

Manuela Benini

Date: 05.06.2016

Dear LUTSF Secretary, committee and members,

I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to receive a Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship to develop myself as a choreographer and be part of the 50 years' celebration of the Kadamb Centre for Dance and Music in Ahmedabad India.

This opportunity was to travel to Ahmedabad in India and extend my knowledge of choreographic approaches in Kathak dance including the body of work of Kumudini Lakhia, one of the most important choreographers in India. The project took place between 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2015 and 26<sup>th</sup> January 2016.

The project aims were achieved as written in the report, apart from the fact that I was not able to choreograph a piece for the festival. This was due to two factors: 1. The festival being oversubscribed with artists and 2. Kadamb dance students (who I was going to work with) had their exams and could not commit with enough time to develop the piece. With this in mind, Kadamb Centre secretary and Kumudini Lakhia decided not to have the outdoor piece as part of the festival and only communicated that to me when I arrived in India.

One of the highlights of the project and most challenging as well, was performing in front of the old kathak masters teacher at the festival. Even though I have been performing since the age of 5 on stage, I was trembling and feeling very nervous to perform in front of such an audience!

For future awardees, I would recommend research and make as many contacts as possible before you travel as sometimes time can be limited and the more people you have contacted beforehand, the easier it gets.

I have shared the project with all the people I have met at the conference, including international producers and promoters who came to the festival and have suggested a few dancers and choreographers to apply for the travel scholarship.

I would like to explain the late return of this report as I went straight from India to Cuba for another professional development opportunity and had no idea about the virtual limitations of the country. Internet only arrived in Cuba 7 days ago and is still very limited. I had to wait until I came back to the UK in the last week of April to do this report and send it to you. I hope you understand.

Sincerely,

Manuela Benini

Manuela Benini  
Kadamb Centre for Dance  
From 23/11/2015 to 26/01/2016

## LUTSF Traveling scholarship: a Kathak Journey

A Kathak journey to:

1. explore the body of work and choreographic approaches of Kumudini Lakhia in her 50 years career as choreographer.



2. be part of The “Kadamb’s 50 Glorious Years” festival where national and international kathak dance companies and artists that were associated with the centre and Kumunidi’s work performed.
3. develop an outdoor dance piece with Kadamb students.

“This fund gave me the opportunity to gain further understanding of the body of work of a great choreographer and experience/perform in an incredible kathak dance festival in Ahmedabad”



I have been training with Kumudini at the Kadamb centre for Dance and Music in short visits for more than 10 years, learning Kathak dance and performing with her dance company all around India.

In the past 5 years I have started to work as a choreographer for outdoor shows and I wanted to develop a better understanding of the ways she created movement vocabulary and her choreographic approaches when creating Kathak dance pieces.

My aim was to research the choreographic body of work of Kumudini in the past 50 years and be part of the festival.

During the festival I had the chance to see more than 19 kathak dance companies from all over the world and more than 100 performers dancing at the festival. I was actively involved in the open discussions with the choreographers and masters, and interviewed Kumudini about her work. This gave me a broad view not only of the work of all those different companies and performers but also a greater understanding of the different ways of approaching choreography in a Kathak vocabulary context. I saw very traditional work being performed but also an incredible variety of choreographers that are developing new ways of approaching kathak movement vocabulary and of presenting it.

The process of research was tough taking classes and performing kathak dance, working on a new choreography looking at Kumudini's first choreographic work from 1975 called "Duvida", reading , interviewing and having conversations with senior and younger dancers from the company.

I have also taken kathak dance classes with Kumudinji, Sanjukta Sinha and Prashant Shah while at the centre.

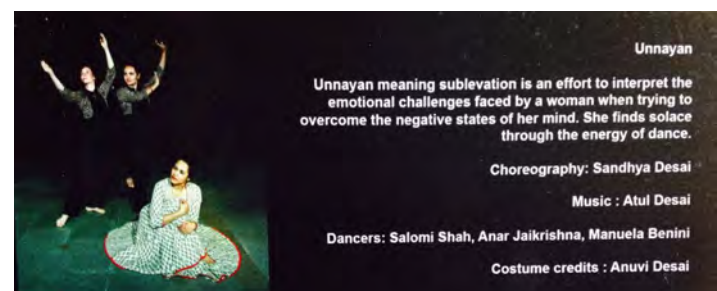
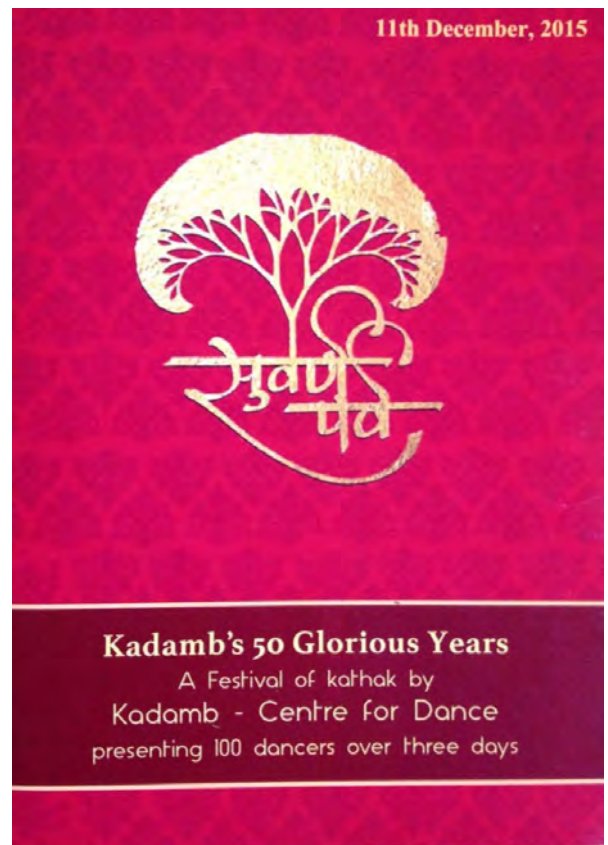
I performed as part of the festival in two pieces: Chaitanya, choreographed by Kumudini Lakhia on the 11th December and Unnayan, choreographed by Sandy Desai on the 13th December.

This experience not only gave me a deeper understanding of her choreographic work, as well as exposure to perform in such a prestigious event, but also pushed me as a performer.

1. Chaitanya: a piece performed by the Kadamb Group and choreographed by Kumudini Lakhia, opened the Suvarna Purva festival on the 11th December at Tagore hall. Using a shloka from the Bhagavad Gita, "Chaitanyam Sarva Bhutanam," it celebrates life in its universal form and is part of the repertoire of the Kadamb Dance company. I had the chance to be part of the choreography, understand how the choreography is rearranged with different number of dancers, get corrections from Kumudini and senior students, and also understand the technique of Kumudini's unique style of creating Kathak movement vocabulary in a devotional context.

2. Unnayan: re-choreographed by a teacher associated with Kadamb since the opening of the centre, Sandhya Desai worked with myself and two other senior dancers from the institute. We looked at the original piece on video and developed new ways of approaching the vocabulary and ideas from the original version. This was a great opportunity not only to look at the archives of videos from Kumudini's choreographic body of work, but also to physically engage in re-choreographing an old piece from her work. It gave me awareness of her choreographic journey through the last 50 years and had my input in the development of the new piece with Sandhya Desai and the two other Kathak dancers.

3. In the process of rehearsing for the festival I also learnt 2 new Ghazals. (The Ghazal is a poetic form consisting of rhyming couplets and a refrain, with each line sharing the same meter) These 2 Ghazals were choreographed by Kumudini and by one by her student Sanjukta Sinha. The experience of being choreographed by Kumudini on this occasion, gave me a different insight from the other piece with the group, as this was a solo piece with more emphasis on narrative, detail of expression and hand gestures, adding a new dimension to the choreographic process from group work to solo piece.



#### 4. Touring:

I also had the chance to perform outside of the Festival in an award ceremony in a castle as part of the Kadamb Dance Company.

We have performed a piece from the repertoire of the company “Ghat Gati” , which again gave me further exposure to another element of her choreographic work, this being much more technical, with fast footwork and spins. The rehearsal period was very intense, where I had to practice with and without the company dancers, giving me an opportunity to work on my technique and experience her unique movement vocabulary.

The experience assisted me in my professional practice with:

- new tools for developing Kathak choreographic material
- gaining deeper understanding of Kumudini body work and movement vocabulary
- giving me confidence to develop further work as a choreographer working with kathak vocabulary

On a personal level being part of the festival was a great opportunity to meet fellow dance friends from all over the world and humility in front of the old masters who are still performing and choreographing.

Kathak, like many other classical indian dance styles, is a life long journey and it's common to see older dancers being on stage. Kumudini, 86 years old, and Pundit. Birju Maharaj, 78 years old, did a duet at the end of the festival to a standing ovation audience. This was a very emotional moment for me where I could see the grace, beauty and depth of the dance style being performed by masters who dedicated their lives to the form. It made me question perceptions of fitness level, age of a performer on stage and understand the importance of older bodies being represented on dance stages all over the world.

