

Report to Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF)

Robin Shillinglaw

Covering letter:

I spent eight months in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia between May 2003 and January 2004 in which time I worked with the Adugna Community Dance and Theatre Company. The experience was intended initially as a way for me to develop my skills as a performer, teacher and communicator. I feel that I did this but to an extent I did not expect.

I had planned to return to work on a project in London with the Chicken Shed Company earlier than this year but unfortunately this was cancelled. However, my time in Ethiopia inspired me greatly and began to help me to focus my plans for the future.

This project was self-funded apart from the financial help from the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund and by Gemini who helped me with accommodation for five of the eight months as well as a food allowance for the remaining three months. The support I received was so valuable, because I would not have been able to stay for as long without it and not have the same level of impact and experience. The work I carried out was only part of the amazing experience I had because through it I built up incredibly strong relationships with members of the Company. Through these relationships we learnt to trust each other in ways that I have only experienced with colleagues of many years, and I feel this was beneficial to them as well as for me.

I plan to return to work with Adugna in Ethiopia as well as to work on other projects internationally and I hope there may be a possibility of further support from your scholarship fund. Whilst undertaking this project I gathered large amounts of footage in the form of video and still imagery but because of the intensity of my current workload, I have not yet managed to edit it as support to this report. I hope to forward this to you once I have completed it. I also hope to refine this material for use in future projects as well as to support future funding applications and develop the work that I plan to carry out here in the UK, in Ethiopia and elsewhere.

Yours sincerely

Robin Shillinglaw

Dance in Ethiopia. A Report on an Eight Month Project working with The Adugna Community Dance and Theatre Company in Addis Ababa.

In September 2002 I was involved in a project in Ethiopia. As part of a team of six from the Chicken Shed Theatre Company, based in north London, we visited the Adugna Community Dance and Theatre Company, based in Addis Ababa. The eight-day project was hosted by CAFOD (Catholic Aid For Overseas Development) who were visiting The Ethiopian Gemini Trust. This is an NGO (Non Governmental Organisation) that CAFOD help to support. The role of Gemini is to help support families who have multiple births in and around Addis Ababa. About eight years ago a company called Dance United, together with the assistance of Gemini ran a project with a massive group of children. Dance United are an organisation who use dance as a tool to empower those who are marginalised or subjected by conflict or oppression and who can see no way forward. They work on projects all over the world. Their collaboration with Gemini was incredibly successful and because of this a selection of the children from the project was made and a dance and drama for performance and teaching, training programme was introduced for this focussed group of individuals. Adugna was born. The company graduated three years ago and have been working as a professional company ever since.

The initial collaboration with Chicken Shed and Adugna had a profound effect on us all, not just because of the desperate poverty in which we saw people live, but because of the passion, enthusiasm and talent that they had for their work. Once back in the U.K. I made a promise to myself to return to Ethiopia to work with this company again in an independent capacity. I hoped to develop my skills as a teacher and performer as well as test my communication skills, which I value the use of so much. I also set out to learn as much as I could from living in such an extremely different environment and try to offer my skills to help develop the company in any ways I could.

I stayed in Ethiopia for eight months and had one of the most interesting and inspiring learning experiences of my life. I feel I achieved further than my initial goals and I realise that the effects this time had on me as well as the individuals that make up Adugna will never be forgotten. Lots of people helped to make this project possible for me, such as the members involved in Dance United, Gemini, Adugna and the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. When I returned to work as a volunteer in Ethiopia I was unsure as to what I would actually do and for how long.

From the beginning, when I arrived in Addis Ababa and was welcomed back by the company, I involved myself as much as possible. I attended classes, worked with individuals, supported classes and taught when invited. I was obviously sensitive to certain situations and took guidance from the necessary people but grew aware that my presence and enthusiasm for the company seemed to inject a new energy to them. I was invited by Mags Byrne, one of Adugna's founders, to assist in modelling certain ways of working and to coach in areas of work, drawing upon my training and experience with the Chicken Shed Theatre Company. I have worked for many years with Chicken Shed and through my training I have been involved in developing their inclusive work in Performance and Theatre in Education. Whilst some members of the Adugna looked up to me, in some areas they have had much more of an extensive training in dance than I have. However, because of my experience and confidence, I found myself instinctively collaborating with Adugna. I felt very accepted by Adugna as well as all the surrounding people with whom we worked, inside and outside their compound. Because of our different training we were able to teach and learn from each other and create together.

Whilst working in Ethiopia one of the areas I was most involved with was the Company's inclusive Programme. Adugna work very closely with a group of eleven individuals who have a range of different physical disabilities. Together this group forms the "Adugna Potentials". This project was, and still is, funded by the Finnish Embassy and as well as focussing on the creative and artistic development of this group. I was also heavily involved in delivering, modelling and encouraging the teaching of movement, dance and performance arts. The teaching was to a wide range of mixed ability students at a number of different venues. Although all of Adugna have teaching experience, most members of the "Adugna Potentials" were teaching for the first time and so together with members of Adugna I found myself helping to train people to teach. This is a skill, which is very familiar to me as a result of my work with Chicken Shed. With some individuals this was a lot easier than others. Some simply needed a little encouragement or advice, whereas others needed their confidence boosting which we achieved through a series of workshops and activities as well as giving feedback from

sessions. I worked with individuals on the delivery of warm-ups and games, as well as how to plan sessions and allocate time to activities.

During this element of the work I attended a number of different sites for these classes. One was at a school for children with emotional and mental difficulties and disabilities called CBSiDo. There is a negative level of understanding and tolerance to people of different levels of ability in Ethiopia. Because of that, this class in particular was at times very difficult. The class demanded a lot of energy as most of the students had incredibly low attention spans. As a result of my experience and training in the U.K. I was able to advise on how to approach teaching such children, including using music to increase interest and harness attention. Another class I assisted in running was for a group of children from a centre called Alert. At this establishment we worked with children with a huge range of differing physical disabilities. I found these classes incredible, due to the level of the children's enthusiasm for the work. Whereas at CBSiDo we used music, stories and games as stimuli for the sessions, at Alert we were able to teach and develop skills such as contact improvisation and the devising of sequences and routines with movement and rhythm. For both of these projects I helped develop lesson plans as well as supported many class sessions. The levels of energy that were demanded for both of these classes were considerable since they needed to be delivered in very different ways. I really enjoyed working with these groups as it allowed me to experiment and develop as well as test my teaching skills. I found pulling back and allowing some of the less experienced members of the delivery and support team to learn to teach in this environment quite difficult. This happened especially when I felt I could assist where they were struggling or making mistakes that I recognised. My primary suggestion and hope for both of these sites would be to involve "mainstream" children in the classes, from a local school and the community. This would make the classes "inclusive" and help to develop the students' ability to learn in a balanced environment that reflects society; the way in which Adugna and the "Adugna Potentials" work together.

Working at Cheshire Home was one of my favourite and most rewarding elements of work. I attended the classes twice a week with members of Adugna and the "Adugna Potentials". What always stunned me with this class was the level of response from the students and their development in ability and confidence as well as their unrestrained approach to whatever we asked them to do. Seeing the "Adugna Potentials" teaching abilities develop throughout this project was also amazing. We committed ourselves to creating lesson plans together although there was a continuous language barrier. This was not just from English to Amharic (the language spoken by Adugna and most people in and around Addis Ababa) but also into other languages such as Tigrinya and Oromifaa (which many students at Cheshire Home use as they come from regions all over Ethiopia). To help break down these barriers we demonstrated ideas as a team to show the students what we meant, which also modelled the benefits of working together in a group. The variety of material covered at Cheshire Home was immense. It included rhythm, music, song, mime, storytelling, contact improvisation, tableaux building, games and warm-ups. At the beginning of this project I suggested including some students from a local school to create an inclusive group. I think this improved the whole process as it worked very well and not only helped the students to learn in a balanced environment, but helped the integrated teaching team to work with such a group. We developed a couple of pieces with the students. The first was never performed because the student turnover was so high. The second was presented at Cheshire Home for visiting Rotarians during October 2003. Their performance was successful, the audience was impressed and we were all very proud.

Another role I played was to work specifically with the Adugna Potentials, developing the work in their own classes. These were held twice a week. The group is well-bonded and familiar with working and performing together and so my main focus was to encourage them to think and create for themselves (not just relying on the members of Adugna to lead the sessions). I suggested a new style of warming up; rather than being led from the front, as it tended to be before. I encouraged everyone to lead a short section whilst the whole group faced each other in a circle. This was very successful and clearly helped to develop individuals' confidence within the group, especially in relation to their delivery during teaching.

I found working with them very inspiring and ran a series of workshops and activities' creating some stunning results. I based these workshops around the theme of a folk tale and focused on different elements and characters from this as the inspiration. As a spin-off from these workshops and as a further development of some of the experimental movement we started, I initiated several extra workshop sessions. In these I worked and experimented with several members of the company to further develop some ideas where we "played" with "harnessing" (dancing tied together). This unusual way of moving pushed me to create in a way that I had not before. The results from these sessions were remarkable, although we never developed them into a presentable form. We also built a wooden "web", (climbing/dancing frame), which we used as a stimulus for movement workshops for the Adugna Potential classes. Again the group took a simple starting point introduced by me, and developed movement in innovative ways on and around the structure. For this they used the different physical abilities of the members in the group and their endless imagination to present their ideas for movement. This element of my work in Ethiopia was an endless joy. I also took part in many classes, which I did not run or co-deliver but simply participated and these were just as rewarding and allowed me to work with and learn about different individuals and the way they interacted.

As well as this I was involved in some performances with Adugna. The first was at Cheshire Home where the Adugna Potentials performed a piece where I stood in for a member of the company who was injured. Performing with the company was a great privilege and a great insight into their work on a level that I could not have experienced in any other way. I also performed with the company at the Hilton in Addis Ababa in a piece at a conference about HIV, which was organised and run by an Ethiopian artist called Meskerem Assegued. The final time I performed was at C.R.D.A. (Christian Relief Development in Africa) where I was involved in the drama piece as a "ferengi" (foreigner) on the street. All of these experiences were an amazing chance for me to bond with the company as well as have an impact in yet another way.

I was also involved with the Gemini youth and community classes. These dance classes were primarily contemporary based and lead by Gebre, a member of Adugna, whom I supported. He had choreographed a piece for the 20th anniversary of Gemini and I helped him in his delivery of this in rehearsals and performances. I also worked with other members of Adugna teaching Contemporary and African classes as well as visiting an African dance teacher called Abiola in a place called Shashemane (a four to six hour drive south of Addis Ababa) to learn new sequences as part of the "African Dance Team". I was also involved in the African Dance Team time preparation and the buying of music for African Dance classes. I observed and joined several drama and traditional dance classes as well.

The company runs sessions within the community. This is called Kebele work (meaning local borough work) and I attended a few Kebele classes as well as supported a couple of Kebele performances. This side of the work was fascinating to experience although my presence in these situations never failed to create a distraction. However, within the compound where Adugna are based and where I mainly worked I became a familiar face. It was here (as well as the work already mentioned) that I attended countless Adugna dance classes, participating and on occasion leading. These classes were a variety of different styles of movement and invariably were contact improvisation, contemporary or ballet based.

Another main and favourite focus of mine throughout the eight months was to work with members of the company to teach the kindergarten. These weekly sessions consisted of movement-based warm-ups and games as well as story telling based activities, drama, dance, music/song workshops and traditional dance lessons. We led the Kindergarten graduation performance that was successful and a lot of fun. Some members of the company with whom I worked very closely developed their ability to speak English more fluently over the time I was there. This development of confidence in the speaking of English was evident and of great benefit as some members of Adugna translated for me in all the kindergarten classes as well as in their performance.

During the visit of Mags Byrne she was eager for me to encourage and develop the freedom of creative thinking of Gebre, one of the dance teachers, in terms of acting out stories. This is a way of working that I enjoy and find natural to do. I also worked with other members of the company in this way and introduced them to White Mime (mime with sound), which we all enjoyed and was very successful. We also introduced this into our work at Cheshire Home.

For Gemini's 20th anniversary, to which I have already referred, I worked on the production side of things. I assisted different people organising the event as well as acting as a stage-manager for the technical and dress rehearsals and the performances. I was accepted as an honorary member of the company whilst working with them, which meant I attended most of Adugna's company meetings. It was interesting to see how the company was run. I also helped to sort, list and number all of Adugna's music and videos as well as copying a number of my own CD's for the company to enhance the music available for their work.

In addition to all of my dancing and teaching with Adugna, I also worked closely with the company's administrator, assisting and supporting her whenever possible, including covering for her twice while she was out of the country. The first time was for 2-3 weeks in June/July and again for 4-5 weeks in October/November. On both occasions I kept an eye on the company, working with them and reporting any issues or problems to relevant people. During this time, five members of the company travelled to France and to Madagascar for work and to take part in a dance competition. For the week leading up to their departure I prepared the group by arranging their visas, tickets, money, etc. as well as just helping to reassure them and make sure that they were all ready to travel.

During the eight months that I spent working with this remarkable company, one of the most interesting observations for me was working with such a large cross section and variety of children and young people of different ages, abilities and backgrounds. Observing the way in which Adugna handled teaching such a vast selection of children allowed me to reconsider my own approaches to teaching. It was also very interesting for me to see and learn the different ways in which people sensitively approach situations compared with those I had previously encountered. Another great challenge and something that I enjoyed greatly was the constant language barrier. It continually tested my communication skills and was one of my main objectives. I had the most wondrous experience in Ethiopia and realise that I need to learn and develop my skills further although I feel that my time spent there allowed and helped me to grow as a teacher and performer.

I am very grateful to all those who made it possible for me to have this incredible experience, whom I have already mentioned and I just hope that I had as much of an impact on the people I worked with as they did on me. I found the dynamics of Adugna and the way they work fascinating and learnt a great deal from working with all of them. I look forward to further collaborations with Adugna; an inspiring group of individuals that go together to make up this company and I plan to use my experiences with them to develop my work here in the U.K. and on future international projects.