

Covering Letter

Dear LUTSF Secretary,

Please find enclosed a report of my recent trip to East Africa for which I received a Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship of £900 to cover travel costs for me to travel to Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda.

Title of Project: Bodies of knowledge: Research into the opportunity for, facilitation and delivery of cross cultural dance projects in East Africa.

Dates: Tuesday 6 August – Tuesday 3 September 2013

Location: East Africa – Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda

This award made it possible for me to carry out research in an area I would not have been able to afford to visit otherwise.

The purpose of my trip was to visit three key dance organisations in East Africa to research mutually beneficial ways of working and extend my knowledge and take part in a knowledge/skills exchange. I believe the project was very successful and that I achieved my objectives. However, the project evolved from the original plan and, instead of working with just the three key organisations, they facilitated me to meet, observe and interview many more practitioners, artists and managers working in dance in each country. Therefore the scope of the research was expanded and I was able to greatly develop my knowledge of dance in the area but a detailed skills exchange was not feasible in this format. The trip was highly rewarding and hugely developed my knowledge of the dance ecology in East Africa as well as my understanding of ways in which to establish a good working practice of collaborative projects across cultures.

A highlight of my trip was the diversity of dance groups and organisations that I met, from social projects for children in slum areas to professional traditional dance groups and independent contemporary dance artists. I was meeting at least one and in some cases up to five groups a day, some of whom were very established and some were independent early career artists. The context these dance artists are working in is a contrast to that which I am familiar with in the UK and it was inspiring to see their dedication and commitment to making things happen with very few resources or access to training.

From my experience I would suggest that future awardees approach their projects with flexibility and be open to adapting their plans to fit those they are working with. I found that timescales were very different in Africa and whilst you could make things happen quickly you might not know that until the day! Planning extensively in advance wasn't always an advantage.

I plan to share my experiences and information gained from this project through publication of an academic article focusing on using dance to work across cultures. I am also working with a colleague, who is about to embark on a Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship funded project, to develop a seminar day focusing on how to successfully produce and deliver international dance projects. In addition, the knowledge I have gained from this experience will continue to inform the projects I produce as Artistic Director of Arts Odyssey.

Yours sincerely,

Louisa Pestell

REPORT by Louisa Pestell

Context

In 2011, I visited Uganda to deliver a community dance project and teach contemporary dance workshops in Kampala. This visit established my ambition to use dance as a tool to collaborate across cultures. I also became more aware of the potential opportunities for such work as well as the challenges it brings. As a result, I focused the dissertation of my Masters in Culture, Policy and Management at City University on the experiences of British Dance Practitioners who had delivered projects internationally. The research analysed challenges presented by intercultural dance projects and focused on good models of practice to deal with them to ensure an ethical, equal and productive project. With this experience in mind, my recent trip to East Africa was designed to fulfil two aims:

- Expand knowledge of the dance sector in East Africa with a view to further collaboration with key contacts in the future.

- Carry out research (interviews and observations) which will inform understanding of the context such work will take place in so as to establish methods of working across a cultural divide in a mutually beneficial, ethical and productive way.

Project Outline

Originally the plan was to visit just one organisation in each of the three countries (Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda). However, this evolved to liaising and meeting with the key organisations who then facilitated opportunities for me to meet with as many other artists and organisations in their location as possible. In each country I met with dancers, choreographers, project managers and artists with differing experience working in a diverse range of contexts and styles. The length of this report does not allow me to fully cover my activity or detail the discussions I had or the work of those I met so I will focus on the key meetings and highlights of my visit.

Kenya

I started my journey in Nairobi where my initial point of contact was Dance Forum Nairobi. Through a combination of online research and recommendations through Dance Forum Nairobi and colleagues who have visited the area I managed to build a lengthy list of dance contacts to meet.

First stop was a visit to the Sarakasi Trust which works across genres including circus, music, acrobatics and dance. It was very well established and inspiring organisation to spend time in because so many young people train and rehearse in the building every day. They have a clear structure which allows young people to progress and work with peers who act as role models. I was able to watch rehearsals for the production they were working on, Umoja. I was to come across Umoja again in Uganda because it is a project which brings groups from across East Africa to together to perform.

Later that day I first visited GoDown arts centre where I spent a lot of my time in Kenya. GoDown hosts a number of artists and organisations across disciplines. The centre has many workshops and spaces featuring visual artists selling their work, company offices and dance rehearsal, space making it a vibrant community of creativity.



Dance Into Space has an office space at the GoDown arts centre and I had the honour of meeting Ondiege Matthew, the Artistic Director. Ondiege has worked extensively in contemporary dance since he began Dance Into Space in 1997. Much of his work has included working with disabled dancers. He developed training schemes which led to the development of further disabled dance companies. He continues to choreograph now and has worked with international partners. He was fascinating to interview because of his depth



of experience and knowledge.

Over the weekend I had the privilege of meeting Elizabeth Wairimu who has set up the Fahari Girls Project. Under this title five youth girls' groups run across slum areas in Nairobi and Uoi on the coast with different focuses including traditional music and dance, poetry, fashion and discussion. I was able to meet and dance with their traditional dance group and a second group who write poetry and look at elements of fashion. Elizabeth told me about the cultural and social issues which lead to the marginalisation of females and consequently her dedication to providing activity for underprivileged young girls to raise their aspirations, confidence and develop their skills. She has achieved high participation numbers and a great breadth of activity considering her limited resources and lack of financial support. The team she has trained and works with to deliver this activity are hard working and talented teachers.



After going back to Sarakasi to visit some of their training groups and meeting with British Council personnel at their offices in Kenya, I went back to the GoDown arts centre to observe some rehearsals with

Opiyo Okach. Opiyo was working with a number of talented Kenyan contemporary dancers so it was insightful to see them improvise, create and work together.



Despite having a list of further people to meet with time ran out in Kenya and it was soon time to move on to Uganda. However, the last day was spent meeting and working with Ghetto Exposed. Ghetto Exposed work with disadvantaged youth in Nairobi to develop their artistic skills in dance and photography. They support them to become self-sustaining, using their skills to earn a living. I had the pleasure of participating in an African fusion dance workshop with them, delivered by Gian Semi Gumba, and then teaching their current group of students a contemporary and creative workshop. It was an exhausting but very rewarding and collaborative day of practical sessions.

Uganda

Being back on familiar territory in Uganda made everything seem easier, as did the superb hosting of Sam Lutaaya of Guerrilla Arts. Sam and his wife Esther had not only set up an incredible, jam-packed schedule of meetings and visits but had also collected information from each contact about their work to give me an in-depth context of those I was meeting.

The first meeting was in the lighting box for the national theatre with Roger Masaba who runs Footsteps Dance. Having danced for a number of years with many different people and internationally, Roger was insightful and great to meet early on because he had such a good overview of the Ugandan contemporary dance scene.

Tabu Flo were next and I was able to watch some of their rehearsal in the dilapidated National Theatre dance studio. Tabu Flo is predominantly a hip hop company and all of the dancers are male. They are highly skilled and their work was impressive to watch. They were very welcoming and invited me to visit the Breakdance Project where many of them teach having been heavily involved since its inception by Abramz Tekya.

Visiting Breakdance Project was inspirational. Twice a week up to a hundred young people, mainly boys although they are very inclusive and encouraging of female participants of whom there were some, meet to train and improvise in breakdance. The activity was set up by Abramz Tekya who promotes an ethos of equality and establishes that everyone in attendance is both a student and a teacher who must respect their peers. Every session culminates in a sharing of thoughts, prayers and discussions during which anyone, regardless of age, is encouraged to contribute. Hakim from Tabu Flo translated this session for me and its content demonstrated how important the sharing was to reinforce Abramz's values and a feeling of community.

The National Theatre in Kampala is an artistic hub and I found that, by sitting in at their café bar with an African tea and chapatti during the morning, I would meet many people working in dance who were keen to stop and have a conversation. It was at the National Theatre that I met Desire (again, having met him during my previous visit to Uganda). He now runs Yuttah Convictz, a new project-based contemporary dance company for which he choreographs on others. Similarly, I met with Julius Lugaaya (having also met him on my previous visit), who runs Theatre Factory and interviewed him about his current work and thoughts on the challenges of working across cultures. Like Roger Masaba, Julius has worked in the field for many years and his thoughts were very enlightening, particularly in relation to the many other perspectives I had heard. Hearing the overlaps and differences was really informative.

Amongst other meetings with Eva, Education and Research Officer at the National Theatre, the British Council, House of Talent and Jill Priblova who teaches on the University Music, Drama and Dance course, I went to observe the Uganda National Contemporary Ballet. The UNCB are well established and are fortunate enough to have basic funding which allows them to rehearse daily, a rare occurrence in East Africa. Their repertoire is eclectic and the dancers demonstrated exceptional potential. It was very interesting to watch their work and understand how they functioned in comparison to the more project-based companies.



In addition to meeting with people, I was able to participate in a dance exercise class called 'Cheza'. I was introduced to this by Karim the founder of 'In Motion' dance studios. Cheza is similar to zumba but using African dance styles fused with aerobic fitness rather than Latin American styles. The class was overflowing with people, great fun but exhausting!



I was fortunate enough also to meet traditional dance groups in Uganda including Bitone, a children's home where they train those living there in traditional music and dance, and Naggalabi Dance Theatre, a community dance ensemble training in traditional music and dance. Both groups performed especially and their musicianship and dance talent was outstanding.

My experience in Uganda gave me an insight into a broad cross section of dance activity including organisations in different stages of development towards placing themselves as arts management and dance development agency style endeavours, Autumn Ventures and Guerrilla Arts. Both of them arrange different activities (including youth classes and professional courses) and manage dance companies each is very different to the other though. In addition, I met with Keiga Dance and Dance Transmissions as well as those who organise Dance Week, allowing me to gain insight into the dance festivals running in the country.



Rwanda

I knew Rwanda would offer a very different experience to Kenya and Uganda prior to my arrival. Very little information was available on the internet indicating key players in the Rwandan dance scene. Additionally, my host contact unfortunately had to change his plans and wasn't in the country during my visit. However, I was able to meet several dance professionals and companies.

Kigali is home to two beautiful centres of art, Inema and Ivuka, which both host a team of practicing artists who make, display and sell their art work to tourists. They are quite close to each other and have some connections through their staffing. In addition to their focus on visual arts, they run community and youth traditional music and dance groups who meet weekly and are of a very high standard. These groups also perform elsewhere. The directors of both organisations seemed to be very entrepreneurial and are continuously strengthening their standing in Rwanda with international links.

I was able to watch two adult dance companies in rehearsal, one contemporary (Inshoza Contemporary Dance Troupe) and one traditional (Impinyuza Traditional Dance Group). Inshoza is linked to the university and appeared to be run like a student union society because there is not a dance undergraduate course offered at the university. They have limited resources and are keen to collaborate. They work very hard and are committed to developing contemporary dance opportunities. Impinyuza is a large group which rehearses weekly at a secondary school both outside in the grounds and in small classrooms. They consist of a choir, male group and female group who also perform together. They were outstanding and demonstrated how physically challenging their repertoire was in their demanding rehearsal.



The only other activity I was able to watch and then physically participate in through teaching a workshop was Rebecca Davies Dance (RDD). RDD works with young male street children to develop their dance skills as well as other useful skills such as IT. They work with the students daily and I was able to observe their work and then teach two workshops to their two groups. It was a very rewarding experience because the boys were so keen and the teachers very interesting to speak to.

My final meeting in Rwanda was with Mashairika, a theatre based company, established in 1997. They work across disciplines and are well known in the country for their high quality work. Meeting with Simon, Sam and Hope was great because they were so knowledgeable and open to collaboration and discussion. They have worked internationally before and I hope to work with them in the future.

The only person I was keen to but unable to meet was Wesley Ruzibiza. Wesley was my host in Rwanda but unfortunately our paths couldn't cross during the visit. He was mentioned by many of those I

spoke to as the man to speak to about dance in Rwanda. It was clear he has been key to the development of contemporary dance in that region and I will speak in more detail to him via Skype.

Reflection on journey personally and professionally

My experience in East Africa was so rich and almost overwhelmingly full. The number of contacts I met was much larger than expected. This was very beneficial because I felt I was able to develop an extensive understanding of the activity taking place, how people work and the politics surrounding developing work in the region. However, it was also vast and hard to digest my experience in order to see clearly how I can move forward with the knowledge I gained.

Each country presented a very different experience and, whilst many people knew each other across countries, activity differed greatly between them, particularly in Rwanda in comparison to Uganda and Kenya. Contemporary dance opportunities are not as developed in Rwanda as in Uganda or Kenya. Training across the three countries is mainly project or workshop based and often relies on visiting artists or external funding to make them happen. However, Uganda has a strong music, dance and drama course and many notable leaders in the arts studied at the Namasegali boarding school under Father Grimes who was very influential on their arts development.

The infrastructure for the arts, specifically contemporary dance, was different in each country and very complicated because of a number of influencing factors:

- Education - its cost, value in the country and curriculum content
- Prominent role models demonstrating the potential to have a sustainable career in the arts
- Training opportunities – visiting artists, university courses,
- Tourism – potential to “sell” artistic products
- Resources – rehearsal and performance venues etc
- Funding opportunities – activity of embassies and cultural institutes, presence of development aid

Each of these factors warrants a report of their own but they were all interwoven with the research questions I asked of those I met. My focus was on the challenges and benefits of developing collaborative dance work across cultural divides. The interviews were in-depth and exposed trends in points of view and interesting considerations to be made both about the artistic content of such work and how to practically set it up.

Anecdotally, from my experience, I found the biggest challenge of my visit to be managing expectations. It is, of course, clear that there was a large difference between the context in which I work in dance (London, UK) and those I was meeting and this often led to a perception that I had the resources, capacity and ability to initiate, carry out and fund a lot of activity. This became more problematic the more people I met because the number of people potentially expecting follow-up from me increased. This was also a personal challenge because I was and am very keen to develop further collaborative international dance activity and when I was in East Africa it was easy to fall into the rose tinted view that ‘everything is possible’, a view which starts to fade when back in the UK and the realisation of the challenges hits.

However, I was clear about one thing when I returned and reflected on the huge impact that the trip had on me; a large percentage of the benefit of my visit was mine and less so those that I was visiting. I also believe that this would be the case for most activity set up between UK arts practitioners and partners in East Africa. In a very positive way, it is important to put into perspective the purpose and benefit of international partnerships and, whilst UK partners may be coming from a very developed contemporary dance context, the experience will be just as rich for them as for those they partner with in East Africa.

Outcomes

The initial outcome from my project in East Africa will be an article summarising the research I carried out into the challenges and benefits of working in dance across cultural divides. After transcribing the interviews I made, I hope to publish this article in an academic journal. Secondly, I am in discussions with a fellow Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship awardee, Jennifer Irons, about planning a seminar which we will develop in partnership about setting up and delivering internationally dance projects. Finally, my project introduced me to a huge number of partners in East Africa whom I wish to work with in the future.

As a result of the discussions I had with them it is likely that I will develop a number of different projects with different focuses:

- Dance and disability
- Girls' empowerment dance
- Contemporary Dance Technique
- Collaborative project placements for UK dance practitioners

A challenge I have set myself is to look creatively at how to ensure sustainability and legacy of a dance project when, in reality, funding often limits activity to short term projects. I am also looking at ways to include more effective use of the internet and digital technologies.

Further thoughts and recommendations

The research project I carried out in East Africa allowed me to approach existing activity impartially and from a fresh perspective as a result of having little prior knowledge. I found that in Kenya and Uganda, whilst there is a large amount of dance activity taking place, the majority of it is quite segregated. The number of dance professionals is quite small and a number of them work across projects together but many set up their own dance companies so there is a lot happening but perhaps a need for more collaboration. I believe the East African region would benefit from a more formal dance network which would allow open and collaborative working between participating partners. Currently, there doesn't seem to be an ethos of sharing and collaborating on artistic content or resources. A network which met quarterly and simply shared information about current projects, needs and opportunities would strengthen the sector allowing partners to team up and work together more. This would need to be led cooperatively and democratically rather than by one organisation.

Working in East Africa was a privilege. The traditional and contemporary dance sector is rich and vibrant and the potential for development is huge. The people I met were inspiring, talented and welcoming and have positively influenced how I approach my work in dance in the UK.