

16 February 2005

Dear LUTSF

Please find enclosed my report on my experiences in Bogotá, Colombia. I was in Bogotá from 2 July through 20 December 2005. My original intention was to develop a month long choreographic research project entitled *Touch/Afar*. However, the trip proved both longer and more enriching than I originally envisaged. I was able to complete the original proposed project and a major second project and start to develop a number of projects for the future. Highlights included producing two different performed pieces, interacting with both the university and independent dance sector and developing artistic links with dancers and other artists.

For me, the most important part of the experience was being able to have a sustained involvement in the dance scene there and to have both the space and time to work artistically for a significant period of time. Therefore, my primary advice for future LUTSF applicants is to consider travelling for a long amount of time. It was wonderful to have the luxury to take advantage of opportunities that arose and to develop deep and sustained relationships over time. I felt that I was able to gain much more than I would have if I had stayed only for the proposed month.

My second advice relates to language. I went there with almost no knowledge of Spanish and was worried that this would be a great hindrance. In the end, through the help of translators and by taking an intensive course, I felt that I could overcome a lot of the communication problems (although of course not all). I also had first hand experience in understanding that communication involves much more than verbal language. As a dance artist, it was at times interesting to not be able to depend on words. So my advice would be to encourage people to see past a language barrier and trust their ability to learn a language quickly and to at times communicate without it.

I am still finding a great deal to reflect and inspire me from my experiences there. I am writing an article that I hope to publish and will submit this to LUTSF once it is completed.

I feel greatly enriched by my experience in Bogotá and cannot thank the Fund enough for making this possible. I have gained a huge amount of professional experience and confidence in my artistic approach in addition to knowledge of a new culture, language and of a beautiful country.

Yours sincerely,

Meghan Flanigan

Report to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF)

My trip to Bogotá in the end encompassed many more activities and projects than originally submitted in my proposal. This report will therefore cover both the initial proposed project and the subsequent activities that I was able to take part in by extending my visit there.

My original project proposal was to create a choreographic research project with dancers in Bogotá in order to explore my artistic process in a new setting and with a group of Colombian dancers. The two dancers that invited me to Colombia were able to accommodate this by arranging an invitation to work for the University Festival of Contemporary Dance. The festival included all of the many Universities in Bogotá that offer Contemporary dance and it comprised workshops, performances and conferences for both the students and the teachers of the universities. My invitation was to teach a month long workshop to dancers who are on the faculties of the universities followed by two performances. In some ways this changed the nature of the original proposal. I felt that the purpose of the workshop for the participants was as a professional development opportunity (as they were not paid dancers) and therefore I needed to accommodate this as well as my artistic aims. Additionally, the fact that there would be a performed outcome rather than an informal sharing would mean that there was more of an emphasis on a finished product than the original emphasis on research.

Despite these changes, I was very pleased with the flow of this project. I accepted all who auditioned for the project and had a mix of dancers – there was a keen interest in exploring movement from a range of perspectives. Most of them had a background in improvisation but had been trained in a wide variety of dance techniques. Importantly, as they were all teachers they had a very eager approach to participating and openness to any ideas that emerged. I focused on working with sensations and images of the body to develop states of movement and then to evolve these into improvisational structures. Although the need to develop a performance out of the material in time to open the performance week of the festival felt rushed at times, it forced me to focus on a few of the key ideas that evolved from the workshops and to find a way to transform these into performed material. Additionally, the organizer of the festival secured funding for me to work with a composer for the performance. The ability to work with a musical collaborator was very important for me in developing the work into a performance.

The final piece was partially improvised and partially set and was performed in two different non-theatrical spaces (a large gallery inside a public library and a large warehouse building on a University campus). Both performances had full audiences and were very well received by the public. I had positive feedback both from the audience and the organizers of the festival. For me, I think what I learned from the project was an ability to combine my approach to teaching in a workshop setting and developing this into artistic goals. In some ways, I think the workshop stage of the project was most successful in terms of developing both my creativity and in providing an opportunity for exploration for the participants. The performance allowed us to showcase this experience and develop the ideas further in the final rehearsals and with the composer.

When I first applied to LUTSF I had planned on leaving Bogotá at the end of this project. However, before I left London, I received an additional invitation to work as a guest choreographer at the Academia Superior de Artes de Bogotá. This institution offers the only BA in dance in Colombia and I was invited to work with the final year students for one semester. The institution is around 10 years old and is a public funded conservatoire. They are housed in an old convent and offer programs in visual arts, music, theatre and dance. The terms of the project were very generous – I was given a studio for 24 hours a week for four months, 12 dance students, an assistant (to help with translating and with organizing the performance) and a budget. I was given total artistic freedom to accomplish what I could with this. After struggling in London for years with very little financial support this was a huge gift and an opportunity to see how far the artistic approach I had spent years developing could go.

As we had a significant amount of time, I decided to spend a lot of initial time researching ideas with the dancers and creating the piece from the beginning rather than basing it on a previous piece made with professional dancers. I think that this was the most artistically exciting starting point for me as I am very interested in what can emerge from dancers in the initial stages of research. This was also a difficult starting point as the dancers had little experience in working in this way. Many of the initial workshops dealt with exploring movement and communication between them and introducing them to my process. I quickly discovered that some of the dancers were more eager to engage in a process-based approach than others. This became a recurring issue in the rehearsals and forced me to articulate and confirm my own artistic goals. As the work developed over the four months, I drew inspiration both from my experiences of the urban environment and from the dancers' personal approaches to movement.

At times, working in this particular institution was a challenge because there were serious organizational problems and I felt that I was not fully supported by the other dance faculty. However, I felt that those problems were secondary to the development of the work which was able to continuously evolve. Some of the dancers completely transformed physically and creatively in the project and were able to perform the work with a fully embodied and sophisticated quality. Others did not reach this level but I think were able to gain something from the project. For me, I sometimes struggled with the disparity between levels in the dancers but felt that the overall structure and goals of the work were accomplished. It was also a challenge for me to create my first full-length work with a completely new set of dancers and with a significant language barrier.

I had an excellent experience with the collaborators I invited to take part in the project, the composer from the previous project, a scenographer (who was also involved in the previous project), a lighting designer and my invaluable assistant. As a team we were able to support and challenge each other artistically. I felt that the strength and ultimate success of the work was due to their artistic contribution and ability to understand the work choreographically and to address this in their own art form. It also helped to keep the dancers aware of the professional level to which they were aiming. All of the collaborators came from outside the institution and offered a different viewpoint on the institutional culture.

The piece was performed four times with increasingly large and enthusiastic crowds every night. We performed in a conventional theatre but in a non-conventional way. The audience was seated on the stage and at the back of the auditorium with the performers dancing in the middle of the space. This meant that the work was seen from two distinct perspectives and was structured to provide a different experience from the two positions. A number of people came twice in order to experience the piece from the other side of the space. I had largely positive feedback from audience members and was pleased to see the final work emerge successful despite occasional difficulties in the process. On reflecting on the work, I can trace threads of ideas that I began developing in previous works in London, particularly in some of the interactions between the dancers. However, these have evolved and consolidated in their new setting. It was exciting to create a major project that demanded that I lead a company of student dancers and an artistic team while expanding on the creative ideas I have been developing over a number of years.

While in Bogotá, I was invited to take part in a number of other activities. I was asked to lead two different improvisation workshops (one for dance students and one for independent dancers). It was particularly exciting to work with the independent dancers and see how they are developing an active and diverse independent sector. Both of these workshops were fun and refreshing as the emphasis was on learning rather than a final product. It also gave me the opportunity to meet and watch many dancers.

I was invited to be part of a selection panel for a festival of dance run by the Culture and Tourism Institute of Bogotá. This was a completely new experience for me and a great opportunity to work in a different capacity. The selection panel comprised a teacher from Cuba and a dance writer from Mexico and me. We spent three days together watching videos, reading proposals and discussing our thoughts on the work. I greatly enjoyed working with this international team and discussing contemporary dance from our different perspectives. There was a high level of agreement in selections, if not the reasons behind them, and we were able to unanimously agree on the programme for the festival. Our task became more difficult when we met with all of the choreographers and gave face-to-face feedback on their work and explained our reasons for accepting or rejecting their work. We also jointly wrote a report that offered recommendations to the institute for running the application process in future years. I felt that I had a lot to offer both in terms of artistic judgement and in experience with a number of different types of applications and festivals.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of being in Bogotá was the opportunity to meet different artists and to see the activity of both the dance and wider cultural scene. I regularly attended dance and music performances and visited galleries. I was able to see that there were many links between what is being developed there and what I have seen in London. I am hoping to return to Bogotá in the coming year in order to further participate in the cultural activity there. I was invited by a visual artist to work with a multi-disciplinary team of artists to make a major installation inspired from the coal mines in a small town near Bogotá. We went twice to visit the mines and had numerous discussions of how we could work together to create an installation. We are still in the early stages of planning but I hope to go back to Bogotá to complete this project. Additionally, I am hoping to further collaborate with the composer that I worked with on both projects. We have discussed creating a duet with me as a dancer and her as a composer. I was invited to propose a month long course in creativity and exploration at one of the major universities and am hoping that my proposal will go through and receive funding. I have spoken with the University Dance Festival and am hoping to run workshops for them again. Additionally, I would be eager to reciprocate and invite the Colombian artists to London.

The whole experience was very enriching artistically, mainly because it gave me an opportunity to work professionally for an extended period of time and to use my skills fully. On a personal level, it was very challenging and exciting to live in a new culture. I was able to learn a new language and to see dance and globalization from a completely new perspective. I received a large amount of support, both institutional and personal, from the people that I met there. After all of these positive experiences I am of course planning on continuing my contact with Bogotá well into the future.