

Dear LUTSF,

Please find enclosed my project report.

My project facilitated travel to Bali, Indonesia in August 2009 to December of the same year.

My projects highlights include:

- Daily practice with expert and professional teachers over a three month period.
- Opportunities to get involved in other wonderful arts based projects happening in Bali.
- Making life-long friends.
- Continued professional development and networking.

Included in the report are a number of headings relating to the project, which I hope the reader may find useful to navigate through my journey.

My greatest piece of advice to any awardee travelling to Asia for a prolonged length of time, is to be prepared for some very challenging cultural differences, which 'may' negatively impact your experience of training. Principally and most obviously, Balinese people are reputedly very 'laid back' and teachers do not consider it their role to push or motivate students, or give lots of positive feedback, as this is regarded as very indulgent and serves only egotistical tendencies.

My advice would be to stay focused and motivated, even when you ache and recognise that there's a lack of progress, and feel that it will take a life time to learn, and the fact is - it will!

Anyway, it was a wonderful trip and I thank the board of trustees for enabling me to have this incredible experience.

Yours Sincerely,

Tiffany Strawson.

Lisa Ullmann Report
Tiffany Strawson

Dancing in Bali August – November 2009

Purpose of Visit

The purpose of my visit was to develop and expand on the dance training techniques that I had encountered on numerous trips to Bali, Indonesia. Previously my learning had been entirely based around learning the male styles of mask work (known as *Topeng*), which is my area of focus and study. This trip enabled me to start learning the basic female style, which because I am a woman, suited me!

The reason why I had not previously learned the female style is because women do not traditionally dance *topeng*. There are female characters within the genre, but men dance them.

What is Topeng?

When we think of masks and Bali, possibly the first image that comes to mind are the touristic picture post-cards of *Rangda* and her opponent the *Barong*, both larger than life, mythical and sacred characters with bulging eyes, fierce teeth and enormous hair...

Topeng masks in contrast, are the smaller masks that fit the face, not dissimilar in size to ordinary commedia dell' arte masks, and although they too sometimes do have animalistic qualities, they are essentially human characters that play out specific roles within society. A *topeng* performance always features specific characters, including kings and clowns, who enact tales from the *Babad*, the Balinese spiritual history and chronology.

"*Mesolah satmaka ngayah ring Sanghyang Widhu Wasa*"
Dancing is like praying to God

In Bali, cultural behaviour relates to religious and faith-based concerns. Performances, especially in reference to *Topeng*, have dual spiritual and social objectives. The word for a dancer/actor in Balinese is *pragina*, 'one who beautifies' and there is a very fine line between what we would define as 'dance and theatre'; in Bali they are one in the same fusing story telling, dialogue and movement.

Topeng performances are held in the temple as part of a ceremony at a particular moment on the Balinese calendar, to mark a significant time of transition or renewal and in this sense they represent 'potential spaces' (Emigh 1996, 107). Amidst the chaos of several performances happening at once, there is an order of events and in order to serve religious purposes these performances must happen in a specific sequence to make the ceremonies and rituals complete in accordance with other non-performative activities happening in the temple: principally the praying rituals of the priest.

The Balinese view the role of the performer as being 'in service' to the community and the characters of *Topeng* serve literally as the traditional channel by which Hindu and ancestral philosophy and mythical acts are communicated.

This further contributes to the spiritual education of the village audiences. Disregarding the element of social control, this strong re-identification consolidates a sense of belief, pride and continuance of cultural modes of being, or rather, what it truly is to be Balinese, a precious concept to all Balinese people. Thus, by inverting 'norms' (*adat* – customary behaviour) and acting out prohibited behaviour like greed, ambition, self interest or some other taboo, the clowns reinforce and affirm acceptable social behaviour, while the kings and queens represent aspirational qualities.

Why am I so interested in Topeng?

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I have studied many different forms of mask work here in Britain and explored various movement-based practices that complement this style of physicalised action. Nowadays the closest living mask tradition we can lay claim to is borrowed from Italy; the *commedia dell'arte*.

Apart from being amazing dances, full of theatrical transformation, technical skill, wickedly funny improvisation and interesting enactments of stories, the reason I like *Topeng* performances is because they still happen in a ceremonial context, and as a witness to such an event, I am reminded that Balinese people still truly believe in their customs and that this is a living part of history. Unlike British practices the Balinese still find a resonance and vitality in this tradition which although is 600 years old is still relevant (with a little modernisation here and there) even though it's based on a patriarchal framework.

Unlike other more strictly choreographed dances in Bali, where the dancers follow a musical composition and rehearse over and over again in the same way, a *topeng* performance is different because the performer instigates and almost controls the music. There are certain physical indicators which signal to the gamelan orchestra that a specific sequence of music needs to follow. This is fascinating to watch and as a dancer to perform. In both cases there is an incredible symbiotic chemistry as the dancer and musicians relate to each other whilst both are improvising within a language of gestures.

We may all be aware that in Bali, like many South East Asian countries, whose art and culture is used to generate tourism, groups actually recreate entirely new performances for tourist audiences, who watch a variety show of different genres in bit sized pieces as they drink beer in their hotels. Casting judgement aside, there's nothing necessarily wrong in that, and as my observations show, this is a win-win situation as in Bali it generates income for vast amounts of local people, it keeps the dance alive albeit for very different reasons and it gives holiday makers a menu of choice, without having to be experts or withstand the duration of real length ceremonial performances that frequently last four or five hours. However *topeng* performances, with the exception of the old man character *topeng tua* who is cute and funny, are not so widely used in this context. This keeps a very sacred and 'real' element to the experience of watching and performing a masked drama from start to finish in a ceremony, and I had the pleasure of doing both.

Who I studied with:

I studied with a range of teachers, mainly in or near Ubud; Bali's cultural capital; principally for male mask work Ida Bagus Alit from Loddunduh village, and Ida Bagus Wirabumi or simply 'Gustu' from Singakerta, and for the female dance style I studied with Dewa Nyoman Irena of Pengostanan Village, Ni Made Arini from Denpasar and Professor Wayan Dibia from Singapadu.

All of these teachers have toured extensively, representing their country the world over and yet what is amazing about them all is their humility, flexibility, sense of humour combined with absolute professionalism and dedication to teaching younger generations for the continuance of their tradition.

All of these teachers are well known in the villages where they live. You can just ask and someone will tell you where to go. Unlike formal training in the West, you can easily just approach them and ask to be their student. They charge between 50,000 – 100,000 Indonesian rupiah per hour (that's about £4- 8). It's best to visit them in advance of when you want to start training, so they can identify an auspicious date on the calendar for you as learning dance is considered sacred and there are special days to start the process which are believed to be lucky dates. When you start, I recommend that you're never late, as this is considered very inappropriate. Paradoxically, your teacher may keep you waiting, but this is their privilege.

What I studied

I studied the male style of *topeng* and the basic female style of an amalgamated hybrid of many Balinese dance forms, as there is a set of basic gestures.

I then worked specifically with Pak Wayan Dibia, who is a professor at the performing arts university ISI (*Institut Seni Indonesia*). He specialises in the creation of contemporary dances based on traditional values, concerns and physical vocabularies. It was essential to work with him as he could explain to me, in his excellent English, that a degree of fiction was necessary in rediscovering or re-inventing a female dance for a *topeng* performance, which I would not have had the confidence or ability to do solo.

Teaching Methods:

It is important to recognise the huge element of training and tradition involved in being and becoming a performer. This takes many years of observation, absorbing particular movements and methods of harnessing energy into a physical vocabulary.

The Balinese teach by imitation of a master teacher or *guru*. The Indonesian word 'guru' literally means 'teacher'. It doesn't mean the student has to worship the teacher, or that s/he can't question him or her but it does mean that usually if the teacher says 'jump' the student should respond appropriately with 'yes - how high?'. This seems very old fashioned, as we live in a culture that celebrates youth and the call of the younger generation leads the way, ultimately we are losing the tradition of following, learning from and respecting our elders. For example Ibu Arini is 76 years old and yet still commands a high degree of respect within her teaching and professional community, where she is still extremely active.

Just as Eskimos have many more words than we do to describe the experience of snow, which we cannot relate to because it sits outside our frame of reference, so the Balinese have words to describe the experience of not only the body in motion, but also the journey of the spirit and the mind as the three move in harmony within the dance. This was a huge conceptual leap from me and quite difficult to understand, however willing.

What my experience lead to/ outcomes:

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I performed in various temple ceremonies, but somehow this was always within the realm of possibilities. Also in Bali I had the opportunity to get involved in a number of side-line projects that I could never have imagined possible.



In a serendipitous way, such things are seemingly more possible in Asia.

I played the role of *Puck* Theatre Firefly's acclaimed production of '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*'. This gave me the opportunity to work alongside famous dancers and performance artists, well known on the international circuit for representing their country at cultural arts events. Most notably, I was performing with I Ketut Rina, a Balinese dancer of *Kecak*, Bali's fire dance inspired by Walter Spies, Rucina Ballinger, an inspirational dancer and expert of Balinese dance and finally master *Silat* (Indonesian Martial Art) expert Jane Chen.

The learning curve of this project was huge and the experience was most rewarding, as we all had a very different skills base and toolkit to start the work.

Initially I was very nervous about the collaboration due to the fame and prestige of my peers and the fact that I wasn't originally cast as Puck; it was a role I was offered incidentally, as originally the performer to play *Puck* was a hip hop artist from LA, but unfortunately for him, he had a bad motorbike accident whilst acquainting himself with Balinese roads!

I also had the opportunity, through meeting Pak Wayan Dibia, to edit his latest book, which was on the concept of *Taksu* (a special, spiritually inspired form of Balinese stage presence or charisma). This was a subject I had written my MA thesis on, but wow, what a great opportunity for me to apply my knowledge and collaborate with such a master.

To conclude it was a truly amazing, once in a lifetime opportunity and I am most grateful to have had the chance to follow this dream.