

WILL DICKIE TRIP REPORT LISA ULLMAN TRAVELLING SCHOLARSHIP FUND

Travelling from 1st to 26th April 2019 to the Western Australia Academy of Performance Arts (WAAPA) in Perth, and the Beyond the Stomp Symposium in Wagga Wagga (Charles Strut University).

INTRODUCTION

In brief, this trip was a deeply enriching experience. The time spent with teachers, the opportunities to facilitate various groups, and the chance to present my own practices have all broadened the vision of my work. I return with new ideas, understandings, questions, connections and possibilities. I have organised my report into two main sections in which I will speak about both parts of the trip together.

FACILITATING MY PRACTICE

At WAAPA I taught 3 different performing arts year groups, a group of dance and acting graduates, the Aboriginal Theatre group, and a first year dance class. At the symposium I shared experiences with other practitioners who use the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (NSP) across ages and experiences. Over that time I collected the following questions for my work as a facilitator using physical training to create performance:

- How to gauge and adapt a class appropriate to the group, on the fly?
- How to graduate a session exercise by exercise so the group has an engaging principal to work with at every step?
- How to sense a lack of engagement and understand it, and be able change course so that the group can get on board?
- How to detect where a group needs to advance? On the surface a group may feel very capable, and yet there will be areas where they don't follow the depths that the practitioner has been to.

Whilst I have not answered these questions specifically, they highlight the areas in which I felt growth was needed. What follows is a record of experiences, exchanges and developments gathered from this trip that respond to those needs.

LANGUAGE, FRAMING AND ANALOGIES

- Much of my work in the studio is to teach exercises from my training, then extrapolate from those into improvisation, devising or choreography. The extrapolation process can be tricky for facilitators and students, and was discussed on both parts of my trip. Frances Barbe at WAAPA explained she gives the labels 'codified' and 'uncodified' as clear markers for herself and students when shifting out of work with a set form or tradition.
- At the symposium Kathryn Lee emphasised the need for clear framing before the work session or a particular exercise so that participants know what is expected from them. In NSP, where commitment and focus are so important in each exercise, she described how she will explain her own love for the training, that it makes performers 'fearless' on stage. She explained how she uses sporting analogies for her role as facilitator to keep

participants inside an exercise. Just like a sports coach, she explains she will offer side coaching as the participants are working, but there is no need to look at the coach as they are speaking, just keep playing! IE stay inside the exercise.

NEW APPLICATION WORK FROM KALARIPAYATTU PRACTICE

- In my own practice, I have used *butoh* and NSP as a bridge to lead from my Kalari training into uncodified practice. At WAAPA, which asked specifically for me to share my Kalari work, I steadily developed 3 distinct application techniques that lead directly to improvisation. One builds out from a deep state of listening and awareness fostered during the training. Another works with the notion of specific points of focus in the playing space, and the third builds from working at close quarters with a partner. In each technique the leap from form to freer movement work requires a different level of understanding. I feel I now have an adaptable set of exercises which I can draw from for different groups and contexts.

ENGAGEMENT AND AFFIRMATION

- Of all the groups I worked with, the Aboriginal Theatre class was the group I found most challenging to gauge from our first session. I was uncertain which aspects of my practices would best suit their creative experience. Fortunately for me I was able to attend the year group's first performance platform at the school, a public staging of *Stolen* by Jane Harrison. I taught the class the following morning. From seeing them work and understanding their circumstances, my presence as facilitator was notably calmer, insightful and appropriate. I questioned how much successful facilitation comes from skills you bring to the studio, and how much from meeting the participants where they are?
- Meeting students 'where they are' was a phrase offered by Glen Taylor, a high school teacher and highly experienced practitioner of the NSP. He was one of several members of the symposium who uses performer training with younger age groups. The symposium was a rare chance for many of us to articulate the challenges we face in bringing psychophysically challenging exercises into the classroom / workshop space, and to offer techniques we have developed. I felt a great sense of affirmation that I am not alone in this enquiry, that there are individuals around the world who can support one another in mining the potential of this training for both professional and non-professional participants.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

- Throughout the symposium, and specifically in her master class, director and choreographer Jacqui Carroll emphasised the moral responsibility of the teacher. She explained as the teacher she needed to foster a greater investment in the training. As she demonstrates she looks to fully integrate herself into the work, warning against giving herself away for teachings' sake. In seeing Jacqui work the space, I witnessed how she is training herself as she teaches, using her students for her own development. She is with her performers and delights in it. Frances Barbe spoke of the director/choreographer's responsibility to put something into their performers' bodies. How many facilitators use only what the performers have? What makes directors like Frances and Jacqui so exciting as leaders in the studio is the moral integrity they feel to give to their performers.

DEEPENING MY INTERROGATION

As well facilitating, I was invited to present my works and the trajectory of my career to

both the WAAPA students and the symposium. I gave talks, showed videos and lead exercises that gave a sense of my creative processes. What follows is another record of experiences, exchanges and developments.

SITUATING MYSELF

Reconnecting with past teachers has given a clearer sense of my own path of practice. I have been able to (re)appreciate the value of the teachings and experiences Frances, John and Jacqui gave me in my early career. By sharing my solo practice with them I have defined some of the differences in how we work and taken some ownership of my approaches. Their feedback, along with the reflections of the students and the symposium members, has affirmed this growth and encouraged me to continue in my own direction. The way I have applied the training to immersive work, autobiography and choreography is distinct and I travel home with renewed enthusiasm for further development.

MAKING METHODS

At the symposium John and Jacqui spoke in depth on how they have developed the NSP out of their study of Tadashi Suzuki's Method of Actor Training (SMAT). They pointed out how they added improvisatory sections to many of the exercises. How they worked instinctively with music to create new exercises to distinguish their own aesthetic, and how they encourage the habitation of dialectics / paradoxes in each exercise to enliven the presence of their performers. They explained how many of the exercises they made were built out of a performance situation. A moment of stage activity required a certain state, action or movement which became valuable in its own right for performers to practice in a training setting.

These are all notions I can draw from directly in my practice. Not only have J & J successfully made their own method from Suzuki, the symposium also gave us the chance to understand how we can make our own too. The quality of the students at WAAPA, particularly at the alumni workshop, enabled me to take further strides in these developments, cultivating my artistic enquires as a dance artist working with autobiography, live art and club culture.

DISCOVERIES

Each teaching experience allowed me to refine the principles my practice holds and how I can best layer experiences to give participants access. My log books are refreshed with new exercises and notes to guide participants toward the unseen fundamentals of centring, sensation and authenticity. The alumni workshop in particular deepened my exploration of the subtlety of the grooving body. Pulses, bops, head nods, hand gestures and shoulder dips are all curiously potent locomotions that require a real depth of sensation to access authentically. The NSP encourages this feeling based interrogation of the dancing body. Form is secondary to the movers ability to bask in the sensation of the music, the space or moment. In leading the graduates, I was captivated by the illusiveness of their trained bodies' capacity to find satisfying grooves, and excited by the possibility of focusing future practices on giving access to these subtle motions. Creating a new pathway to stabilize and empower performers' stage presence.

A second clear discovery was how the NSP specifically applies to immersive movement work with audience at close quarters. Within the NSP the sense of fellow performers during each exercise is heavily emphasised. We start together, stop together, speak together, make physical contact and feel one another deeply. As I presented my immersive practice at the symposium I came to understand that I had been applying the same principles directly to audience members in performance. I realised that a further step in NSP exercises can be to develop the sensitivity of performer/audience relationships at close proximity. We can shape exercises that take this relationship between viewer and doer to new extremes, supporting performers in their devising processes for participatory works in/across theatre, dance and live art.

This trip has reinvigorated several creative relationships and allowed me to reconsider them

and their practices in a new light. Sharing how I have grown and developed has also allowed those teachers and artists to reconsider me! The developments I am making and the work I am capable of. I am certain that through these trips I will find new possibilities to teach, to study, and to develop my own way with these practices. Various conversations are now underway between here and Australia that would not have been possible without face to face meetings, and time and energy spent in shared creative spaces.

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