

Rhiana Laws - Sri Lankan Report
Lisa Ullmann Travel Scholarship Fund
Dance Project

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Depart: 4th November 2010 *

* Early departure for the UK due to an illness in the family (original departure date: 11th November 2010)

My initial proposal was to work at the Butterfly Peace Garden in Sri Lanka with ex-child soldiers and young people badly affected by the Tsunami, using Reiki as a starting point for dance movement exploration. I intended to use dance as a tool for developing self-confidence, trust and a time to play away from daily burdens. The reality was that virtually every aspect of what I proposed, planned and expected had to be changed - and thus began one of the biggest learning curves of my career, the findings of which I'm still grappling with.

Arriving in Sri Lanka I was informed that the young people attending the Butterfly Peace Garden were now in the middle of important school exams and so their programme could no longer accommodate me. Lesson number one: concrete forward planning in Sri Lanka is not always easy or reliable! Undeterred however, I headed south to Arguam Bay and quickly arranged to meet with the Principals of three different schools within 45 minutes of each other through Annette Beuth, my initial point of contact for everything that I proposed to do in Sri Lanka.

The schools were all badly affected by the Tsunami. One of them had been completely washed away and has since been re-built by an Italian NGO. Another of the schools - Komari School - is in the neighbourhood with the highest suicide rate in Sri Lanka, something I was to experience the effects of whilst teaching there. Each of the school's pupils was hugely poverty stricken and every family had been touched by the devastation of civil war, tsunami and many by suicide.

I had also arranged to work at the Jeeva Jothy Girls Home in Batticaloa before leaving the UK and this arrangement went ahead according to plan. The youngest girl is currently five years old, and all the children will stay here until they are married. The girls all have their own story as to how they came to be at the orphanage (although this is not something that we ever discussed) ranging from abuse within the family making it unsafe for an individual to stay at home, to being snatched on their way to school and trained to be a child soldier. Some of the older ex-soldiers are still too afraid to return to their villages and so haven't seen their families for 12 years. For such a bubbly, smiling group of 40 girls and young women there is an unthinkable well of pain and experience lurking beneath the surface, glimpsed only occasionally through the odd cry out from a nightmare in the early hours of the morning, or the hunted, haunted eyes of one girl who quietly looked on, but was in a different world internally.

This report is difficult to write, not because I ended up having to think on my feet and re-organise my whole trip, but because what I discovered as I started teaching in Sri Lanka threw into question everything that I had taken as concrete.

Working with young offenders and prisoners, as well as with many other marginalised and non-marginalised groups within British Society, has proved to me firsthand the incredible capacity Contemporary Dance has for facilitating positive change within individuals. It seemed, therefore, reasonable that the same principles could be employed in Sri Lanka - at this point I had wildly underestimated the translation of Contemporary Dance into a different cultural context as well as the importance of the basic educational needs of a rural population recovering from civil war and natural disaster, whilst simultaneously living with poverty and the third highest national suicide rate worldwide. My learning curve began.

Once I realized it was no longer possible for me to work with the groups who had been using Reiki to aid their personal healing I quickly changed tack. Whilst I still very much hope to

explore how Reiki could be used as a starting point for contact and creative work, it just wasn't possible without access to the young people with the necessary foundation of Reiki practice.

I found out about what life is like in the Arguam Bay region through talking to the school Principals, teachers and locals and discovered that what the children and teenagers really needed, in order to better their future prospects, was English speaking. Everyone was very enthusiastic about my desire to teach dance and gave me all the help I needed to make it possible, but what they wanted from me was my language.

This troubled me for the short space of time I had available to ponder and re-think. What should I do? What *could* I do? All my skills are in teaching dance. It's what I know and love. All my planning revolved around taking dance abroad to see how I could develop my own practice - my funding was granted for this specific reason. But what was also playing on my mind was all the conversations I'd had, and all the evidence I'd seen which revealed the disappointing reality of the post-Tsunami drive to rebuild those areas of Sri Lanka reduced to devastation. Countless NGO's arrived with vast sums of money to rebuild schools, houses, shops and replace fishing boats but none of them actually asked the local people what they needed or set up a communication system between the different charities to discover what was being attended to and what was not. The remaining result today is that there are families who now have three houses whilst others still live in temporary Tsunami shelters. Houses have been built without power or water in isolated communities far away from the beach, schools, shops and bus stops. There are fishermen without boats whose neighbours were given boats even though they never worked in the fishing trade. The situation is ludicrous and was created out of a severe lack of communication and listening.

I refused to be another well meaning Westerner arriving and blindly sticking to my proposed agenda without consultation but, at the same time, I wasn't about to simply start teaching the alphabet - the existing English teachers were more than capable of that. In the end I decided not to plan anything. I simply had to arrive in front of the class and tune in to what was appropriate as I went. The English teachers acted as my translators so I started to play some basic movement games which introduced unfamiliar moves appropriate to the male-female mix. All the different age groups responded well to this and I realized that these games were giving them the chance to hear and understand English as well as find space to play, move and at times speak or move in front of their peers which pushed them outside their comfort zones and led to a feeling of achievement.

It wasn't until I was invited to attend a traditional dance class at Komari School, just before leading four Contemporary Dance sessions that I truly realized just how far removed my style of dance is from almost every cultural and social norm in rural Sri Lanka. I decided to go ahead and lead my technique sessions as I would in the UK with beginners anyway as teaching something new is never necessarily a bad thing! The students were well-disciplined. Behaviour and a disinterest in education are not factors that need combating in Sri Lankan schools. However, there was much hilarity at the notion of using their bodies in such a foreign way and the students happily worked through centre and travelling exercises. My final session went from 20 to 80 students participating because, unbeknown to me, all the teachers had left the school to attend the funeral of a pupil's mother who had committed suicide a few days previously. This tested my ability to handle a language barrier with no translator and to think on my feet in a mass context, directing 80 excited and slightly bemused children and teenagers who didn't know where the teachers were, who I was, or what Contemporary Dance was either! As haphazard as this final session may sound, the school was highly emotionally charged that day and it was quite something to witness how the whole town was effected by the suicide. Mr James, the Principal, explained how Komari had the highest suicide rate in the whole of Sri Lanka, a phenomena perpetuated by children copying parents and extended family members, and through the TV soap dramas which have gripped the attention of the nation, especially the women. He explained that the young people need re-educating about suicide but that outside

help would probably be necessary to get this started. I took a Portuguese doctor to meet Mr James with the thought that one day perhaps dance could be used as an element for young people exploring and communicating a fresh understanding of the alternatives to suicide, but there is a vast amount of ground work which needs to be done first. This in itself served as another indicator that perhaps in Sri Lanka, whether addressing ex-child soldiers, tsunami, suicide or the aftermath of civil war, there are basic foundations which need establishing to address these issues before someone like me can come and use an alien form of dance to encourage a creative response to hardship.

My dance sessions went down well everywhere I taught them, although at times I felt painfully aware that they were utterly out of place - for example, when set in the midst of a town lamenting a suicide. But to counter that I was also aware that the children and young people were experiencing something new, and as many teachers explained to me: it was giving them the message that the world hadn't forgotten about them and that somebody cared.

The way in which all of these experiences and new understandings have prompted me to question what I do with dance and what I hope to do has been invaluable, and that process hasn't ended yet. Certainly, leading a dance project in a Sri Lankan school, issue-based or not, would be gratefully received and without doubt lead to all the positive personal skills and realisations that dance can facilitate. But, unless one was to devote years to setting up an established Contemporary Dance school it would be a one-off, isolated experience. But is that such a bad thing?

Returning to the question of me helping with English speaking, myself and Annette Beuth had offered Komari School a weekend away for 15 students who would benefit the most from this experience, the funding for which was provided by a supporter of Annette's work in Arguam Bay. She has set up a retreat centre specifically for Sri Lankan people, to provide a place where she can continue to teach massage and Reiki with a view to individual and community reconciliation. The centre is on an isolated beach and the weekend we proposed fell on a Full Moon which is celebrated in Hindu culture. However, the Tsunami happened during Full Moon and this, combined with the sea, is now a feared combination by coastal communities so people have stopped their traditional beach-side celebrations. We were offering to take the group to the retreat so they could have a weekend of Contemporary Dance whilst at the same time try and alleviate some of the fear, and allow the children to be temporarily free of daily burdens.

Mr James thought this was a wonderful idea and knew exactly which students would benefit the most but he requested that the camp be an 'English Camp'. It was what was really needed. Again, I found myself rethinking an idea and again I resolved not to plan. This whole trip was teaching me that I couldn't rely on what worked or was applicable to the UK and if I really wanted to find a niche in which I could one day take dance to many different communities overseas, or use it as a means of helping young people's healing process in Sri Lanka, then I was going to have to be prepared to back down, think on my feet and soak up as much as I could at every opportunity.

We did take the children to the beach retreat for an English Camp and it was fantastic. We played games, sang songs, explored the beach, drew pictures, ate Sri Lankan food, drummed and danced as is the custom at Full Moon. They taught me some traditional dance and I performed for them. We slept under the stars on the thin mats that people use for beds very often. It was a weekend that none of us will forget and it allowed me to get a bit closer to real life in Sri Lanka. As for a dance camp? Yes, I think one day it could work very well but there are other things which need tending to first. I'm still in touch with all three schools and the Girls Home about returning very soon but at this stage I think it will be less issue-based or developmental work for myself, and more about using dance to give young people with tough lives some much needed time out and valued attention.

Right at the end of my trip I met a lady who works under the UN banner and she was

interested to hear about my original proposal to explore the potential of dance through Reiki and she said she was keen to help me in any way that she could. In the north of Sri Lanka, in Jaffna, the UN are working towards promoting reconciliation, peace and non-violence and she has offered me the opportunity to develop some workshops for girls and women centering around these issues. I plan to go in February this year and utilise the fundamentals of Reiki, i.e. positivity, love and light through touch, and some basic Contemporary partner work such as counterbalances and sharing of weight to promote trust within communities. This, combined with the potential to return to the schools and Girls Home is allowing me to keep exploring the hugely complex task of taking Contemporary Dance abroad.

Some of my biggest lessons are in realizing that, just because an arts project works in the UK, it doesn't mean it will directly translate into another cultural context. I've also learned that it is vital, though so easily overlooked, to ask the people I hope to work with overseas what it is they really need and could benefit from. Through my constant questioning I've asked myself *why* dance works and *how* it could possibly benefit people who have trouble with the basic needs in life, and I'm still coming up with new thoughts, answers and ways of delivering which is pushing me out of my own comfort zones of practice and thinking.

And finally, my Sri Lankan adventure allowed me to realize my strengths as an adaptable teacher. Upon returning to the UK I had one week before returning to work for Dance United again, with young offenders and prisoners. I felt secure in what I was doing in a fresh way because of the deconstruction process I'd been through in Sri Lanka. I trusted my ability to remain flexible at all times and even though challenging behaviour was not something I faced in Sri Lanka, seeing the hardship which lay behind the children's smiles reinforced to me that there is always a mask worn and that there are many ways to help what lies beneath. From here, my task is to continue to explore as many different ways to help as possible.

My huge and sincere thanks to LUTSF for their continued support in all my change of travel plans due to a fantastic work opportunity which fell exactly when I was originally meant to deliver my project in Sri Lanka.

Many thanks to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for enabling me to get to Sri Lanka and start exploring new avenues in dance.