

# **Lisa Ullmann Travel Scholarship Report:**

## **Kai Tomioka - Japan- Time and Space:**

**June - September 2025 (With gaps whilst being in London and China in between for work)**

### **Introduction**

I was awarded the Lisa Ullmann Travel Scholarship to enabled me to spend time in Japan pursuing a variety of projects, collaborations, and research activities across different Cities and areas. One of the most valuable things anyone can have is time, and the travel fund allowed me the freedom to be fully present, immerse myself in different communities, and explore artistic opportunities across multiple regions.

During my time in Japan, I split my focus between Niigata, Kansai (Osaka and Kyoto), and Tokyo, engaging in collaborations, community-based projects, workshops, and performances.

### **Niigata: Community-Based Research and Collaboration**

In Niigata, I began a collaboration with Nephrite Dance Company, based in Niitsu city. This company combines professional performance with semi-professional training programmes and classes for children and adults, as well as engaging in different community activities across the area. The company directors, Takayoshi Tshuchida and Aika Ogura are also built a guesthouse called 'SlopeHouse Akiha' alongside a dance studio in their local shotengai (shopping street). Their vision is to create a residency environment where both Japanese and international artists can live, work, and share with the local community.

I had previously stayed at Slope House Akiha in 2023, in which we created a short dance film together with their professional company. In December 2024, I was invited to perform at their guesthouse in a small event they hosted. What inspired me most was the range of audience members present—children, adults, and older generations all gathered to enjoy dance together. This reinforced our vision to create a work that could involve and reflect the whole community, breaking down hierarchies often seen in professional dance. This time, our aim was to begin research for a community project rooted in Niitsu itself. For the people, with the people.

While in Niigata, I taught workshops and research sessions with people in the community, gradually combining the groups. The goal is to create a site-specific project in and around the town, in local shops and businesses, to engage passers-by and reach audiences who may not usually attend performances.

Alongside this, I documented the process with a filmmaker friend, speaking with residents and local participants to understand their perspectives and wishes. These excursions into small restaurants and coffee shops revealed the challenges facing rural towns in Japan, aging populations and fading shopping streets (shotengai). Yet Nephrite's studio, with open shutters and vibrant activity, brought energy and life to the community.

Whilst in Niigata, I reconnected with Noism Dance Company, a professional contemporary company where I had danced for three seasons from 2018-2021. I Observed rehearsals, and participating in company class offered invaluable insight, as did a last-minute research workshop with their junior company.

The directors of Nephrite are from Niigata and are part of a broader network of former Noism dancers who are developing independent projects across Japan. Their work aims to rejuvenate the local dance sector and create sustainable communities in regions experiencing population and energy decline. My time in Niigata emphasized how dance can strengthen intergenerational connections, foster local community, and expand creative networks.

## **KANA**

### **Kansai: Collaborative Creation in Osaka and Kyoto**

My connection to Kansai goes back several years. In the summer of 2023, I created a 15-minute work at Kobe Jogakuin, a university under the leadership of Shimazaki Tohru specialising in dance and performance. It was a weeks creation in which I also taught workshops to the students. Since then, every time I return to Japan, I have continued to build on these links—meeting new people, reconnecting with those I have met before, and deepening my relationships in the region.

This summer, I gathered with four other dancers in Osaka to begin researching and creating a new full-length dance work. The group consisted of Sayo Homma, co-director of Kobe Dance Jogakuin, Tamako Kuramoto, a recent graduate of the Kobe, Misaki Aya, a former dancer with NDT now freelancing in Holland and Yuki Takahashi, a freelancer based in Berlin. The work, titled Bohyo (儚氷), can be interpreted as ephemeral ice. “Ephemeral” signifies the fleeting, fragile quality of moments; “ice” represents something fixed in time yet capable of melting, moving, and transforming.

Bohyo reflected a period of constant movement and change in my life, a year ago I began freelancing after having worked in full time dance companies for the last 8 years. This has been a time when I often felt tense and breathless. The work explored stillness within motion, inviting both performers and audience to pause, yield, and release in heart, body, and mind. Like melting ice, it reminds us of how fragile, fleeting, yet beautiful each moment can be.

We collectively decided that we wanted this work to be seen and performed, so made a decision to organise some performances. We performed in an independent arts space in Kitakagaya, Osaka called Chidori Bunka. Chidoribunka is a renovated space that host performances and events from a number of different disciplines, including live music, theatre, visual art and dance. Over two days, we performed Bohyo three shows, and were able to bring together friends, local residents and other members of the dance and creative communities as well as those completely new to dance and performance in this type of setting, outside a conventional theatre. Audience dialogue afterward highlighted the themes of connection, care, and empathy embedded in the work. The project exemplifies how short-term freelance collaborations can create powerful, intimate experiences between performers and audiences.

It was wonderful to see many of my past students and colleagues at the performances, to see and hear how they are doing now and to continue building this relationship and consistency for me in the Kansai region. Long absences from Japan make these encounters particularly precious. Maintaining these ongoing relationships allows me to witness growth, exchange knowledge, and build continuity across years. Kansai, Tokyo, and Niigata remain core regions for me to nurture these connections.

### **Tokyo: Festivals, Performances, and Collaborations**

Tokyo, much like London, is the central hub of continuous performances, classes, and artistic opportunities in the country. A defining aspect of my time there was attending summer matsuri (festivals) and dance celebrations, with particular focus and interest on seeing Awa Odori. These types of festivals occur throughout Japan in the summer season, featuring local groups, professionals, and visiting ensembles from all over the country. They are accompanied by live music and have a strongly inclusive atmosphere.

Awa Odori ensembles can include up to a hundred performers of all ages, and the groups are split usually into four sections, the mens dance, the women’s dance, the children and the musicians. Each ‘Ren’ (group) will have their own stylistic essences but these are the common structures. These layered structures fascinated me in how choreographic ensembles can interweave and arrange on such large scales. Much of my own choreographic work has been working in more smaller numbers so to see work on this scale was invaluable knowledge for me. The movement vocabulary is distinctly different in each group, however there

are hand gestures and patterns that are consistent for all the dancers. Virtuosity is often highlighted but not essential, as Awa Odori allows for all the movement to be scaled up and down dependent on the individuals capabilities. I enjoyed seeing very active young people dancing alongside much more elderly people, the movement is the same but the range and physicality can be different but all kept together in unison, following the call of the musicians and chants to keep it cohesive and as one.

Towards the end of my stay, I was able to spend time with Aoi Shinren, a Koenji-based Awa Odori ren of about 60 members. I was able to watch their rehearsals, learn about the culture and history of awa odori and how it came about, learned movement patterns and choreography, as well as get to know about the people and to start to build relationships with them. A particularly memorable story was from my discussions with the leader of the male ensemble, who began Awa Odori only after his children began participating, highlighting the multi-generational nature of the group. This focus on community, of intergenerational dance and family was something that really struck me. I was invited to join rehearsals whenever I am in Tokyo, allowing me to continue engaging with this community.

I was also able to attend performances during my time in Tokyo, 'Each Other' performed by Satoshi Kudo and Motoko Hirayama at the Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse, and Peeping Tom's 'Triptych' at the Setagaya Theatre. These experiences reinforced the value of being present and available; being in Japan allowed me to reconnect with colleagues and witness creative performances firsthand. Performances from international companies in Japan is rare, much less accessible than London and the UK so to see companies performing here more and more is exciting for me looking forward to the future of the Japanese contemporary dance sector.

Additionally, I collaborated with Chikako, a Tokyo-based choreographer, dancer, and movement director, to create a short dance film in Yamanashi. Like the other projects in Japan, this came about from a place of passion and ambition to find a way to make something happen. We brought together a creative team of friends and collaborators, to make this happen. Self-financing artistic projects in Japan is a challenge, but the rewards and affirming and give me strength and inspiration to continue finding ways of making it more sustainable in the future. Projects like this plant seeds for future opportunities, showcasing the importance of presence, time, and collaboration.

## **Teaching and Workshops**

During my stay in Japan, I undertook several workshops and teaching opportunities across Kansai, Tokyo, and Niigata. I am a regular guest at Kyoto Contemporary Ballet, a group that host regular professional classes for dancers in the Kansai region. They regularly have guests as well as regular teachers. In Tokyo I taught at open studios such as Broadway Dance Center Tokyo and Dance Works Shibuya, delivering classes intermittently while balancing research and creative projects. One challenge of teaching in Japan is consistency. Unlike in the UK or Europe, where professional dancers can attend classes at fixed times in regular studios, Japan lacks this structure. Times and dates frequently change, making it difficult to build long-term groups or sustained engagement. Due to the lack of professional opportunities in Japan many dancers work different jobs to sustain themselves, so finding ways to build a structure in this to gather is challenging.

To address this, myself and a friend set up a project organization called Key+, connecting the Japanese contemporary dance sector with the international dance community. Over the last two years, we have facilitated workshops in Tokyo and Kansai by international artists from the US, UK, France, Portugal, Taiwan, Brazil and others. This work aims to provide more consistent, high-level contemporary dance opportunities and strengthen local networks. Whilst community building takes time, I believe this work plays an important role in the dance sector and I hope to continue expanding this in the future.

## **Planning Future Projects**

This time in Japan was also spent looking forward to planning future projects. We are in discussions to create a winter project in Kansai, continuing the type of collaborative and community-focused work initiated with Bohyo. I am currently submitting a funding application to collaborate with Tokyo-based choreographer

Takuya Sato on a double bill created in both Japan and the UK. Dancers will travel between the two countries, with the UK side focusing particularly on Black and culturally diverse artists, integrating heritage and identity into the work. These plans illustrate how my time in Japan has supported both immediate artistic outcomes and long-term, cross-cultural collaborations.

As I plan my next choreographic projects, including the community project in Niigata, I look forward to integrating everything I've learned about people, community, and folk practices into my own choreography.

Being a person between two places, the UK and Japan, brings both rewards and challenges. Maintaining presence in both locations requires time, effort, and money. Over the last few years, I've done my best to remain present while balancing freelance work and financial sustainability. This period in Japan has given me a different sense of grounding, emotionally and creatively, and I feel fortunate to feel connected to both places. Japan, as a creative community, is supportive, and while challenges exist, the desire to collaborate, create, and inspire is a value I hold closely as a dancer, teacher, and choreographer. I am eternally grateful to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for supporting and believing in this vision and I will continue to work hard towards making these dreams a reality.

## **Reflection and Impact**

Spending three months in Japan allowed me to explore diverse artistic, cultural, and community contexts. The experiences reinforced my understanding of the value of presence and time in fostering collaborations and connections, how dance can engage communities intergenerationally and cross-culturally, the importance of improvisation, flexibility, and resourcefulness in freelance work and the ways in which folk dance traditions, contemporary practices, and international exchange inform my choreographic identity.

These experiences will directly influence my future work, both in Japan and in the UK, allowing me to build projects that integrate diverse communities, explore ephemeral moments, and maintain strong collaborative networks.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst I began my time in Japan with clear goals and practical projects in mind, I realised that the true value of this experience lay in the process. The opportunity to be present, to immerse myself fully, and to embrace the spontaneous, unplanned encounters enriched my time far beyond the initial objectives.

If I had focused solely on the end product, I might have missed the chance to engage with communities, meet new collaborators, and witness moments of connection that became some of the highlights of this experience. The Lisa Ullmann Travel Scholarship provided the time and space necessary for these possibilities to manifest, allowing ideas, collaborations, and inspirations to unfold organically.

This experience has reinforced that, while planning and goals are essential, remaining open to the present moment and the unexpected can lead to profound personal and professional growth. For me, this period in Japan was a reminder that creativity thrives not just in what is produced, but in the connections, processes, and experiences that shape the work.

## **Suggestions for Future Awardees**

My advice is to embrace flexibility alongside clarity. Hold strong intentions with integrity, but remain open to spontaneous collaborations and opportunities. Like bamboo, be both resilient and flexible, allowing the experience to flow organically. Resourcefulness to make things happen when you can, and to enjoy the unexpected along the way. This duality of precision in intention and openness to the unexpected for me I believe is key to making the most of the Lisa Ullmann Travel Scholarship. Time and space is precious, and I am once again grateful to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling scholarship fund for the gift of time and space.

Image from 'Bohyo'



Workshop with Noism2 Dance Company



Time spent with local community  
In Niitsu



Independent Film project in Yamanashi

