily performance practice which continues to inform her as a student, teacher, and dancer. In 1976 she began performing as a solo artist for the first time. Since 1980 she has been conducting annual group workshops. These group dances became the fabric for her solo performance repertory.’

The venue for the event was the magnificent Universal Hall Arts and Conference Centre, set within the Findhorn Foundation Community and Eco-village. The Findhorn Foundation is known throughout the world as a major international centre of personal transformation and sustainable living, so it seemed perfectly apt for a project such as the SPCP to take place here. The 5-sided theatre space was stripped of its seating to provide a beautifully large and unique space for us to spend 10 intense days involved in the practice of performance.

Day 1. Twenty dancers, one choreographer, one beautiful venue. With the Solo Commissioning Project all participating artists commission the same solo dance choreographed by Deborah Hay. We enter the space and Deborah invites us all to practice what she is practicing. There are many questions and mantras to investigate as we get to feel familiar with the 'practice', each other, the space. Eventually we are given a 'score' for the work, and we are encouraged to follow the choreographer through the material. Each of us has commissioned the same solo dance choreographed by Deborah Hay. Hay rarely demonstrates solutions to the choreography. Rather she conveys her concepts through directives that each performer translates individually into movement in his/her unique way. As part of the process, the artist is bound to the material through meditation-like exercises that are applied throughout the choreographed dance.

I begin to realise what a huge undertaking I have become involved in. The practice of performance suddenly feels like an alien that I have no understanding of. How could I call myself a performer when I have never before perceived such an array of tasks to divide my attention between? This intense learning environment is enticing and terrifically scary. The ability of the choreographer to inspire such trust and evoke great vulnerability amongst participants is inspiring. There is a wonderful lack of ego in this space, we are all committed to 'getting what we need'.

What a fantastic mix of artists, all brought together to exchange and pool resources in our mission to be challenged. I love watching and observing and witnessing their imaginations at work, it is sustenance and inspiration. Deborah constantly challenges each of us with movement concepts that trigger multiple levels of perception at once. It feels akin to keeping plates in the air, juggling and balancing, never able for one moment to lose concentration. An example: "What if every cell in my body at once has the potential to invite being seen, and getting what it needs while choosing to surrender the pattern of facing a single direction, while perceiving all of space within the laboratory in which I choose to read my movement as music". We are constantly invited to notice the feedback from our bodies, and to trust the inherent intelligence that it contains, and to identify the sensual feeling of 'inviting being seen'.

In the latter half of the SPCP each artist is personally coached in his/her performance of the dance, with everyone present. Ultimately the solo is adapted by each performer through a period of practice that extends into the months following the project. This is where I am now. I have signed a contract that states I will practice the solo every day for at least three months before it is performed. At first this seemed a bizarre request, but as the days pass and I manage to find some kind of routine to a practice, then it all begins to make a puzzling but perfect sense.

So here I am, post Findhorn, trying to balance the experience and enlarge my perceptions as I continue in my role as Rehearsal Director back at The Place. I realise I have an engrained Pavlovian 'dancer' in me, constantly needing to explore and be creative with material, to do what feels good, and this simply gets in the way of the practice. It is often all to easy to become seduced by immersing yourself in the movement, and I was constantly reminded to bring myself back to time and space considerations. How to let go of this need to make interesting and beautiful material is a major task for me. I need to keep reminding myself of Deborah's encouragement to experiment and return, and not to explore! The work derives from a need to be challenged and nourished, whilst realising that the movement is not of interest. There is no linearity to the work, it doesn't develop, it simply goes nowhere – but exists honestly in each moment. Some of the artists on the project could demonstrate this skill with wonderful judgement and dexterity, and one of the major pleasures for me within this course was to witness such physical information being constantly enacted. The struggle and the frustration was a daily event, which each of us confronted and grappled with, therefore the learning became a well earned bonus.

Each time I begin my practice, whether I'm in the luxury of an empty studio, or the hasty surroundings of my bedroom before I have to dash to work, then I feel I'm still continuing this journey. I also feel entirely supported by my fellow artists from that shared experience in Findhorn. I can envision each of them through each moment of the solo, and it doesn't feel a lonely place at all. We are all in constant email contact with each other. A daily forum of encouragement and suggestion to tap into.

Getting what I need has become my guiding light.

Inviting being seen my daily routine.

I enjoy trying to confound myself.

I try very hard to practice restraint and remain simple. This isn't to diminish myself as a dancer, but to open up more possibilities.

I try to retain an ability to laugh at any serious intentions that may get in the way.

I endeavour to practice performance with a non-attachment to professional training and hope this will provide a source of insight and delight.

I try to become without fear of appearing foolish in my capacity to violate form in order to recognise where and why it exists.

I am hopefully becoming more skilled at monitoring my own performance.

What all this means is that I am developing a capacity to witness myself from more than one perspective at once, not as a judge but a guide in the practice of attention.

One last word of warning from Deborah was this ... 'It's no big deal, don't wear yourself down with this practice of attention.' This is a major factor I must constantly return to.

Lauren Potter