

Project Axis Dance Company Summer Intensive 2014

Place: Oakland California USA

Dates: 1-14th August 2014

Purpose

The purpose of my trip was to partake in the Axis Dance Company Summer Intensive in order to learn about their dance technique for disabled dancers, their practice for teaching in the community, and to gain insight into their creative work. I also wanted to meet and develop contacts with others involved in the disability dance sector, and gain personal refreshment for myself as a dance artist.

I believe my trip was successful, as I feel I have got to know the current members of Axis Dance Company well, and I learned useful lessons through observing their teaching.

On a personal level I feel invigorated as an artist, I have a new found confidence of my skills as both a dancer and dance teacher, and a better understanding of my position within the integrated dance world. I made some excellent contacts and friends, with whom I will continue to communicate.

Highlights

For me the highlights of my trip were the community contact improvisation jam, when I had the opportunity to dance freely with both Summer Intensive participants and dancers from the local community, and the technique classes where I was able to develop my dance skills. An unexpected highlight turned out to be outside of the structured activities of the week. During an afternoon off, a number of us got involved with a meaty discussion on many different aspects of the integrated/disability arts scene. It became quite an animated, impassioned conversation and fascinating to share experiences from different countries, cultures and background.

Suggestions

My suggestions for future award winners would be -

If possible, find time to experience additional activities other than those of the main project itself. For example, try to see a performance or show, maybe visit a gallery or take part in other cultural activities. It can be helpful to put your experiences into context, and makes for a well rounded trip. It is also important to try to keep your chosen objectives in mind during the whole of your trip. You could maybe bullet point your aims and carry them with you as a reminder.

Sharing

Since returning home, I have been able to share my experiences with Stopgap Dance Company with whom I work. I have incorporated influences from the Intensive into my teaching of company class. My experiences will affect the way I teach community dance workshops. In particular, Axis's use of language, specifically using "translate" instead of "adapt" particularly stood out to me, and has already had a huge impact across my work. My new knowledge and wider understanding of the international integrated dance scene will help inform my work as an advocate for disability dance.

Additionally, I was delighted to be invited by Axis to teach a master class for the company members and an open community session which included some of the participants from the Intensive. It was great to be able to share some of my knowledge with them, having taken so much from my time there.

Please find enclosed my report for my trip

Yours sincerely

Laura Jones

Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund Report

Dance has always been a passion of mine, ever since I can remember. And although I suffered a setback at the age of 16 when I had a spinal bleed which left me paralysed from the chest down, I've always been a dancer at heart.

Having taken a year out for recovery and rehabilitation, I continued with my studies, taking Dance A Level, becoming the first wheelchair dancer to complete 100% of the A Level dance syllabus. On completion of my studies, I was then lucky enough to join Stopgap Dance Company in 2001. I have been a professional dancer since then. Being a dancer with a disability has as many challenges as it has rewards and highlights. It has been a steep learning curve, and I've done a lot of on the job learning, but one thing I have always felt a shortage of, is other disabled dancer role models and peers to learn from and share experiences with. The integrated dance sector is very small, although growing all the time, and despite the privilege of working for a highly acclaimed integrated dance company, it is easy to feel isolated. More recently I felt I had reached the point in my career where I wanted to reassess my situation and felt the need for refreshment. I therefore elected to take a 3 month sabbatical this year in order to pursue other career and professional development opportunities.

I have known about Axis Dance Company for a long time. I remember, as a newly disabled dancer, trying to make sense of my situation, watching videos of them on the internet and thinking this is much bigger than me. I had, for a long time, wanted to meet them and learn from their many years of experience, but they have always felt so far away. However, the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund provided me with the financial support I needed to be able to travel to Oakland, California, to take part in the Axis Annual Summer Intensive. It was exciting to finally meet the members of the company, and have the opportunity to experience their work first hand.

As well as an intensive week of dancing, as part of the structure of the week there were many other additional treats. There was also the talk by Judith Smith, the Artistic Director of Axis, about the company background and history of integrated dance in the USA, their annual community contact jam, and the opportunity to observe some of their youth work. I was also able to go to a couple of performances outside of the summer intensive, to get an idea of the wider dance/performance scene in the area, which was very exciting as Bay Area seems to be such a thriving community of dancers and performers.

There were many different areas from which I was interested in learning: from looking at the logistics of structuring such an event; ideas for teaching strategies for such an eclectic mix of dancers; to the personal refreshment as a disabled dancer in an accessible setting, developing and nurturing my individual technique and movement skills. As such, I have divided my reflection into different categories, to help.

Structure and set up

There were many things about the structure and set up of the week that I thought worked particularly well, and I found could be very useful to bear in mind when looking at setting up dance intensives here in the UK. Axis set up a Facebook group, specifically for the participants of this year's intensive. This was created in advance of the week so we were able to introduce ourselves to each other and start to become familiar with each other before we even arrived in the country. It also gave us the opportunity to air any needs or worries that we wished to share with the group, as well

as coordinate on issues such as accommodation or travel to and from the studio. This was particularly useful given the large size of the group encompassing many different backgrounds, experiences and needs, and the fact that there were a number of participants from out of town.

Then during the week, it was also a place where we could share our thoughts and feelings about the intensive. The Axis team could post notes there from the sessions to help us remember tasks and sequences. It assisted us in developing social bonds while there, so we could arrange to meet up with each other outside of the sessions, and those that were familiar with Oakland and the Bay Area could give suggestions and recommendations of things to do and see to those of us who were new to the area. Since the Summer Intensive, we have been able to share photos, reflections and keep each other up to date with what we are now up to. I have made useful connections that I hope to maintain, and the Facebook group is also an important part of this networking.

As part of Stopgap Dance Company, I have helped to host some intensives of our own, however, we have never hosted a full week long intensive. It was great to be able to experience it from a participant's point of view to feel how it would work, and how energy levels varied over the week. A particular highlight turned out to be having the time off on Wednesday afternoon, when a number of us went to a local park by the picturesque Lake Merritt, and got involved with a meaty discussion on many different aspects of the integrated/disability arts scene. It worked well to have the days split into the three specific sessions of Technique, Improvisation and Composition, that would continue to develop throughout the week, which gave clear progression and development.



Finding satisfactory ways to self-evaluate and reflect is usually a challenge and often something that is easily overlooked when trying to cram in as much learning as possible. We were given plenty of time for reflection, but with questions to help direct our thoughts. A particular technique of note was writing postcards to our future selves with thoughts and feeling of what we learned, and what we wanted to take away with us. They were then collected in, and will be sent back to us in the future. I'm looking forward to receiving it and seeing if anything has changed.

Class and technique – with Joel Brown and Sonsheree Giles

Of all parts of the Summer Intensive, I was most looking forward to taking part in the morning technique class. I was excited to learn from their practice, and to experience an accessible yet different approach which might help me to develop both my own personal movement vocabulary and skills, as well as my delivery of technique as a leader. It was interesting to see that although our practice has developed on different continents, there were similarities between the class we did and the kind of class I am used to back home. I feel that even though geographically we are far apart, we shared some common practice, which I think is reassuring. However there were also many differences, which gave me much to think about.

As a manual wheelchair dancer, the chance to be taught technique from another manual wheelchair dancer is a very rare opportunity and one that has been something that I have craved more of in my development as a disabled dance artist, so I really enjoyed Joel's exercises. The open language gave the opportunity for everyone to challenge themselves on their own personal level. Over the years, I have developed my own style of technique class. It has a rigorous style of set exercises, which although they are open and non body specific, are still quite formal and precise, sandwiched between more improvisational led movement explorations. It was great to experience a greater capacity for individual interpretation and freedom within set boundaries. I am looking at finding a healthy balance and potentially blur the boundaries between the two a little more, and allowing my expectations of certain movements to be more relaxed.

As a disabled dance artist, having a significantly different body and movement facility to that of a "traditional dancing body", I am always looking for different ways to introduce movement sequences. I found the phrase that Joel taught using only clear yet open language, but with no visual "model" given, that would otherwise influence our movement choices, a particularly memorable and successful experience. We all had our own individual version, using the words to create the rhythm and set the pace, becoming a sound track to the phrase. I still have the lyrics to the exercise ingrained in my brain... "scoot right, scoot right, roll down stage, turn to the right and crawl down stage...." The clever use of language, combined with the rhythm of the words created both clear instructions and a strong memory aid that worked wonderfully. I have previously tried something similar, but not with the additional layer of the words becoming the sound track and setting the pace and specific timing of each movement. I look forward to trying this out in my own work.

On a personal level, I found it great to have time to focus on specific and juxtaposing qualities of movement, challenging myself to not add impulse and snap at the beginning and end of a movement. I also relished the opportunity to experiment with different timing, practising working in counts of 5's or 7's instead of the usual rigid 8's that are so ingrained. This was helped by the skills of the live musician that we were treated to.

Wheelchair technique

In addition to the regular technique class, there was also an optional session of wheelchair technique. With so many different wheelchair dancers together in one place, it was great to have the opportunity to work together to focus specifically on wheelchair technique. As so often happens, a number of us had developed our own individual movement style independent of other wheelchair dancers, because of not having other peers and role models nearby. We were able to share our experiences, moves and tricks with each other. We experimented with a number of different balances, tilts and turns, trying out each others' techniques. This was a very enjoyable experience.



Improvisation – with Sebastian Grubb and Julie ??

There were many different improvisation tasks that we were led through during the week. There were icebreakers, team building exercises, ones to help us develop our own movement vocabulary and quality, ones to help us develop an eye as a director. All of them have the potential to be used and developed in my current work. There were two in particular that I will take away with me. One was the group charades – working as a team to create an object or thing. The other being Sophie’s “Alphabet of dreams”, a fantastic tool for exploring different movement qualities; each letter of the alphabet being assigned a particular quality which we worked our way through exploring each and getting to know them. We then used this in composition class to create personal solo material using our names to determine which letters and therefore which quality to use.

Composition – with Sophie Stanley

I found the composition sessions both enjoyable and challenging. The process that we were led through was a clear and innovative way of creating work. We used the alphabet of dreams to create individual solo material. This was then put together with the material from another dancer to make unison. We were given the time to really work on the detail and precision of the movement, being challenged to be as specific and defined as possible; a particular challenge that can often be shied away from when working with so many different body types. It was refreshing to work in that manner and it really got us thinking in detail about our movement. We then used the directing tools to turn these duets into quartets with another pair of dancers. I was working with a visually impaired dancer in my quartet, and it gave me a deeper insight into some of the issues that can arise and the opportunity to explore different ways of supporting in this situation. In particular, we found that by making percussive sounds on my wheelchair, it helped her to orientate herself within

sections of our quartet. Overall I found the clarity and enthusiasm in the delivery of the tasks to be inspiring and refreshing.

Youth Work

I was very pleased to be able to experience one of Axis's youth workshops. On the Monday I joined in a Creative Dance Class for Kids that Annika led for children with and without disabilities. Again it was fascinating to see there were many similarities between our work. I find this interesting as they have been developed separately, but have commonalities throughout. The use of play and props was similar: For example, using scarves so the participants were focusing of the movement of the prop to help then to warm up and to introduce movement skills. We also use props in our work to encourage and inspire movement and it is something that I will reassess to make sure we are using them in the most productive and appropriate way. Overall I thought the significance of using appropriate language was clear, as well as the importance of different learning techniques and stimuli to make a successful session. It has inspired me to be more creative with my workshop ideas and tasks.

Community Jam

Another highlight of the week was taking part in Axis's community contact improvisation jam session, an annual event that coincides with the summer intensive. I have never attended an event like this before, as although I've been aware of various jam sessions in London that have an open policy, they have been in physically inaccessible spaces. I was inspired to see such a large range of people there from the local community. It's clear to see that there is a thriving community of dancers, and enthusiasts who live in the Bay Area. It was amazing to dance freely with all these different people. I would love to be able to set something up like this here, and will start looking into the possibilities.



Overall Reflection

I had an intensive and thought provoking week in a beautifully large space with lots of natural light that inspired you to move, and I have come away feeling refreshed. It was exciting to be a participant in a situation with so many different bodies and minds discovering a unity of movement and a joy to be feed as a dancer without the pressure of leading, or having to create material that will be performed over and over.

A key aspect in their use of language that truly struck a chord with me, was the use of the word “translate” instead of “adapt”. For many years I have been a keen advocate of the importance of adaptation in an integrated setting. It has been an essential tool in creating access to dance, being used in technique, affecting creative choices, and informing responsive teaching. However the small change to the use of the word “translation” instead of “adaptation”, I feel makes a huge difference. It eliminates the hierarchy of non disabled movement vocabulary, readdresses the balance between different dance languages from different dancing bodies and minds, showing they are all of equal importance and the translation can happen in any direction between any dancers. This is a change that I have incorporated into all aspects of my work.

At the end of the week, we had a very fruitful discussion about the set up of the Summer Intensive. It was clear that there was quite a range of different levels of experience and support required for the different participants. It was very exciting to see such a high standard of disabled dance artists together. However, it has highlighted the need for both continued community level work for new, less experienced, less confident participants who need more support, but also a setting in which the more experienced dancers can be challenged and stretched, and thrive on the experience of working at a higher level. This was not necessarily the case when Axis started running these Summer Intensives, but as the art form has developed and more highly skilled disabled dancers are developing and looking for the next place to develop their career, so the need has arisen. To this end, I am interested in cultivating an international network of skilled professional disabled dancers, providing a forum to communicate with and support each other, but also opportunities to meet up to share and develop their skills and experiences.

Over all, the trip has given me a greater confidence in the standard of my own skills both as a dancer and a teacher. It has inspired me to push to come up with new creative ideas and challenge myself. I met some wonderful people and have made some great connections who I hope to meet up with again. I feel like the disability dance world closer and I feel less isolated.

I would like to say a huge thank you to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for enabling me to have this opportunity.