

'Mentoring the mentors' - Lindsey Butcher.

I have recently returned from California where I completed a 6-day training programme with Amelia Rudolph the founder and former AD of Bandaloop (alongside her veteran company dancers Roel Seeber, Rachael Lincoln and Suzanne Gallo), together with Chantal McCormick, Artistic Director of Fidget Feet aerial dance (Ireland) and 3 Irish based dance artists.

This was followed by 2.5 days of meeting with Joanna Haigood of Zaccho aerial dance theatre in San Francisco.

The projects aims were to:

- support my own continued growth as a still active performing artist
- look to peers for discussions and fresh thinking on mature practice
- expand my vision as an independent artist, choreographer, artistic director and sector leader
- trial a means of creating meaningful peer support that is practical and realistic
- share those skills and learnings with the sector here in the UK and beyond.

The 3 women listed above, Joanna, Amelia and Chantal are all recognised as key international players in the field of aerial and vertical dance.

This exchange was proposed with the knowledge that we could meet as equals, with mutual respect, recognition, empathy and support for us each to keep growing, upskilling and thriving as mature, passionate artists.

As a specialist in vertical dance and heading up the aerial dance sector in the UK, this opportunity to continue investing in my own practice with sector peers was invaluable. It also usefully coincided with a recent unsuccessful organisational arts funding application which threw into immediate focus questions around 'how we sustain ourselves when we don't get the resources we need' and 'what is of prime importance now and at different times throughout our careers'?

To have frank discussions with these 3 key arts activists was inspirational and offered valuable perspective on my own practice and thinking. To question opinions, ideas and methodologies I thought I knew and approach them from a fresh angle and understanding was made joyful in this generous and supportive environment.

This opportunity to reflect with fellow artists still leading the field, on our relevance as older women in the dance sector and the unique qualities and perspectives we can offer was timely and very positively, thought-provoking.

We discussed our experiences and aspirations including:

- how we nurture, hand over to and make space for the next generation of aerial dance artists and leaders and
- how to continue to make space for our own curiosity, ongoing explorations and future ambitions and what that journey might look like for each of us.

The opportunity to delve deep into each of these conversations (for myself and Chantal) was supported by being able to wholly immerse ourselves in an intensive training environment outside of our respective countries, enabling us to leave behind the pressures of heading up our own organisations. This alongside shared meals and walks in our leisure time with both Joanna and Amelia yielded a seam of rich discourse and nourishment for bodies, minds and souls alike. The value of this informal 'downtime' and what emerges when we're not focussed on 'the work' never fails to astound and inspire me.

For example, Amelia (Bandaloop) recently handed over the Artistic Directorship of Bandaloop to one of the dancers with whom she's worked for over 15 years and has taken on the role of 'Director of special operations' instead. Carving out this role gives her the opportunity to step down from the pressures of the day to day running of the co and its future vision and instead take a deep dive into the projects that really pique her interest. It was a brave and difficult decision to let go of the company and community she has grown and nurtured but 2 years on, it is affording her both the creative space she craved alongside being able to spend more 'quality' time with her family without the pressures of heading up a successful arts organisation.

I also spent a half day in the studio with Joanna Haigood and a further 2 days spent walking in the headlands and forests around her home. We discussed approaches to work and pedagogy, the importance of creating space and constructive rest, alongside future dreams and ambitions at a point where Joanna is working towards handing over various strands of the companies' operations to focus on the latter.

As I navigate my own thoughts around 'what next', I'm excited by how impassioned these 2 pioneers of the aerial arts remain as they continue to hone in on and distil their artistic and creative vision and ambitions.

Chantal McCormick and I first met as artists on a vertical dance gig last century (!) and have been collaborating and supporting each other ever since.

Alongside this shared training intensive, we recently developed an action learning coaching cohort between ourselves and another aerial dance peer (Jen Patterson) which we've now shared more widely amongst other aerial dance sector leaders.

It's a first step in trialling how a peer support network could operate; to create and offer resources that can have meaningful impact when time is precious and/or we are under pressure.

Sharing these skills and approaches more widely throughout the sector is already having a 'trickle-down effect' with a younger group of aerial artists now creating their own support group.

Another joy of this project to date has been the Inter-generational aspect of the artists involved in the training - from a recent 23-year-old dance graduate, through to the 'elders' (myself included) approaching 60 and beyond.

As someone who mentors artists at all stage of their career, from aspiring artist to mature professionals this was a perfect demonstration of the generosity, respect and support shown to other artists in our sector regardless of age, disability, ethnicity etc.

If only this acknowledgment of value could be more widely embraced by society!!!

Relevant to, but not included in this application, is phase 2 of this initial research with Amelia Rudolph in collaboration with Chantal, to create and film a short piece on the cliffs of Moher in August as a direct result of this exchange.

The film will be used to generate interest and investment in and longevity for this ongoing exchange, affording it a legacy beyond the timeline of this application.

And beyond that, I am confident that I will have further scope to share my increased skills and knowledge more widely through my ongoing work as an independent choreographer, teacher and mentor across aerial dance festivals, HEI's and masterclasses, alongside my role as artistic director of Gravity & Levity here in the UK and beyond.

I'm filing this report with enormous gratitude for the lifelong learning opportunities the LUTSF so generously supports.

Thank you for all that you enable.