

TO: Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF)

I applied to visit India in September 2007, following the route Anna Pavlova's Company took in 1923. My aim was to create a new dance piece inspired by her tour for 2008, as well gain as a wider inspiration for my work and choreographic practice in the process. In the event my trip took place between April and May 2008. I went to Kolkata, Delhi, Agra, Amritsar, Chennai, Pondicherry, Chidambaram, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Aurangabad, Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta and Goa.

I had a very exciting and almost uncanny build up to my departure. My father had bought a signed picture of Pavlova at auction which he gave to me when I was emailing LUTSF to confirm that I would travel in April; my brother-in-law casually gave me my India Lonely Planet book; I ended up in taxis driven by people recently arrived from India or going soon and I was given a lift up to the tube on my way to the airport. Small, random but comforting, happenings.

I flew into Kolkata where Pavlova began her trip. I stayed there for 5 days as I acclimatised and settled in. I visited sights such as the Marble Palace and Victoria Memorial which were standing in the 1920's. I was feeling a little lost and unsure of my way as I could find no direct reference to Pavlova when I came across the New Empire Cinema with flashy boarding on a very old building. Knowing Pavlova has performed in the Empire Theatre I wondered if they were the same. On my way home I was drawn into the foyer of a five star hotel. Not my usual haunt, but in I went, and asked if they had pictures of the older days – they were keen to get rid of me and so I left reluctantly. It seemed so fabulous...

I reread my notes and realised that both Pavlova and Ruth St Denis had stayed at the hotel. So, I returned and asked again about the history and they gave me a book on the history of the hotel to keep me quiet! I was delighted. There are no pictures of documentation from the 1920's of performers but the hotel was an entertainment hub in the 40's and 50's - full of dancers then.

I then returned to the New Empire Cinema and was given a tour by the manager. The building was built in 1926, therefore Pavlova could not have performed there in 1923, however, Ruth St Denis was there in 1927 and Pavlova returned to Calcutta in 1928, performing there then with Uday Shankar. The manager remembers seeing pictures of Shankar from the 20's, but did not have copies. One theatre found and thrilling it was.

By now I had decided to open my trip to both Pavlova's tours and those of Ruth St Denis and Denishawn. My initial reason for being there was solely Pavlova but, as it was clear they both travelled to many of the same places, it was the sensible thing to do. It was also very exciting as they often performed in the same theatres and, when not, it gave me two theatres to seek out.

Next I travelled by train to Delhi. Here I sought out the Excelsior Theatre where Pavlova performed. I was given instructions in Hindi by the hotel manager and was whisked away on a rickshaw. It stands in what is now a dusty, crowded street and has also become a Cinema. Again, the manager was very helpful and after initial disappointment – he told me the building has been running since 1937 – he then mentioned that it had been a stage theatre before becoming a cinema in the 1930's. Result! We had our theatre. Again, I was kindly given a tour. It is now painted bright blue and is rickety but fabulous. You can almost feel the old world charm - and see the company dancing. The Denishawn Company performed in the Elphistone Theatre in Delhi. However, as I was told it was 30km outside of the centre of the city, I decided not to go on this occasion. These were the only two theatres that I struck lucky on. Many have been rebuilt – such as the Elphistone Cinema theatre in Mumbai – or destroyed as in Chennai and Hyderabad.



travellers as well as just sitting in the open square for hours.

From Delhi I travelled to Agra and Amritsar by train. Both companies travelled to Agra and both divas were overwhelmed by it and indeed, it is a magical place. They both managed to be there at full moon which I was not, but maybe next time. I went to Amritsar because St Denis writes about it in her diaries and described the beautiful Golden Temple situated in the middle of a pool of water, the bridge across which you walk to enter the temple and how a never ending chant is maintained by temple priests and players. She described this in 1927 and the same description is in today's Lonely Planet. No change in 90 years. I simply had to go. I was lucky and found myself there at Festival time. Filled with Sikhs wearing the most brightly coloured turbans and head coverings. I stayed in an open dormitory and spent time with other



Travelling in India is exhausting, exhilarating and a voyage of discovery in more ways than one. I was very lucky and helped in so many ways and places and on trains I was taken warmly greeted and everyone chats away in the most wonderful and familiar way. Completely unlike trains in the West. There were times I simply wondered where on earth I was going – did this bus really go where they said it did? Fingers crossed I would get to my destination. Each time I did.

In Hyderabad I had my Lonely Planet, aka my bible, stolen. Potential carnage. However, it meant I had to ask people for help during the day and I was so very, very lucky. To have received as much help as I did made losing the book worthwhile. Chennai proved to be a challenge for me. I was there specifically because the Kalakshetra School is based there. Pavlova and Rukmini Devi, who set up the school in the 1930's, had travelled together to Sydney from Bombay in 1928. Pavlova had arranged for her dancer Cleo Nordi to teach Devi ballet whilst in Australia and encouraged

her to re-find the lost (or hidden) arts of classical Indian dance. Due to an unfortunate misunderstanding I was not able to stay at the school to visit the Library and I left stung and quite shaken. I believe, however, that the experience was a gentle (!) warning to not delve into the relationship between Pavlova and Rukmini Devi. Due to anti colonial feelings and a naturally protective disposition towards Devi - along with a very old-school approach towards dancers - they were not open to my presence. But as I say, this was a warning to leave well alone. And I shall.

From here I spent a few days in Pondicherry by the sea resting and reading before heading to the Chidambaram temple and then back to Chennai to train to Hyderabad, a day there and off to Mumbai. I liked Mumbai immediately as I had fully settled into my travelling mode and loved the difference in architecture, so evident in each city. It is also the most westernised city I visited - which also has its drawbacks. I was approached to dance in a Bollywood film and, after initially declining the offer, I decided to do it. Ruth St Denis would have done - not sure about Pavlova! It turned out to be a very funny day - five random white women asked to dance as cheerleaders in TV programme about cricket - tying in with the newly launched Indian Premiere League. Currently there is a furore over the scantily clad dancers cheerleading for these matches, so the fact that we were doing the same thing was both hilarious and challenging. We were perceived as being 'easy' foreigners purely because of the colour of our skin. The two Norwegian accountants found this particularly difficult to deal with. I was just trying to cope with the questionable choreography, camera up my skirt and flaky pompoms. I thought those days were behind me...

I went to Aurangabad on 24th April and spent my first day at the Ajanta Caves. They are quite magnificent, the most extraordinary place I have been to. It was the hot dry season so was in a dust bowl - that Pavlova took her company there is quite amazing. I was joined by an old friend who lives in Goa and came up on his bike, on which we returned to spend three days staying just outside the entrance. Being able to share the Caves was fabulous. He is also a sculptor, poet and film and theatre director. Inspired, we returned to his house in Goa to begin making a work.

I travelled via Mumbai and visited Elephanta Island which St Denis writes about. Again, it seems virtually unchanged from her diaries. This proved to be a little disappointing after the Caves of Ajanta and Ellora but it was good to be able to see what St Denis had seen and also have perspective on the magnitude of Ajanta. Goa had not been part of my trip but I extended my stay so we could begin playing with movement ideas. I worked from his poetry and from music I found in Ajanta. The work will be based in a setting of Laurens's sculptures of bronze and copper. He has begun directing my movement and I found an easy and open way of moving that resonates for us as well as for numerous people who have seen the video. This means we have a new work. In the event a full evening has arisen which will be called 'Ajanta'. This will include a solo I perform, a company work and a community or youth work.

This ties in beautifully with the work Pavlova created on her return to London - an evening of work titled *Oriental Impressions: 'Bombay Wedding'*, inspired by a wedding she saw in Bombay, *Radha and Krishna* and *Ajanta Frescoes*. For her, the Ajanta Caves were the most 'unsullied image of India'. This is of course a very colonial and idealised concept of what India actually was in the 1920's but gave rise to her evening nevertheless. The work was premièred at the Royal Opera House on the 23rd September 1923 and in New York on the 18th October that year.

From India I went directly to Italy where I worked on *Dialogue* with 16 other dancer solo choreographers. I was able to explore this new found sense of physical freedom with ease and it enhanced the India movement. This was followed by a two-week residency in Cove Park, Scotland, in which I worked on the movement further. It was here that we made the connection between the potential Ajanta company work and movement that I had created with four dancers while in residence in London and Edinburgh earlier in the year. We have the base for the full evening. Very fine.

The week of the 23rd June, Laurens was back in London and we rehearsed for a few days at the Royal Opera House. The first place Laurens wanted to meet before rehearsing was at the V&A Museum. It was slightly uncanny as he had no idea that was where Pavlova had sent her dancers to research the 'ideal' India (in a British museum). The first picture we saw on entering the India section was a copy of one of the paintings in the Ajanta Caves. This was amazing. There are apparently 300 copies made at some point in the past and I will contact the Museum to see if I can see more of them and also to find out what was on display in 1923 when Pavlova's dancers went to the Museum. There is also an exhibition of Indian miniatures, similar to what she describes her dancers seeing, currently on display at the British Library. I will see the exhibition on my return.



Taking the movement from Goa to London was strange and working under the direction of another is unfamiliar for me. So, while here in Australia, I need to re-find the movement for myself. The plan is for me to join Laurens in South Africa in September to finish the work and then premièred on the 10th October in Yorkshire. This will give an opportunity to see how the work sits in a theatre space and film it for compilation for the creation of the full evening of work and also to find the support needed to do that.

While in Australia I will also spend time in Canberra at the Australian National Library looking into Algeranoff Harcourt's archives. It was he Pavlova sent to the V&A and who performed and toured this Indian evening. He also joined her tours to Australia and this is another area of research I will pursue in the future.

I went to India knowing that I would return inspired and hoping the Caves would give rise to a work. I had no idea that the inspiration come so quickly. In 2007 I was forced to completely question my practice and this trip in 2008 has begun to bring gifts very speedily. While in India I was also contacted by Talal Al Muhanna who is doing an MA in film at Leeds University. We met at BDE and I told him about my research on the India trip. In short, he has funding to return to India in October and make a film/documentary about my visit and the tours of Pavlova and Denishawn. This film will

allow us to be able to give a certain focus and credence to the work of these early contemporary and cross cultural artists.

India was difficult, challenging and liberating. Exploring cities and looking for theatres active in the 1920's gave me a huge buzz; travelling alone showed me a strength I did not really know I had; opening myself to new collaborators and working practices is enormous and yet exactly what is needed. To leave with a full evening in the wings was much more than I hoped for and to be able to put it onto film is humbling. It is also, I feel, a fitting follow on from my first LUTSF grant - I have been to the US to seek out Miss Ruth and now India to follow her, and Pavlova. May the journey continue and I am indebted to Scholarship Fund for your support.

Liz Lea

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