



Mark Elie with Virginia Johnson

Report from Mark Elie who travelled to New York to visit the Dance Theater of Harlem in July 2003. Mark submitted his report in the form of a video diary. This letter supports that video.

Dear Chair of the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund

As requested here is a short written statement on paper to support the video diary report I sent to you regarding my trip to New York's Dance Theater of Harlem to carry out research and development. My trip was from 10-24th July 2003, and I was able to spend five days at the Dance Theater of Harlem's prestigious summer school.

As you know my own school here, the Mark Elie Dance Foundation (MEDF), is a charitable organization and multiracial dance school. Classical ballet forms the basis of our work.

As a former student of the Dance Theater of Harlem some 20 years ago I was keen to return to the school in my capacity as teacher and Artistic Director of my own school. I was very keen to learn first-hand from their teaching faculty what teaching methods they are using to groom the children with a view to picking up some new teaching skills for my own school.

The Lisa Ullmann Scholarship enabled me to travel to the USA for two weeks' research to observe firsthand the ballet and training techniques for students aged 3- 17. I drew great inspiration from what I saw and a real insight into the way the school maintains its reputation as a centre of excellence by observing its prestigious summer school programme.

As illustrated in my video and the still photograph I was able to meet with 70s and 80s African,American Prima Ballerina Virginia Johnson, Mr Mitchell, the head of the School, Lavine Naidu , the head of Education and many of the pupils studying at the summer school.

I noted in the classes of 7-11 year olds that the standard was much higher than in the UK of overall dance skills. I was able to draw clear comparisons about the way my own teaching methods were similar and, in some cases, very different. At the Dance Theater of Harlem the level of dedication and concentration from the pupils is very high as are standards of discipline in class. The size of the classes is also much bigger than in my own school with around fifteen pupils per class, hence the need also for more strict discipline. I also noted that the children start to dance on point at age ten years old unlike my own school where point work does not begin until age twelve.

The level of focus from the staff and pupils at the Dance Theater of Harlem's school was a great inspiration and I was able to discuss the possibility of sending a pupil from my own school to New York to attend the prestigious summer school with Head of Education, Lavine Naidu.

We are working towards making this happen in Summer 2004 and I am delighted that The Mark Elie Dance Foundation has been able to build this exciting creative bridge with the Dance Theater of Harlem. I was then able to follow the progress of some of the summer school students and watch them get a chance to perform in the adult company of Dance Theater of Harlem. I also went to the premiere of the company's new ballet " Louisiana Woman" which was first class. Here I was able to see the outstanding results of years of training in practice, which has inspired me to create my own showcase and aim to create my very own centre of excellence for black and Asian classically trained dancers. The Dance Theater of Harlem really gave me a great insight into how to further focus my own pupils, as well as a great knowledge of the role of corporate sponsorship which has really allowed the Dance Theater of Harlem to survive for so long. I was encouraged also to explore the route of corporate sponsors for my school and have made a fantastic start since returning to the UK.

On 18/19 October 2003 I was able to secure the sponsorship of four-star American restaurant "Ashbells" of Nottinghill to put on two evenings of modern ballet named "Classically British", which played to two full houses and had great reviews at the Tabernacle, Nottinghill. I am now aiming to make this an annual showcase for Black History month each year as the response was so terrific.

This confidence would not have come about had I not had the chance to learn so much from my Trip to New York which has given me a multitude of new ideas and teaching methods, not to mention incredible inspiration to build my own Dance Theater of Harlem in the heart of my community here in Nottinghill.

It has also really inspired my pupils at the school where I showed the video diary and told them about the history of the Dance Theater of Harlem as part of Black History month, as well as the exciting news about the chance to send one of our pupils over to the prestigious summer school at the Dance Theater of Harlem in New York.

Mark Elie, Creative Director, The Mark Elie Dance Foundation