

15/09/09

Dear LUTSF

Please find enclosed my report on my participation in European exchange/professional development programme Dance Beyond Borders.

Dance Beyond Borders: 5 x 2 Week Residencies

K3 Choreographic Centre, Hamburg February 2009
Escola Superior de Danca, Lisbon April 2009*
London Metropolitan University, London May 2009
Retina Dance Company, Antwerp June 2009*
K3 Choreographic Centre/Sprechwerk, Hamburg July 2009*

*The LUTSF covered the travelling costs to three of the five residencies.

Through these residencies I created a solo, *Seven Skins*, which was performed at DanceKiosk-Hamburg in July 2009. The residency programme was an extremely beneficial and rewarding process - I learnt much from the exchange between peers from different countries and mentors from different backgrounds, and began to understand and make contacts within the dance scene on the continent. I feel very much that I got the maximum possible benefit from participation in Dance Beyond Borders, and that it will have creative and practical resonances within my work and working methodology for many years to come.

All parts of the project were enjoyable and beneficial. I particularly enjoyed being brought into contact with a motivated and inquisitive group of peers (the other project participants). We have established friendships and working links and I am certain this will lead to many future possibilities and projects.

I have completed a report for Dance Beyond Borders, which will be used primarily to report back to the European Commission (who funded the project) as well as for internal assessment and management. *Seven Skins* was performed at DanceKiosk-Hamburg, and will be performed this weekend at Theater Outlet in Braunschweig. Further festival performances already scheduled include *Soft Cuts*, London, London Metropolitan University, and *Reverie*, Belgium.

I plan to continue my research in future work, implementing skills and engaging with the subject more fully, and taking it into dialogue with collaborators from other mediums.

Thank you so much again for awarding me the scholarship which enabled me to participate in such a rewarding project, it has been of such benefit to my work and I am very grateful for your support.

Yours Sincerely,

Rachel Birch-Lawson

REPORT



Dance Beyond Borders (DBB) was an incredibly valuable experience, rich, varied and rewarding. An exciting project in itself, I feel that the benefits to my future career are incalculable. On an artistic level, my working processes and methodologies developed considerably, my analytical and critical skills were exercised and honed, and my confidence in my ideas and my ability to realise them grew. On a practical level, the course has led me to explore the dance and arts scene beyond Britain, and establish contacts with artists from other countries (within the Dance Beyond Borders group, and from outside, including those I met at DanceKiosk-Hamburg). I feel privileged to have worked within such a committed and exciting group of young artists and benefited from support and feedback from a wide variety of mentors; and I look forward to implementing my discoveries in future work and working practice.

Dance Beyond Borders took place over five two-week residencies:

Residency 1: K3 Choreographic centre, Hamburg, mentored by Angela Guerreiro
Residency 2: Escola Superior de Danca, Lisbon, mentored by Francisco Pedro
Residency 3: London Metropolitan University, mentored by Thomas Kampe / Stephanie Schober
Residency 4: Retina Dance Company, Antwerp, mentored by Filip Van Huffel / Natalie Gordon
Residency 5: Danckiosk-Hamburg - production time / performances at Sprechwerk.

These were attended by ten young choreographers from around Europe, selected by the above partners. We took part in workshops, mentoring, and peer-mentoring, and created our own pieces. I also danced in another participant's (*Verana Kutschera*, Belgium) work.

ARTISTIC PROCESS

My artistic process was an incredible journey. I feel convinced that this was only possible given the context of DBB: the peer group, the mentors, and the total concentration of the residencies abroad.



During the first residency my preconceptions and previous methodology for making work was entirely shaken up. We undertook deep body exploration and movement research, which led me to a new point of departure: I reexamined my own body and movement, and came to understand that what I had were many ideas as to HOW to make a piece - a list of tasks and building blocks - but not ideas for a piece in itself. I had all the structure and composition tools, but without anything to put into this structure. From this point on I threw out all I had planned, all my preconceptions, and began making from what was, for me, a new and strange perspective: from the inside out. This fascinating process of working directly from my own body: taking a body experience into a feeling experience, and, by walking the fine line between the two, generating a movement language and set of associated qualities; from that opening back out to theme and narrative; from that into compositional structures; and finally returning to the movement language to hone and shape it to my now developed theme and ideas. This took me in directions I would never have imagined exploring. I challenged my body history, and my perception of my body history, and so challenged myself in my dual role of choreographer and performer.

I initially planned an experiential installation piece, but gradually the subsidiary elements (TVs, sound sources, text placards) were stripped away through practical considerations, and I finally decided on a staged performance piece. However, the key content and themes endured. I learnt through this process to be flexible and adapt to change and practicalities: my installation ideas were just not feasible given the performance space and the nomadic nature of the residencies, so I had to adapt, and see not the limitation, but the other possibilities.

It was important for me on this occasion to simply make the work that wanted to be made. However, I have produced a piece that is difficult to stage: it requires the audience to be able to see small detail clearly. It works best in a studio setting, in daylight, and something is lost in the transference to stage. This is a good lesson for the future: to really consider how something will be viewed, and to ensure that the work I am making can in a practical sense be shown in its best light. As dance is a performance art it is of course essential to remain aware of the final presentation, its format and possibilities/limitations, whilst working through the creative process.

I know that I have made a bolder piece than I could possibly have made remaining at home in London, and this was due as much to the international nature of the group and working conditions as the mentor support and mutual support we gave each other. I felt, within this European context, witnessing work with bite and intensity and drama being made around me, able to overstep the boundaries of politeness and my self-consciousness regarding drama/melodrama. This feeling of freedom to take risks was undoubtedly due to the lack of personal ties and history, the influence of a variety of cultures and schools of thought, and the consistent support and encouragement from mentors and peers that I mentioned earlier.

I was also performing in someone else's work as well as my own. I enjoyed the chance to step out of my own piece, to work in a larger group (one choreographer and two dancers, including me), and to work in the kind of piece I would never have imagined myself doing. Verena's process and way of working was very different to my own, and as a group at times it was difficult and frustrating. However, it was a great opportunity to work on communication and exchange, to commit fully to another's work without judgment, and yet maintain a sense of questioning. Switching between choreographer and then dancer within the space of a few hours was hard, but I feel that this experience of both perspectives was useful and refreshing.

MENTORING

Through each residency we received substantial mentoring and peer-mentoring. On a personal level this was invaluable and always spot on. I was continually encouraged and supported, and questioned and questioned again. I also enjoyed the opportunity to support others through their process and give feedback on their work.

The mentors came from very different perspectives and had very different skills and viewpoints to offer. Angela Guerreiro focused on movement research and deep body exploration; Francisco Pedro on giving us time and space to develop our movement research and ideas; Thomas Kampe and Stephanie Schober on compositional tools and structures for our work; and Natalie Gordon and Filip Van Huffel on extending the physicality of our work, and audience experience (they continually questioned - 'what do you want your audience to see?').

Throughout, I felt the feedback was necessary, concise, and encouraging, but also helped me maintain a sense of perspective and humility. The different approaches were essential to the development of my work: the varying viewpoints encouraged me to explore how I wanted my work to be read, and by whom, and hearing different kinds of feedback also enabled me to discover when to stand my ground, when to be firm, when to follow my own intuition, and when to accept.

LABS AND WORKSHOPS

Through the residencies we participated in workshops which were varied in content and intensity. All were of benefit and use, specifically the film (Hamburg, Lutz Gregor), sound (Lisbon), and writing (London, Lizzie Le Quine) workshops we took made an enormous contribution to my final piece. It was through these that I was inspired and motivated to include film and text in my work, and to film, write, record, and edit this all myself. The writing workshop in particular moved me - I found it of such benefit as a tool for reflection and process, but also really enjoyed it, and I look forward to using writing more in future work. All the workshops generated within me a sense of self-sufficiency and confidence, and new skills for me to implement in my work.



THE GROUP

The most exciting and rewarding part for me was undoubtedly working within this peer group. I have made some great friends, great colleagues, great contacts, and I look forward to working with all of them again in the future.

Working as a young artist can frequently be a lonely and frustrating experience, and here being able to simply share the sometimes painful creation experience made all the difference! I was able to ask for feedback and support, to give my own opinions

and thoughts on others' work, and to be supported continually by others experiencing the same difficulties and joys as myself. The groups' work was varied, and I felt privileged to witness 9 such different pieces grow in front of me. It was useful on a practical level to watch others manage an artistic process, to compare methodologies, practices, and ideas, and great fun to work and live within such a great group. For me, this was a key part of DBB: I have already made plans to work with several of the rest of the group in the future, to share studios with them and peer-mentor each other through future processes, and to work together to produce and manage future performances of our work.

RESIDENCIES - CULTURE AND ISOLATION



Education and Culture DG

Culture Programme

The intercultural nature of the group and mentors and place of residency was key. This mix of place and space and perspective encouraged all of us to explore new ideas, new ways of working, and new ways of perceiving. The isolation and intensity and freedom from other responsibilities was also very significant: it was incredibly refreshing and rewarding to be able to focus entirely on this one piece, on this one process: the luxury of time and space was great.

SHOWINGS AND PERFORMANCE

After each residency we had a showing. These varied in formality and structure: some were internal studio showings, for participants and mentors only, others were more formal, staged, for a public audience. They were useful as a management tool, ensuring I reached a conclusive point at the end of each residency, however they could have been more useful if there had been more opportunity for feedback afterwards: this is something I hope DBB will address in the future.

The final performance in Hamburg was great. I wasn't able to achieve everything I planned technically, but it was a great space to work in and a very receptive and enthusiastic audience. The chance to show my work and participate in an international festival was fantastic, and I made many contacts and received much interesting feedback. This final performance was never the focus of my DBB experience, but it was a great end-goal and conclusive ending to the process.

REFLECTIONS - WHAT I HAVE LEARNT AND FUTURE PLANS

I can honestly say that DBB has made the most significant contribution to my career development so far. I have learnt many, many things about artistic methodology and practice, analysis and dissection, discussion and sharing, generosity and openness, intuition and rationality, management and organisation. On a personal level I have gained confidence in my ideas, my choreography, and my performance, I have found new ways of working, new ways of moving, and opened themes out on-stage that have been looking for expression within me for many years.

Artistically I have reassessed how I was working and making pieces before DBB, and realised that for now I wish to begin to work more in the way I experienced during DBB: before I was working a lot within commissioned work, following briefs, as well as collaborating with others. I realise that for my artistic development it's important to be able to have an idea and follow it to its conclusion as pleases me: for now I need the freedom to follow my desire, and not be bound by others' briefs, time constraints, or musical choices. Perhaps after I've explored this I will be able to return to working more with others, working to brief, but I've realised I need to explore my ideas and how I craft them more fully before I will be ready for this.

Making a solo on myself was a huge creative and logistical challenge and managing the dual role of performer and choreographer was an interesting and difficult task. I dislike working alone in a studio: I only felt able to take the challenge of making a work on myself because of the large group environment and studio sharing. Having only myself to draw on for ideas and inspiration, having to motivate and manage myself to create to schedule and to maintain interest when my enthusiasm began to flag, was difficult. Again, the group situation made this easier and more enjoyable than I could have imagined, and as several of us had this experience, we plan in the future to share studios to work on individual processes.



I plan to take this solo, *Seven Skins*, on to festivals and platforms, and, then attempt to move onto new works, taking what I have learnt with me. On a practical level I am looking now to apply for residencies and supported programmes to continue to develop these thoughts and consolidate this experience. I also have realised my hunger for study and discussion, and now plan to apply for a master's degree in choreography starting 2010. As part of DBB I look forward to working as a group to arrange international performances of our work, to continue to exchange and collaborate practically, and to work on new projects with each other over the next year or two. We definitely feel that this is just the start, we have established this exciting network which we are only beginning to

explore. Beyond DBB I look forward to opening up future dialogues with the mentors and other artists I met through the project, looking at performance, mentoring and support opportunities, and to begin to establish myself firmly on the dance scene, with confidence in my abilities and channels of communication now open.

In conclusion, DBB met my expectations, but also my desires. I realise now, on completion, how much in need I was for what was offered, on a practical, a personal and an artistic level. (Time and space, mentoring, community and companionship, inspiration and stimulus.) DBB helped me to open doors within myself, and to the wider dance community - I learnt more about myself as an artist, more about the kind of work I make and want to make in the future, more about dialogue and exchange, more about producing and publicizing and managing myself and my work, than I could have ever imagined. I gained courage in my convictions, a support mechanism of fantastic mentors, and a network of inspiring and inspired young artists whose inquisitiveness and openness will, I'm sure, lead to exciting future possibilities. I have been inspired to return to study, to continue to make and make, and to get my work seen and heard. This was ultimately a valuable and rewarding experience, and left me with the conviction that whilst, as a young artist,

I cannot yet be certain of producing work of great creativity, thought and intellect - work of great moment - all of us who took part in DBB can now be certain that our input is all of these things: that we can be assured of making a valuable, creative contribution to dance culture.

R B-B