

LUTSF Report.

Lindsey Butcher - Vertical dance, peer to peer exchange.

As an aerial dance practitioner with over 30 years of professional practise, much of my aerial dance work has been performed in close proximity to the audience or in the more 'usual' urban settings for vertical dance on buildings, bridges or the spaces in between.

In this proposed research period I wanted to explore the potential for taking my work out of the traditional theatre and urban setting, to work with and respond to alternative landscapes, architecture and community. It was also important to seek out an exchange of a quality & level that would substantially benefit my practise.

To this end I embarked upon a peer to peer exchange between myself & Julia Taffe, Artistic Director of 'Aeriosa' Dance Society - a vertical dance company based in Vancouver who base much of their performance work in Canada's natural landscapes; parks, forests, mountains etc.

An initial exchange took place with Julia coming to the UK to participate in the European Aerial Dance Festival in Brighton from August 9th - 16th. The EADF is an annual event hosted by myself in my role as Artistic Director of Gravity & Levity aerial dance.

This year we ran a total of 23 inclusive classes a day from Mon- Fri (115 in total) and 4 professional development intensives over the weekend to over 90 participants of all ages and abilities.

Julia was able to both participate and observe a diverse range of aerial skills teaching throughout the festival and gain an insight into running an aerial event of this size and diversity, something she aspires to create at home in Vancouver.

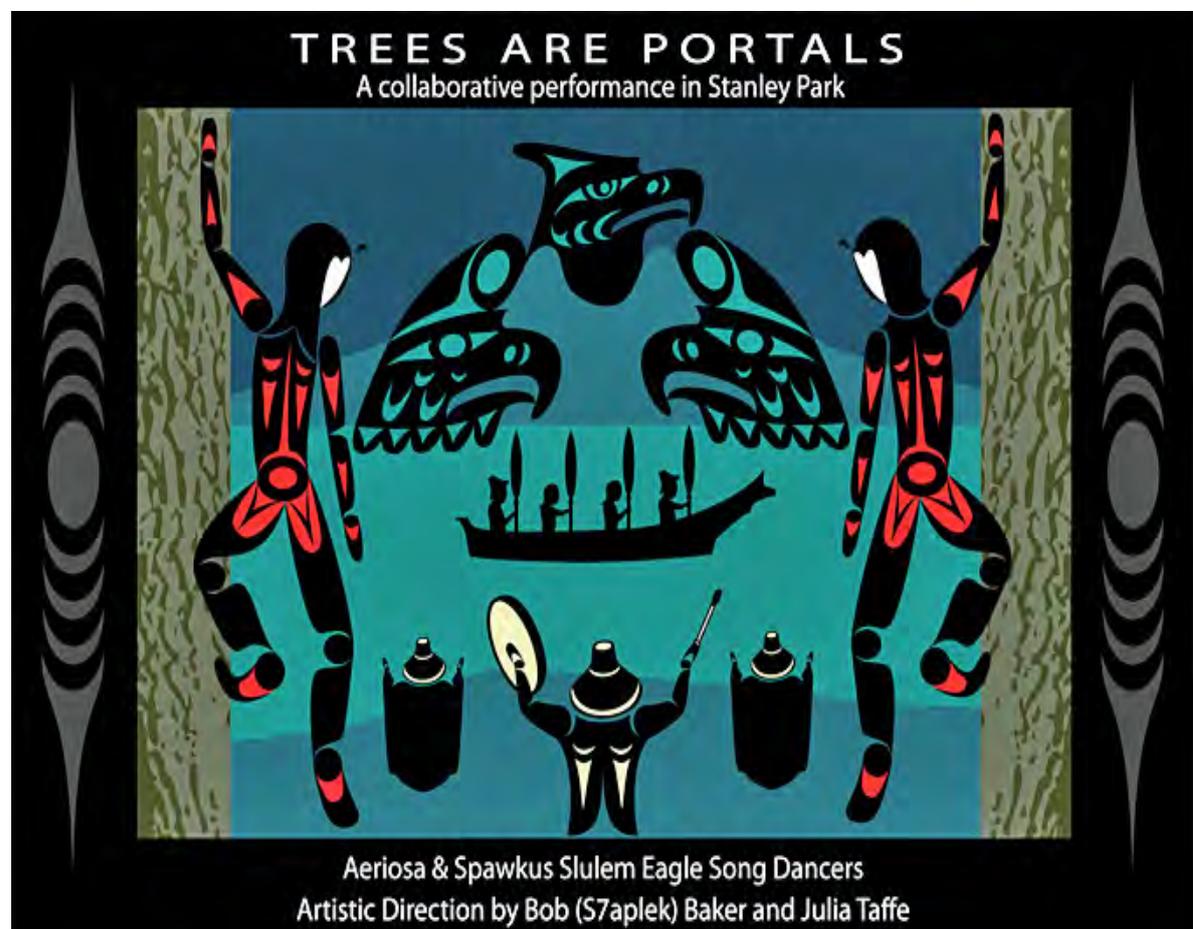
My exchange began with travelling to Vancouver to train and rehearse (over a two week period), for a series of performances of "The Trees are Portals" in Stanley Park, Vancouver, a collaboration between 'Aeriosa' and Spawkus Slulem Eagle Song Dancers of the Squamish First Nation.

Stanley Park is situated on the traditional territory of the Coast Salish people and is where they held their sacred winter ceremonies until the Canadian Government's Indian Act banned them in 1885, destroying their homes and building a road through their land, properties and gravesites to create the park.

We were rigged and dancing in 'old growth' Douglas fir trees, celebrating Vancouver's Stanley Parks oldest trees as witnesses that link the traditional First Nations songs and dances of long ago with the songs & dances of today and will still be standing when we too are gone.

It was a wonderful experience to work in these enormous, ancient trees and so unlike my experiences of dancing on a fixed wall on the side of a building. There is a visceral sense of working with and responding to a living, moving object that feels almost animal like - primitive. Our 'rigging anchors' changed daily in response to the weather (there were big storms!) which meant really tuning in everyday to discover how this affected flight on, off and around the tree and also how this altered partnering with the other aerial dancers. It was hugely informative to have to pay such close attention and be responsive to the changing environment and entirely appropriate given the subject matter and collaboration.

It was also a tremendous honour to work with and be welcomed in to the Spawkus Slulem 'family' and learn more of their collective histories, community and traditions - I can now perform a passable rendition of a centuries old 'Eagle song dance'!





There was also much to learn on a technical rigging level. Aeriosa's techniques for rigging and securing the lines on the trees, their work with professional arborists, their risk management protocol, daily safety briefings, record taking of equipment and rigging systems used, wear and tear on equipment etc. was all hugely informative and both Julia and the riggers, Colin, Stephanie and Keely (pictured below in action) were extraordinarily generous with their expertise and sharing of knowledge in this area.



The next section of training/exchange was as a guest teacher at the Scotiabank Dance Centre in Vancouver on a 6 day intensive, teaching vertical dance techniques.

The 1st 3 days comprised indoor sessions of teaching vertical dance basics to a selected group of novice aerial dancers with myself, Julia and fellow Welsh vertical dance artist Kate Lawrence, team teaching these workshops.

These same dancers then progressed to working on the outside of the building over the next 3 days.



During this period we also managed to squeeze in morning rehearsals for a Gala performance with Aeriosa and creative research on the outside wall of the dance centre during the afternoon.

It was felt by all 3 tutors that there was much gained from the team teaching sessions: the sharing of our personal practise and gentle probing our individual interests and methodologies – an area we are keen to continue developing. Coincidentally, Julia, Kate and I met at the Vertical Dance Summit (!) at the University of Limerick last year where one of the prime topics for discussion was 'how to meet a demand for specific training in this area to be developed'.

This conversation will be built upon when this same group of 7 international vertical dance companies meet again this Dec in Croatia. It is planned that this material will be documented for dissemination and opened up for further discussion to the larger professional community.

After a final performance of a piece created for the Scotiabank Dance Centre Gala we headed out of the city. The initial plan for this period had been to transfer the material performed in Stanley Park in Tofino Botanical Gardens on the west

coast of Vancouver Island. This proved impractical due to time constraints and scheduling shifts for both the artists and Parks boards involved.

Not to be undone, we headed out to Tofino anyway to do site visits, discussing how the transfer would have been achieved and 'scouting' the surrounding area before spending our final days in consultation mode exchanging information on aspects such as risk management, board development described in brief below.

The weather also impacted on the initial proposed schedule of activity - as mentioned previously we had big storms, one bringing down 50 trees in Stanley Park alone!

This disrupted our plans to travel to Stawamus Chief Mountain, an internationally renowned rock-climbing site to act as choreographic research assistant for Julia. We did find time however to hike the trail up to the site and discuss potential anchor points and rigging before having to hurry back down to teach. Slightly disappointing but well worth the hike for the views alone! We also hiked to Lyn Canyon with Stephanie our arborist pointing out which trees could potentially work for dancing in, discussing why and including root systems, degrees of stress and how she would go about further assessment and rigging - all fascinating and hugely informative.



In summary, this exchange and training was timely for both myself and Julia, with my desire to immerse myself practically, working in the natural landscape and for Julia being in a creation period, whilst training and recruiting potential new company members.

I gained enormously, from this exchange and the opportunity to observe and participate in Julia's practise both as performer and teacher.

There were also many 'less expected' learning outcomes in this immersion brought about as a result of a genuine desire for mutual learning and exchange including an insight on alternative management strategies in addition to artistic practise.

Aeriosa are in a period of change with large shifts happening in board management and development and after many years of working with the same performers they are recruiting new dancers. Having time (during inclement weather spells and whilst travelling) to exchange experiences of how we've both arrived at our current practise and ideas for how to move forward, were warmly welcomed – it can be a very lonely place as a practitioner and particularly as a sole artistic director which is the position both Julia and I find ourselves in.

Another huge component of the exchange was the opportunity to observe and consult with Aeriosa's rigger (Colin Zacharias). As a specialist mountain guide, the level of technical knowledge he has in working outdoors, creatively adapting to diverse locations is phenomenal and their working relationship (his and Julia's) is a testament to the levels of trust developed over many years of experience. Colin actively encouraged discussion around choices of equipment made, different rigging scenarios and urged everyone, at all levels of experience to ask questions.

The opportunity to quiz his encyclopedic knowledge was astounding and his offer made 'to advise on any rigging questions that might arise as a result of this meeting' will definitely be taken up!

The opportunity to 'side step' my practise in this way and be afforded an alternative view has been hugely beneficial and rewarding.

I am so immensely grateful to have had this experience and feel privileged to have met and worked with these extraordinarily generous people in such wonderful landscapes.

I return to the UK afresh, with renewed vigor to keep exploring with a broader palette of knowledge to draw from and though our natural landscape may not be on the same epic scale and proportions of those in Canada, I feel buoyed up and enabled to seek out opportunities for creating 'unexpected' experiences of aerial dance and research opportunities in our natural environments here at home for both participants and viewers alike.

