

Dane Hurst travel to New York, Rwanda and South Africa

After 12 years as a professional Dancer, Choreographer and Creative Director in the UK, I decided it was time to pause and consider my role as an artist and question where I'm heading and what I've been aiming to achieve with my work. I arrived at the decision to use my acquired skills and experience to reach out to children or young adults living in challenging and disadvantaged circumstances. Having been raised in South Africa exposed me to many challenging situations and afforded the blessed experience of living and succeeding through struggle and gave a true understanding of the potential dead-ends of life without access to facilities and the dire consequences of living in certain deprived parts of a country. I experienced the importance of role models and mentors who inspire and assist young hopefuls, offering them help and a lifeline when they're without much to hold onto.

In December 2015 I decided to leave my job at Rambert Dance Company to focus on setting up a charitable dance project called the Moving Assembly Project taking professionals artists from the UK to teach dance to the youth in South Africa. I realised that in order to succeed with this project I needed to gain some experience working in the charitable sector and therefore set up a pilot project in the Eastern Cape whereby I offered intensive dance workshops to two grassroots charitable organisations in the Eastern Cape of South Africa with generous support from The Linbury Trust and made contact with the New York based Mindleaps organisation who use dance as a tool to empower and uplift street children in Rwanda, Guinea and Bosnia through the teaching of Dance, Language and Computer Literacy. I made an offer of my time as a teacher, choreographer and performer on a voluntary basis to the Mindleaps team in exchange for an opportunity to learn about how they deliver their work in Rwanda and as a consequence was invited join their teacher training programme in New York, June 2016, thanks to the travel scholarship awarded to me by the Lisa Ullman Travel Scholarship Fund.



My trip to New York was an intense two-week period whereby I studied the Mindleaps methodology created by founder Rebecca Davis in collaboration with her team in New York and Rwanda. I studied and delivered part of the training programme and partook in a rigorous teaching course with seven other volunteers and members of the team. The training consisted of studying and teaching the Mindleaps Dance Curriculum consisting of structured warm up and dance classes of contemporary, ballet and jazz techniques, a structured choreography curriculum along with learning about and understanding their Developmental Skill Objectives. The training had two focused objectives, one was to develop an understanding of the dance vocabulary and structure to teach to the street children in Rwanda and two was to understand how to teach this to the teachers and potential teachers who are based there. We studied the seven cognitive skills that are developed by the programme through its dance-based curriculum and learned how to measure and grade the pupils accordingly. The seven skills that were measured and focused on were Memorisation, Grit or Commitment, Teamwork or Collaboration, Discipline, Self-Esteem, Creativity and Language. These skills were studied and measured by researchers from the Carnegie Mellon University, and students have proven to reflect positive growth in these areas through participating in the Mindleaps curriculum over a period of time. This research data is processed and students who reach a certain percentage in each of the skill sets are then deemed ready to join other regular students in school. The main focus of the programme is therefore to develop those street children who have not been able to attend school, bring them up to speed with their peers and help them to re-enter and start school again. I am absolutely amazed by how dance has been used as the integral part of the curriculum and has been proven to help vulnerable street children re-integrate back into society.



Image by Angé Denapaite

As a consequence of volunteering my time and expertise I was invited to Rwanda to teach the Mindleaps curriculum, to co-choreograph a dance for the students to perform at the Ubumuntu Arts Festival at the Genocide Memorial in Kigali as well as perform an excerpt of a solo that I created in response to the passing of Nelson Mandela. My offering of volunteering to teach, choreograph and perform essentially

was an exchange, which allowed flights to and accommodation in Rwanda to be covered. I worked with approximately 50 street children who formed part of the Mindleaps Programme as well as delivered partnering workshops at the Ubuntu Arts Festival. This experience was so vital to my practice as a teacher, performer, choreographer and artist as it has exposed me to an entirely new, vibrant and flourishing dance community from Rwanda, Uganda, Nigeria and Congo. This opportunity has opened the door to a possible collaboration with the Mindleaps team and my Moving Assembly Project in South Africa. We are currently in funding application and negotiation stages to create a collaborative programme in South Africa 2017 as well as looking into a possible extended residency back in New York to continue my research and work with the Mindleaps team there. I have been inspired to propose and create a new cross border dance production between dancers from the above-mentioned areas and am hoping to create a future link between students from my Moving Assembly Project in South Africa and the Mindleaps students in Rwanda.



Overall this Lisa Ullman travel scholarship has helped me to start a new chapter in my artistic practice and has allowed me to expand my network, reach further and have a wider impact as an individual and dance artist. I look forward to continuing my journey with the Mindleaps team and students and hope that all that I have learned will help to make the Moving Assembly Project an effective and transformational opportunity for disadvantaged youth in South Africa and beyond.