

**A RESEARCH INTO JAPANESE CONTEMPORARY FREELANCE DANCE
OR
THE ART OF BALANCING AT 11.000 METRES**

Have you ever tried to balance on one foot at 11.000 metres of altitude? This is how I found myself after eight hours of flight (and still three to go) en route to Tokyo. The action isn't as easy as I thought. It certainly requires some movement skills, bird-like arm technique and strong muscles to avoid falling. While working on it I became surrounded by a bunch of Japanese passengers (I was the only European-looking one among them) who stretched and moved methodically next to me. "These people certainly are familiar with movement," I thought. It left like Tokyo was indeed waiting for me...

As soon as I landed I realised that daily life in Japan is somehow constantly being choreographed. The underground is full of painted waiting lines on the floor to organise traffic into each carriage; many signs and instructions are continuously given in order to facilitate the flow of people (I particularly loved "Please sit close to others"); and on the streets citizens cross, change directions or move backwards and forwards with no hesitation at all. But how is life for those really specialised in choreographed movement, meaning dancers, teachers and choreographers?



The aim of my research, which was supported by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund was to acquire a deeper understanding of what the free-lance dance scene is in a country where high technology, art and tradition blend in unexpected ways. The results of my stay in Tokyo could not have been more astonishing.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Contemporary dance is a fairly recent discipline in Japan. There are the few big names we know in Europe (as Saburo Teshigawara) but in general it's an art form that is still emerging and rarely receives the support it needs to really develop. About three years ago a kind of Japanese Arts Council was created following the model of Arts Council England. Its aim is to support both traditional and less-established music, dance and theatre but news about it seems not to have been widely disseminated within the contemporary dance scene. Many of those I met and talked to had no idea that this organisation even existed. In short, at the moment the infrastructure for those doing contemporary work is meagre. The government is more supportive of Kabuki, Noh and other traditional performing arts when it should be acting more closely on behalf of all artists.

AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

One of the many problems Japanese choreographers face is that they don't know how to engage 'ordinary' Japanese people with contemporary dance. The idea of doing open rehearsals or sharings, workshops, post-show talks, outdoor performances and the like is simply not a part of their regular artistic activity. In my conversations with artists they always addressed this issue. "Japanese audience likes storytelling," said the choreographer Yumiko Watanabe during one of our sessions together, "and that is why kabuki, theatre and ballet are so successful. But how can we help them to understand our contemporary dance work?" I shared with her some of the strategies we commonly employ in Europe, and encouraged her to try new formats of dance in order to be able to better raise the profile of her work. Then, to help Yumiko explore the possibilities of dance on film, I persuaded



her and her company to actually make one with me. The film was developed and shot in one week but it took me two months to edit it (with the filmmaker Jeen Miura), as we just could only use Google Translator to communicate via email. Finally TOKYO TOKYO (vimeo.com/79149906) was finished in November and has already been shown during several events in the capital.

The bottom line is that Japan lacks a coherent and concentrated development strategy for contemporary dance. There is certainly an audience for the performing arts, but they need more exposure to it if things are to move forward.

PRESSURE ON FREE-LANCE DANCERS

The main issue I found during my research trip to Japan was the high pressure applied to the lives of free-lance dancers. Incredibly, most of the time they don't get paid but must themselves pay a fee to be part of a company. Obviously they must then have to work in other "non-artistic" jobs to make a living. Last but not least, they are required to sell a proportion of performance tickets or must cover out of their own pockets the cost of those seats that they could not sell. So when they're offered employment as dancers their main question is not "How much am I going to get paid?" but "How many tickets do I have to sell?"

Attending some of the shows, I could see that there are contemporary thinkers in Japanese dance who want to say things in a different and original way. Socially, however, it's apparently risky to acknowledge that one is a dancer. They tend to hide this by saying they are dance teachers (because even self-identified as a master carries with it greater prestige in Japanese society). On the other hand, the older you are as a dancer the better performer you are considered (because they also really value experience)



OTHER ISSUES AND OBSERVATIONS

The most successful dance form in Japan at the moment seems to be hip hop but I wonder, don't they realise that hip hop can be as abstract as contemporary dance?

Dance is a discipline supported at universities, but the resources to make a career out of it are almost non-existent.

Unlike the UK, in Japan male and female choreographers are equally represented. I found there to be such a great diversity of artists that, ideally, things won't balance towards one side or another when the context for developing the work actually moves forward.

All of the obstacles cited above contrast with the splendid individual qualities of the dance artists I met. It's admirable to see how eager they are to develop their work despite the creative roadblocks they regularly encounter.

This entire experience has certainly broadened my view on how another culture deals with its own performing arts sector, exposing achievements but also - and mainly - deficiencies and difficulties. To engage in dialogue, exchange knowledge and pursue collaborations with creative minds from other cultures is one of the greatest privileges any artist can have. The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund has given me this opportunity, allowing me to interact with the Japanese contemporary free-lance dance scene during July 2013. I learnt and shared a lot with the people I met. I hope I can return in the future and witness the infrastructural development they so deserve.



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* This report has also been published in Dance UK magazine:
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