

To: LUTSF

Please find enclosed my project report for my two-month's of training with Leela Samson in Delhi funded by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling scholarship Fund (LUTSF). I hope the Fund finds the report interesting.

In the event I was unable to visit Chandralakha in Chennai as had been originally hoped. This was because I chose to stay the extra time in Delhi to extend my period of training, and also to have the opportunity to watch Akka's troupe, Spanda, performing.

I have yet to fully disseminate what I have gained from this project, partly for personal reasons. However, I have written one article for *Pulse* based on an interview I conducted with Akka while in Delhi, and I am including this with my report. I am also sending this report to *Pulse* to see if there is any aspect of it that they would be interested in developing into an article.

The LUTSF may also be interested in my other plans for building on this project which include

- Organising a day for contemporary dancers to experience bharata natyam;
- Applying for an R&D grant to further develop an idea I worked on partly at The Place in London, and partly in Delhi, inspired by Leela's classes.

Finally, I would like to thank the LUTSF for making this project possible. I had a wonderful time in Delhi with Leela and, as I explained in the report, I feel that my time there has substantially helped my development as a dancer.

With best wishes

Magdalen Gorringe

Return to bharata natyam Training for two months with Leela Samson in New Delhi, India Project report by Magdalen Gorringe

Project Description

My project started in July. On the 9th July I completed an intense one-year course in contemporary dance at the London Contemporary Dance School. Two weeks later I was training in my main form, bharata natyam, under one of the most distinguished exponents of the style, Leela Samson. My time at The Place had thrown up a multitude of questions about bharata natyam – about its basic stance, about the way in which sometimes it seemed to work against my body, about whether it would be possible to employ a more skeletal than muscular approach in its practice. I wanted to immerse myself back in bharata natyam under the guidance of someone I trusted and respected, to revisit my basics, and to try and apply what I had learnt in The Place to my bharata natyam.

Leela teaches classes every afternoon, three times a week, to the advanced and professional dancers, and twice a week to the beginners and the intermediate class. She also teaches morning classes, theory classes, and has regular rehearsals with her dance troupe, Spanda. I went to whatever I could, whenever I could, dancing with the six year olds and the professionals, shadowing the dancers in their rehearsals, attending talks, performances and lecture demonstrations.

Leela's class starts with a variety of exercises to develop the abdominal and lower back muscles, to strengthen and warm up the ankles and knees (crucial to bharata natyam), to improve flexibility and turn out and to help focus and balance. The exercises are drawn from variety of sources. I found those from the Bihari school of yoga particularly useful. These exercises are based on tasks still performed in everyday life in rural India: drawing water from a well, sweeping the floor, pounding rice, grinding rice flour. Together these exercises strengthen and warm up the abdominal muscles, the hips and knees and the lower back.

The class then moves on to *adavus*, the standard starting place for bharata natyam class. My training has involved exposure to a number of different styles of bharata natyam, and I was grateful of the opportunity to systematically run through the *adavus* of one particular school (Kalakshetra). While I appreciate and enjoy the variations of *adavus* from many of the different schools of bharata natyam, I would like to give my own students a solid grounding in the technique of one school from which they can branch out to explore other variations. I believe that the set of *adavus* that Leela teaches, based on the Kalakshetra school, offer a structured and solid base for a bharata natyam dancer and one from which it is easy to incorporate the nuances of other styles.

From *adavus* the class progresses to repertoire – some traditional works, or choreographed by artists like Rukmini Devi Arundale and others choreographed by Leela in the class, with the support and in put of the senior dancers. My main aim in going to Delhi had not been to learn rep, but to revisit basics from a more mature perspective, and observe teaching methods. Nevertheless, simply by being in the classes each day, I picked up a number of pieces which Leela then reviewed with me before I left. I re-learnt some dances that I already knew – with slight variations – Vasantha and Kalyani Jatisvarams, Alarippu, the Sabdam *Sarasjakshalu* and *Nadanam Adinar*. It was a valuable exercise to review these dances finding a way to engage the body more fully in the key movements and to cut out the in between shuffling that can use so much energy and compromise the beauty of a dance. Leela forced me to consider my choice of dynamics in performing received movement. Yes, I had learnt to perform this section with a tight angularity – but was that how I wanted to perform it? How did I want to emphasise the contrast in movements? Such choices, which seem so obvious when applied to new choreography sometimes feel harder to apply to dances that one has learnt to perform in a particular way. I also learnt two dances that Leela choreographed – *Madhuvanti Thilana*, and a beautiful Astapadi that she choreographed in the class while I was there.

Leela believes that a strong grounding in the theory and background to the dance is vital, and provides a knowledge that can allow for greater confidence and freedom of exploration later on. She therefore took some time out to give me theory classes looking in particular at the role and understanding of rhythm within bharata natyam and the specified uses of each hand movement.

Apart from the classes, I spent a chunk of time shadowing the dancers in Spanda as they rehearsed for their up-coming production, *'Reflections'*. It was enlightening to watch Leela choreograph – to see the very familiar vocabulary of bharata natyam being transformed into something so different in the context of a group performance. I had had some experience of Leela's choreographic techniques earlier, when she choreographed *'I- Together'* in London. On this occasion the experience reawakened me to the array of choreographic possibilities that rest within bharata natyam without branching into other movement vocabularies. Leela plays with rhythm and canon and with the geometry that bharata natyam lends itself to quite naturally, so that the dancers flock seamlessly from triangles to a line to a circle, producing dance patterns that appear kaleidoscopic.

As well as training, the trip also gave me an opportunity to watch a number of performances of bharata natyam and odissi, and get back in touch with dance developments in India. Notably, I was able to watch Madhavi Mudgal perform in a tribute performance to Kelucharan Mahapatra, and the performance of Leela's own group, *Spanda*.

Project Outcomes and Conclusions

In terms of getting back in touch with my bharata natyam and finding a way to integrate the knowledge absorbed at The Place with my primary form, I could not have wished for a more fulfilling experience. Working with Leela reinforced the practice I had started in my training

under Mavin Khoo and continued at The Place – working from the core. Too often my bharata natyam (and, in my experience, that of many others) seems to consist of fast foot and arm movements, where the centre and the torso is not properly engaged. Leela will not allow for this. A particularly useful exercise in one of the classes was to practice the arm and body moves of *kitatakatarikitatom* (an important move within BN) in *preritham* (a plié in second position). My diary entry for this class records 'It's amazing how much the body moves (or should move) in this *adavu* – from the front, twisting round to the back and then back to the front again through a half figure of eight. The challenge is then to combine this deep body movement with precise footwork, while not compromising your *aramandi*.'

In the event, I was reassured to find how many of the corrections I had received throughout the year at The Place were reiterated by Leela. Reassuring because so often at The Place I felt like I came from a different dance planet from the majority of other dancers there. A lifetime of learning bharata natyam seemed to serve me very little in performing the controlled leg movements, the fluid sweeps to the floor, the airborne leaps of contemporary dance and ballet. Increasingly though, it feels like the basics are in fact the same – keep a strong stomach and lower back, a firm centre so that the limbs can move smoothly and freely, be aware of your weight so that you are neither sinking back on your heels nor pushing your chest forward, so that you can form an unbroken, open line. My feeling that bharata natyam works against the body comes from an accumulation of tension especially in the shoulder area, and working to an ideal image of how I think bharata natyam 'ought' to be, rather than listening to my body. With Leela, I worked to address both these areas, which automatically meant relying less on muscular strain and following more the natural articulation of the body.

We discussed the impetus of various movements, and the particular muscle groups that they engaged, though Leela also cautioned me against being over analytical in my approach, as she believes that certain things are felt and enjoyed rather than analysed and determined. Leela speaks a lot about the importance of '*adakam*', a Tamil word meaning restraint, which can be used in several different contexts – in terms of the physical, but also the emotional performance or the intent of the dance. Physically, '*adakam*' highlights the need not to over open the diaphragm, and not to extend movement beyond the integrity of its form. Emotionally, it is a reminder of the dignity inherent in the dance form and cautions against abandoning this in favour of a more sensationalised rendition of the form. This is not so much an emphasis on 'propriety' as on integrity and a considered performance of the form.

Attending all classes, including those intended for children gave me a good sense for how to structure early training. Leela focuses on a number of key elements in bharata natyam in all her classes – and these are introduced right at the beginning. The children are taught exercises to develop flexibility and balance, exercises to strengthen the knees, exercises doing half and full plies while 'thinking of the stomach'. After the warm up, they do some solid work on the *adavus*, with the emphasis on turn out, *aramandi* and a strong centre. Despite the demands made on them, the atmosphere in the class remains relaxed and playful. Occasionally the class performs the *adavus* in a circle, at other times they are asked to watch each other and identify what is good or not so good in another's performance. That vital skill for the dancer – self-correction – is developed very early. Even with the youngest students, the teacher develops this practise by asking the students to identify for themselves what they need to improve in their movements.

The children are also introduced to the basics of theory at the very beginning of their training – learning the names and usages of the hand movements, the eye, neck and head movements. They are not formally introduced to the narrative or abhinaya element of bharata natyam until their 3rd or 4th year of training. However, surrounded as they are by easily accessible bharata natyam performances, senior students in training and so on, their introduction to abhinaya happens by osmosis. In the U.K, where the opportunities for such 'passive' learning are less evident, Akka agreed that elements of abhinaya should be introduced earlier in training than is customary in India.

Conclusion

My time in India was both beneficial and enjoyable. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to spend time with Leela Samson in terms of allowing me to make sense of my contemporary training in the context of bharata natyam. The experience has helped me in my own practice, as well as in teaching/ communicating about bharata natyam to others. It has also left me with a lot to continue to think about, develop and explore.

Note:

Magdalen Gorringer has an article published in *Pulse*. Autumn 2004. pp. 25-27.