

Lucy Wallis – Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship report
16 August 2005

Covering letter

Dear Chair of the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund,

Please, find enclosed two copies of my report of the project I carried out from January 2004 – June 2005. I am sending a CD-R with the report but unfortunately cannot send a video of the dance rehearsals as the folk dance groups I studied with like to retain a certain amount of secrecy about their dance forms and their community.

The experience made possible by LUTSF was invaluable to my PhD research and I am extremely grateful to the LUTSF. The money enabled me to visit various folk dance groups across the UK and I became the first woman to gain inside access to one folk dance performance team for 50 years. The scholarship also gave me the chance to visit choreographer David Bintley in Birmingham and study his work in rehearsals and training sessions. This has been an amazing opportunity.

I plan to share my research at the New Scholars' Conference in December 2005.

Lucy Wallis – report

Introduction

To summarise my research process, I am exploring the work of a major British choreographer, David Bintley, who is currently director of the Birmingham Royal Ballet. I will be making particular reference to *Still Life at the Penguin Café* (Premiere, 1997) and the extent to which Bintley draws on English folk dance. I was awarded a Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship to help carry out ethnographic research into English folk dance and work with performance teams across the UK to find out how folk dance has evolved and been adapted and distorted over time so that I can then study in detail the work of choreographer David Bintley.

Location of study

I carried out research into the following dance forms at various locations: border Morris dance, rapper and longsword dance, woodshoe clog, maypole dancing Cotswold Morris and English country dancing.

Study	Group and location	Timescale
Maypole dance	Padstow, Old Cornwall Society - The Old 'Oss' hobby-horse and maypole ceremony	May 2004
Cotswold dance	Ravensbourne Morris men	April 2004
Wood shoe clog dance	Singleton Cloggers, Lancashire	January 2004
English Country dance	Jane Austen Dancers, Bath	September 2004
David Bintley	Birmingham Royal Ballet	November 2004 June 2005

Methods and results

During my ethnographic study, I worked closely with the groups learning traditional steps, dances and patterns and acting as a participant observer, recording the groups' work at rehearsals and performances.

The groups provided me with feedback on my own expertise and admitted that I adapted to the style well. However as a trained dancer, it is difficult to adopt the relaxed posture and heavy footwork, dominated by a use of weight through the flat of the foot that is needed in folk dance, something that I found particularly useful to note for my research. I found it very interesting that the various groups were quite secretive about their work and liked to retain the individuality and mysticism of their tradition despite sharing a network of steps that can be recognised across the entire folk dance community.

My ethnographic research allowed me to draw conclusions as to how English folk dance has adapted within theatre dance and I was able to draw conclusions as to various issues over posture, weight, arm lines, basic steps and figures, rise and fall and use of props and costumes. An example is that I found a Cotswold Morris dancer's posture is relaxed, with the weight slightly back and the arms hung by the sides with a feeling of weight in the wrists. The shoulder girdle is heavy and the ribcage, although supported, is free to move forward and backwards as weight is thrown into a step. Use of weight in the arms is difficult to achieve for ballet dancers, and I am now able to compare these variants within the work of David Bintley and other choreographers and compare them to the work of the folk dance community.

Cotswold Morris dance is also characterised by a low centre of gravity. Weight should go through the whole of the foot, emphasised by wearing heavy shoes or boots and flexing the feet. It was detailed observations like these that have proved extremely

useful to my research.

I was able to notate and learn how to perform specific folk dance steps from the dance vocabulary such as the Morris dance caper and the two-step, and found variants in rhythm and counts. I was also able to analyse the various figures used across the dance form such as the very popular grand chain, in which dancers weave in and out in a circle, and threading the needle, which is another series of chains where dancers weave in and out underneath an arch and pull other dancers through the chain.

I am going to be running some experimental dance workshops to help disseminate the knowledge I have learnt and will draw from my ethnographic research and will be able to demonstrate variations when comparing authentic folk dance and theatre dance.