

To: LUTSF

Please find attached my report from my trip to Brazil in April and May 2004. Once again I'm very sorry it is so late.

I want to take the opportunity to thank the LUTSF again for the award. My trip was truly rewarding in many different ways and has given me much inspiration for my work in Cornwall. A particular highlight was that, while in Brazil, I managed to organize a visit for Mestre Roberval (the teacher I spent most time with) to Penzance in June 2004 to teach at Trelya Youth Project, to run adult workshops and take part in the annual 'Golowan' community arts festival in Penzance. It was an amazing experience seeing him teach and perform with very disadvantaged young people- without speaking any English! It was a fantastic conclusion to my trip and I know that the young people were deeply inspired by him as they frequently ask how he is and when he will be coming back.

The youth group has maintained their enthusiasm and have just performed a dance choreography at the Hall for Cornwall in Truro using ideas that I developed from my trip. It was a resounding success and a very valuable and positive experience. For some of them it was their first time performing in a theatre.

During my time in Brazil I took very few photos but recorded about fifteen hours of video footage including extended interviews with Mestre Roberval and his students which I will be editing into a short documentary. I will send a copy to the LUTSF as soon as I have finished it. Many thanks.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Wheeler

Research trip to Brazil in April and May 2004

Summary

My award from LUTSF allowed me to travel to Brazil for five weeks during April and May 2004. The funding was for my travel expenses. I intended to undertake a period of training primarily in the multi-faceted dance/fight/game of Capoeira but also to immerse myself in other related Afro-Brazilian dance and musical forms.

My aims were:

- Development of educational and choreographic ideas for my work with young people in youth projects and schools
- Personal skills development as an artist, teacher and performer and to gain further insight into a foreign culture
- To make contact with Capoeira and/or dance and music groups to discuss the future possibility of setting up youth exchange projects between Brazil and the UK.

Background

My academic training is in Fine Art but it was during my degree that I first encountered the Afro-Brazilian art form of Capoeira. Capoeira is a dynamic fusion of music, dance, acrobatics, game play and martial art. Its roots are in African tribal culture but it was first developed on the plantations of Brazil as a form of cultural resistance to slavery and as a literal tool for liberation. Students train the movements, rhythms and songs which make up the performance of a 'roda' (circle). The rhythm is set by the bass berimbau, a single stringed instrument which guides the movements of play, and is joined by other percussion (berimbaus, pandeiros-tambourine, agogo-cowbell, atabaque-drum, recoreco-scraper). The music is accompanied by call and response songs that warn, urge, praise or satirise the two players in the circle. The game itself is one of beauty, wit and rhythmic interplay characterized by movements such as the cartwheel, movements of attack and defense and the basic step known as the 'ginga' (swing). In addition to these there are a vast array of complex and 'sometimes' very acrobatic variations and transitions that create the beguiling flow that can be observed in experienced 'capoeiristas'. The game is improvised.

Finally and most importantly there is an equally complex set of codes and rules of play that bind the whole event together and prevents the game from slipping into a non-communicative improvisation on the one hand or at the other extreme becoming a violent confrontation. Today, Capoeira enjoys worldwide popularity and recognition due to the work of dedicated Brazilian Masters and their students.

In my work with young people I have found Capoeira to be very beneficial as an educational tool. It develops confidence, flexibility, spatial and mental awareness, musical and vocal ability and has huge potential for self-expression within defined boundaries. It can also help young people to channel anti-social behavior. As a teacher I have two main remits: firstly to provide continuation to the work of my Capoeira teachers and the tradition of Capoeira, presented in specific classes and workshops. This is an ongoing project in itself.

Secondly, to take some of the elements from Capoeira and related art forms e.g. Breakdance (which could be seen as a cousin of Capoeira as it has arisen from similar socio-economic conditions), to create exciting, collaborative and cross-curricular projects for youth groups, schools, colleges or for performance.

Rio de Janeiro April 2004

My time in Rio de Janeiro was shorter than I had initially planned but was very rewarding. The first few days were spent at a large Capoeira meeting in Niteroi, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro. It was an excellent introduction to the city and its culture. The meeting was a not for profit event and was designed to bring together some of the best players and Masters from the surrounding area to play Capoeira but also to discuss it and its place within Afro-Brazilian culture.

During the lectures and forums there was much discussion of the origins of Capoeira and the regional differences in the art. A common belief is that Capoeira originated in the N'golo or Zebra dance of what is now the Congo but developed under different conditions in each of the slave centers of Brazil: Rio, Salvador, Recife and Sao Luiz. Another factor effecting the development of the art and, therefore, the regional cultural fabric, was how much the influence the first wave of slaves from the Bantu region of Africa (now Congo and Angola etc) had over the second wave, which came predominantly from Yuruba speaking people (now Nigeria etc).

This discussion made me reflect on Capoeira's newest journey back across the Atlantic and the fact that the descendants of slaves have traveled back to Europe and are now teaching an art that was originally prohibited and brutally suppressed by Europeans. How is Capoeira influencing culture in the UK? The beauty of some of its movements can be seen in the media or in contemporary dance pieces and Capoeira groups are springing up all over

the country but it would be a shame if its roots and how and why it has developed were forgotten.

I had the opportunity to play some Capoeira during the event but really the highlight was to see so many of the city's best players gathered in one place. A day after the event I received an e-mail from a friend in Salvador who told me that Mestre Roberval was to travel to Europe in three weeks. Mestre Roberval was the teacher I was most eager to train with so I decided to cut short my stay and travel to Salvador early.

Salvador April and May 2004

I first met Mestre Roberval a few years ago in Salvador. I see him as my teacher in Capoeira alongside his friend and colleague, Mestre Laercio who is currently based in Berlin. Roberval has a slight build and is an extremely agile and skilled Master and is also a very talented musician and a prolific songsmith. Thankfully his trip was delayed and he ended up traveling to Europe only a couple of days before I was due to return.

I spent every week day training with him or his top students. Classes would be spent training individually on combinations of movements and later working together in pairs on routines that could eventually be improvised within the game. One of the most important skills in Capoeira is being able to improvise and link any number of learnt movements into any combination while remaining closed to an attack. There are around ten basic movements, which can all be linked fluidly and from this base thousands of variations of strategic or stylistic subtlety can be created. We would also often spend some of the sessions learning the rhythms and songs that are used to accompany the game.

It was fantastic to be submerged in learning again. It is easy to forget what learning feels like if you are regularly in the position of teacher. I think it is a very valuable and essential experience that can really inform teaching practice. I learnt a great deal about Capoeira during this period and was also exposed to new stretching methods, gymnastic techniques and new ideas for choreography.

Video project with Mestre Roberval

Whilst in Salvador I recorded about fifteen hours of video footage with Mestre Roberval and his group, including in depth interviews, recordings of classes and training techniques, performances and some location shots in Salvador. I plan to edit the footage to use as an educational resource for my work in the UK but also to assist Mestre Roberval in his search for funding to build an academy in Cosme de Farias, the area in Salvador where he lives.

It was clear from my stay in Salvador that privileged 'westerners' are often getting more access to top quality teachers than a lot of local people. Most of the teaching spaces are in the center of town- where visiting tourist stay- and a lot of local people, especially the youth cannot afford the bus fare into town. Obviously it is not a bad thing for foreigners to seek out these teachers as an important cultural exchange takes place and also teachers are able to make a living doing what they do best but it is by no means an ideal situation.

Cosme de Farias is a poor area by Brazilian standards and there are thousands of kids in areas like these who have the potential to become incredible dancers, capoeiristas, artists or musicians but do not have the facilities through which to make that happen. I interviewed one of the Mestre's top students who is almost recognized as a master in his own right, and he frankly stated that his 'education' through Capoeira had prevented him from becoming a thief and a killer...

Percussion and Candomble

Having played musical instruments since my teens and also through my involvement in Capoeira, I have developed a keen interest in all forms of percussion. I have recently started running after school music clubs with two other musicians in Penzance and was excited about the possibility of learning some new techniques and rhythms. Through Mestre Roberval I met a very talented percussion teacher called Macambeira whom I took classes with during my last week in the city. He taught me a variety of rhythms on conga, timba and surdo. He also did a lot of work in the 'favelas' or slums of Salvador so we discussed the realities of youth work and the potential of youth exchanges. We weren't able to organize anything concrete as I found out that there is very little funding available in Brazil for exchanges but we have kept in touch nevertheless. I plan to investigate exchange opportunities more thoroughly in the UK as I think with the right support there will be a greater chance of success. However it was a step in the right direction having a reliable, experienced and very talented contact.

Macambeira also invited me to attend the 'Candomble de Egums' that he played drums for. Candomble is an Afro-Brazilian religion and is perhaps the purest form of African cultural expression in Brazil. I was already familiar with it from books and had been to a Terreiro (a house of Candomble) on my previous visit to Brazil. I do not wish to pass judgement on something so revered, complex and profound as Candomble so I will describe in brief the events in the Terreiro with some basic background information. I make no claim to being deeply knowledgeable on the subject but have decided to include it in my report as, for me, it was a profoundly unusual cultural experience.

The Terreiro was about an hour and a half on the bus from the city centre and was situated in a very poor suburb of the city. The building was single story and inside half the room contained benches while the other half was open space with six or seven chairs placed along the back wall. Each chair was of a different size and style. The benches on the left were reserved for women only while the right were for men. The room was painted more or less half white half blue. The ceremony or ritual started at about 8pm and finished sometime after sunrise the following day and was punctuated with breaks for food and drink. There were roughly 40 people in attendance mostly dressed in white clothing. There seemed to be several phases to the ritual but nearly all parts were accompanied by very intense 'toques' or rhythms played on three atabaques (tall conga-like drums on stands) and an agogo (cowbell) and were only played by men. The music was accompanied by beautiful call and response songs, sung mainly in the Yuruba language (still used in parts of West Africa). Everyone who knew the words joined in with the chorus. The whole process was led by an older man, perhaps in his fifties, known as the 'Pai de Santo' or saint father who was assisted by several other advanced iniciates. The first phase consisted of women dancing and shuffling around in a circle, accompanied and urged on by the music and song. A central belief in Candomble is that all human events and actions are determined by the 'Orixas' who are believed to be archetypal energies, deities or spirits. In certain rituals an Orixa can enter the iniciant and cause them to become entranced and often to convulse and shake violently. This occurred to one of the female dancers and is very strange to observe firsthand. The spasms are truly involuntary and the person is assisted by one or two others to avoid falling badly.

After this phase the rest of the night was dominated by the 'Egums'. The 'Egums' are believed to be dead people who return to the Terreiro for various reasons and appear dressed in faceless full bodied cloaks, often highly decorated with beads and shells. For the rest of the night one Egum after another came and went through the door at the far end of the Terreiro. A different toque was played for each one. There appeared to be the same number of Egums as chairs along the back wall, some were adult size, some were more childlike. They shuffled around in the open space in front of the benches. Some were definitely swaying and dancing to the rhythm while some appeared to offer advice or to take questions and offerings. They all spoke in the most extraordinary way- either very high-pitched or in a deep growl. The Pai de Santo mediated the conversations in Yuruba. One or two of the Egums were very aggressive and had to be corralled by the leading iniciants who were standing around beating cane sticks on the floor to keep the Egum from touching anyone, which is apparently fatal! There was no doubt in my mind that everyone in the Terreiro believed the Egums to be the spirits of the deceased.

The whole event was utterly fascinating but beyond my comprehension. What was very apparent however was how important the religion is to

these people and the fabric and values of their community. I felt very privileged to be there and was treated very kindly.

Conclusion

Brazil is an exotic, beautiful, dangerous yet joyful place- a place of extremes and contradictions, but a place where rich cultural practices form a very important part of everyday life in a way that doesn't exist in the UK. It was fantastic to spend some time there this year. The experiences will stay with me for a very long time and have undoubtedly enriched my creative and working practice.

Michael Wheeler