

To: Chair of Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund

My report is a bit late. I'm sorry about that and hope that it is OK.

New York 13th July to 11th August

Spending 4 weeks at the Merce Cunningham Studio

My aim was to improve my knowledge of the Cunningham technique and that was definitely achieved.

The highlight for me, apart from being in such an exciting city, was to see the commitment and energy of the American students in the class, the American approach and work ethic is very different from the laidback British style.

The only suggestion I have when it comes to New York is to have a lot of money. If you don't have enough you'll regret it because in a city like N.Y you want to be able to do things and not just stay at home, if you're short of money it is better to do a dance course in the country!

I will share my knowledge through my teaching in various dance schools.

Best wishes

Niklas Laustiola

Report

Merce Cunningham Studio, New York City

13th July to 11th August 2003.

Week 1

Getting back into the Cunningham technique and general dance training (after a long absence of regular classes) was hard.

Mobilising my spine and strengthening my torso to be able to execute the curves, arches, twists and tilts that a lot of the technique is based around took a few days.

The thing that I found most difficult the first week was to keep my weight in the centre of my feet, basically just getting that strength back in my legs, hips and feet. So after the first week I didn't feel great, getting back into hardcore dance training was a much slower process than I had hoped.

Week 2

Started slowly feeling better, more centred and my general physical strength was improving. The Cunningham technique is a very pure technique and one is therefore technically very exposed, every mistake i.e. incorrect line, a shallow curve etc. shows, which explains why the Cunningham dancers all have "perfect" bodies, i.e. turnout, straight legs and very flexible backs.

The co-ordination of the technique is very tricky, curving and arching the back while doing fast footwork or twisting and tilting the torso while jumping. In the 2nd week, while I was absorbing certain aspects of the style, at the same time I realised that the technique doesn't allow for any complacency, there was always a new hurdle to jump.

Week 3

I was taught all week by former Cunningham dancer Carol Tannenbaum. Very good classes. I could tell that she had great knowledge and a real understanding of the technique. Carol worked a lot with strong visual imagery, which as a dance student and from a teaching point of view I find very helpful and inspiring. She gave me good exercises for beginners and also more advanced versions. For example, the back stretches can be done with hands on hips in parallel in reverse, bending over with flat back first then plié to curve the spine and recover. That way the student can get a real feeling of where the centre of the spine is, what it feels like to reach the maximum curve of the middle back and whilst in plié in a flat back how not to push the weight back into the heels.

Week 4

Last week was more varied, had a different teacher every day. The first was an older lady who had danced with the company in the sixties and she taught a lyrical, less strict Cunningham class, then Catherine Kerr who has taught a lot of British dancers over the years. I found her class very inspiring also a freer version of the technique, which actually feels more modern and that I personally respond to much better and is also more the way I teach the technique and the way in which I see it evolve.

Daniel Squire, a dancer with the company for 7 years taught my last class. His classes are very pure and hard, focusing on clarity and detail of execution. By the end of 4 weeks at the Cunningham Studio I had gained a lot of information, strength and last, but not least, inspiration: inspiration to take into every aspect of my life in dance, both the choreographic side and the teaching side of my work. The Cunningham technique is beautiful, difficult and strange and, as distinct from the Graham technique much alive and kicking