

From: Rosa Shreeves

Report for the LUTSF Committee about my dance project in Guatemala 25 March - 14 April, 2011

First of all, many thanks to the LUTSF Committee for the Scholarship. This enabled me to continue my dance project in Guatemala and was an important recognition of the value of my work there with indigenous people. I continue to feel excited and enriched by the whole process entitled ***DANCING IN THE LANDSCAPE 2***.

"I have not come to resolve anything. I have come here to sing and for you to sing with me".
Pablo Neruda, from Latin Spirit, published by Thames and Hudson

Background

Each year, since 2006, I have visited Guatemala for a month at a time, researching dance ideas in the context of the culture and giving something back in terms of performances and workshops to the community. I have worked particularly with the Nahual Foundation, a voluntary indigenous organization based in Antigua which aims to empower local people in a variety of ways. This project grows from our continuing collaboration and belief in the value of the creative arts in the process of change.

My aims this year are

1. To deepen my knowledge of Mayan culture through meeting with Alfonso Manzanares, a spiritual leader in the town of Santa Maria de Jesus, and experiencing his sacred rituals. Hopefully, this will expand the significance of the elements and the natural landscape in my own dance practice.
2. To develop a dance performance project entitled WATER, begun in the UK and to be developed in Guatemala for children and community groups, using movement, music, props, words and imagery.
3. To continue contributing to current dance ideas by writing about the experiences and discoveries of Dancing in the Landscape.

Dates, Places and People

On arrival in Antigua I spend a few days acclimatizing myself to the climate, altitude, people and vivid surroundings and then begin to re-establish the project connections. Communication difficulties are part of life in Guatemala. Often peoples' telephone numbers have changed or they are unexpectedly away, e.g. a school is off to see a festival on the day I understood we are to meet. Oh well!
I practise my dance.

28th – 30th March

I have vibrant, initial planning meetings with Ignacio Ochoa, Director of Nahual Foundation and Claudia Pacheco, Head teacher of El Colegio School. I begin an email contact with Raxhem Guilder Nicolas Gomez Lancerio, who lives in Guatemala City and is an expert on Mayan knowledge from the Sacapulteka community.

1st April

A performance of the new choreography WATER at El Colegio School, Antigua.

4th – 5th April

Two dance workshops there and the creation of a choreography with a class of 9-10 year olds, assisted by their teacher and dance enthusiast, Jaqueline Mencos.

6th April

The Mayan Ritual of Alfonso Manzanares, a Mayan spiritual leader and sculptor, from the town of Santa Maria de Jesus, followed by a lengthy, informative interview with him, including dancing together.

7th -11th April

A retreat to a quiet place on Lago Atitlan, four hours journey away, here to reflect on my new perceptions of Water as a connective life element in the outer and inner landscape. Here, too, I slowly translate into English information I have been given in Spanish about the Mayan spiritual life.



13th April

I revisit El Colegio to watch and encourage the children's performance of their Water Dance which they have practised with Jaqueline. She gives me their writing and poems stemming from the dance and we discuss how the choreography developed. I give her a few notes to reinforce the ideas.





14th April

An interview with Karla Cofino, a Mayan woman trained in the wisdom, rituals and oral tradition of Mayan beliefs by Wakatel Utiw from the town of Quetzaltenango. A final meeting with Ignacio and Claudia. He gives me a wonderful present of the book by Wakatel Utiw about the oral tradition of the Maya, entitled, 'El Tesoro de la Cultura Oral de Maya'. Through this I gradually begin to learn more about the inter-relationship of the elements, the gods and stories from the Mayan history.

Throughout this report I use material from my journal which ranges over the practical, informative, philosophical and poetic aspects of my experience. I now expand on some of the events which are currently foreground for me. All were significant.

Reflections on the Ritual of Alfonso Manzanares

An audience gathers in la Pena, a bar, meeting place and art gallery with a wide floor space open to the sky above, there to witness an ancient ritual as both spectators and participants in the event.

Later Alfonso explains to me how the ceremony as enacted in different villages, is always basically the same, but the details and intentions are different. Significant is the particular day in the Mayan calendar on which the ritual is enacted. Today's is to say, 'Thank You', to the Universe.



The intention is to create balance in the world and in the whole person, the mind and the emotions and through prayer, dance, music and tangible symbols to re-energise our universe. The Mayan culture emphasizes balance, cleansing and integration of the outer and inner worlds. The practice of Mayan culture is not a religion or Shamanism but a recognition of how universal wisdom, spirituality and love integrate and merge. This felt experience is often difficult to put into words; the visual images, words, music and scents merge with the indefinable energy of the event.



The placing of little clay bowls, the censor, a bowl of thin, different coloured candles, a pile of grasses and herbs, the tying on of long headscarves by his three male companions, the smoking of cigars and the occasional drinking of brandy; these are not a preparation but all a part of the unfolding ritual.

The bonfire of candles and charcoal is alight; flame as energy and purification. Each candle stands for a particular quality: Red - the sun, life's beginning; Orange - wind and water. Tobacco represents the pre-Hispanic god, Machimon whose effigy is often present in ceremonies as the guide and support to the countless people who pray to him. The drinking of alcohol symbolizes a reunion with the spirits, a sharing of happiness.

Alfonso, moving rhythmically across the space, prays to the fire, to the sky and to Machimon, sometimes reading from the ancient and sacred book of Mayan teachings called Choltun. Three musicians play drums and flutes. Alfonso takes swatches of herbs and passes them over the flames to purify them and then brushes them over chosen individuals and presses his hands on their heads. Many people take candles and throw them onto the fire. Alfonso dances, soft footfall, springing step, arms wide behind him, a bird hopping and flying. He blows the conch horn, turning to acknowledge the four directions, then reaches up to the sky and down to the earth, all universal life manifested through his body.

There is no moment of climax or choreographed ending. Now the ritual is over. The audience talks to the participants. 'What did you feel?' Alfonso asks me. We talk at length about the significance of the ritual; how a person's date of birth and characteristics are inexorably linked to the Mayan calendar, the seasons and the many aspects of the natural world. Moving from my experience to understanding requires a shift of emphasis, a big internal effort. Enough! We dance the bird together. I tell him of the ola (wave) in my WATER dance. 'The ola in you too', he says.

The dance project with El Colegio School, Antigua

In my initial meeting with Claudia, the Head Teacher, and based on past experience of how essential is every small detail, we make a plan, organize the dates and timing, the audience size, warm-up time

and clearing of the dance space, which also doubles as a garage. There is a stone floor and huge enthusiasm. Everything is reiterated to make sure that we understand each other's Spanish. The performance is to be seen by about seventy children.

As a sacred, life giving element, a source of visual images, moods and also a powerful element of destruction, water is the starting point for my creative exploration. It is also relevant to Guatemala which suffers from ferocious flooding and lack of drinking water in many rural areas. Water is a powerful symbol in Mayan beliefs where it is linked to fluidity and blood, to particular gods and to stories of the Creation.

WATER dance uses silver as a magical colour for costume and props. The accompaniment is a collage of music, words, silence and the sound of clay flute, made in the shape of a tortoise. The dance alludes to the four directions and to the contact with earth and sky, to the movement, moods and mysteries of water and ends with a chant from the audience for clean water, *no contaminada*.

In the subsequent three workshops for a group of 9 - 10 year-olds, we use ideas from the performance and develop a choreography with a mixture of imposed sections and structured improvisation, focussing on detail. They are so enthusiastic and their final performance to me is touching in its effort, absorption and increasing ability to focus and connect to their dancing energy. I ask if they are tired. 'No', they say so on we go, occasionally watched by children from the adjoining playground. One boy insists on staying, so he does. We are very full from the experience. I am enriched by them. I am sad to leave.

Significant Memories of the project include sudden moments of hyperawareness, shifts of perception, or a recognition of a familiar pathway from the past, now charged with fresh meaning:

1. The day following the Ritual, I responded to the desire for quiet, for the wide water spaces of Lago Atitlan, three hours journey away. There, sliding into the water, floating in the shade of the trees, I have a timeless awareness of there being no separation between the water of the Lake and that within myself. This is a different experience from the familiar one of seeing and recognizing a symbol in the natural world and consciously embodying it in the inner world.
2. In my serendipitous meeting with Karla Cofino, I notice a small shift of inner movement, like a tiny breeze, into another layer of awareness. Karla is adamant that learning about the culture must begin by more self exploration. No information about the sacred secrets of the Maya can be given before this process. On this occasion she asks me provocative questions and gives her personal reflections. An opposing view among Mayan experts is that sharing these sacred beliefs freely is an important contribution to the world of today.
3. A magic moment in the children's Water dance as they slowly and gently touch their faces, symbolically washing themselves with the sacred water, in a fusion of movement and meaning.
4. Moments of spontaneous performance, once in a bar and another time in the square at midday where a band is playing and I wait and wait 'til I have to dance and children come near me and clap. Then I dance with all of them.

Outcomes

- A successful project for el Colegio school. This was my second and more extended visit there. I was able to develop the dance on different levels and the Head Teacher now feels confident to continue the work in her school and to pass on the ideas to others. I also reinforced a previous link to a school in England by posting on some work by El Colegio children. An experienced photographer would be useful.

- Making new contacts and connections in the indigenous community and with the people and organizations who support them. I have been invited to perform, to give workshops to women and to contribute to a preschool project.
- A growth in understanding of the Mayan culture and its interconnection to my work, and practical suggestions for further study.
- Perhaps more important than the practical outcomes are the thoughts arising from my experiences, for example:
 - how important in my life and work is the element of chance and the unexpected which often leads to rich connections;
 - the re-vitalizing of my dance philosophy, which often finds a parallel belief or practice in the Mayan culture, an indirect influence on my choreography.

I reflect on how the aspect of relationship in movement is a cornerstone of dance. In my perception too, the inter-relationship of my surroundings; the visual patterns of colour and architecture, are also dances - Still or Moving images - The Choreography in Stone of the church facade.



The many layers of meaning In Mayan Culture are akin to those in poetry. Like poetry they cannot be understood by analysis alone but are more likely absorbed slowly as in a process of osmosis.

And then as I write this report I come across an extraordinarily apposite quote from a poem by Tennyson:

'Poets whose thoughts enrich the blood of the world

From, The Princess, A Medley, by Tennyson.

It is fascinating how similar ideas are sometimes expressed in different ways at different times and in different cultures world wide.



Future Possibilities

Overall I hope to continue my intercultural work in this country and Guatemala. In the UK to expand the ideas of WATER dance for performance to and with children and adults, to run Intercultural workshops for adults or a talk/recital for community groups or students.

My study of the Mayan culture, and its interconnections in society, is ongoing. This report may be the basis of an article for magazines which have previously published my writing, e.g. 'Dancing in the Landscape', in *Animated Magazine*, January 2011.

Above all in the future to continue following my curiosity and passion for movement detail and my belief in the value of travel, both literal and metaphoric; shifting my ground, growing new shoots and responding to what emerges.

Heartfelt thanks again to LUTSF and to all those who have supported me in many different ways, with information, warmth, enthusiasm and laughter.

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