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Inspired by Kylian, who was inspired by Aboriginal dance

A Latvian choreographer finds her own connections to the past and the present

by Gunta Liepina

In 1984 Jiri Kylian, then choreographer and artistic director of the Netherlands Dance Theatre, went to Groote Island, off Australia's northern coast, to witness a gathering of Aboriginal dancers. The event brought together five hundred tribespeople from twenty different localities in Australia to perform traditional dances for each other. Kylian was there to observe and appreciate, he said. Eventually, the encounter led to his creation of a unique fusion of ballet and Aboriginal dance in his piece called *The Stamping Ground*.

A dance documentary called *Road to the Stamping Ground*, directed by Hans Hulscher and David Muir, is a very interesting and useful example to discuss in a choreography class for a number of reasons. Inspired by Kylian's fieldwork on Groote Island, students could do their own research by choosing to go to a natural or urban setting where they've never been before. The best way would be to go camping for a few days, to stay overnight at the same place, or to experience different times of a day in the city. It doesn't have to be a faraway island like it was for Kylian, but it is important to take yourself to a different environment. What does the place look like in the morning when the sun is rising? What feeling is there at night? What energy and colors? What lines and shapes are there?

Such an assignment would draw choreography students' attention to their senses – what they see, hear, smell and touch. Questioning your habitual way of seeing is a very important skill for choreographers. Do I really *see*? Or do I *think* I know, am I *projecting* what I see? Jiri Kylian is a great example of staying open, paying attention and noticing details. He notices, for example, the hundreds of ways of walking and how a foot touches the ground.

Another task, inspired by the documentary, would be to practice performance in a group, with attention to the energy it creates. In the documentary, Kylian talks about an eye-opening revelation he had after watching the Aboriginal performers dancing for almost 15 hours. He saw them start with really high energy, giving it to the audience and receiving it from them. Around midnight, the audience left, but the dancers continued to dance. Even without an audience, the performers continued to dance with a strong energy, because they were supporting each other by exchanging that energy. Based on Kylian's observations about this group energy, I think it would be a useful exercise to practice performance mood and energy for a certain amount of time to build group stamina. If the dancers can keep their inner group energy up by dancing together for twenty minutes, then they can do a ten minute performance for sure.

If I were to give a choreography class in my own country, at the Latvian Academy of Music Dance Department, I would use this film to ask questions about what happens when you fuse two traditions, using it as inspiration, not imitation. Latvia has a very rich traditional singing and dancing tradition that is celebrated every four years with a Song and Dance Festival. An important event in Latvian culture and social life, this festival has been included in UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is one of the largest amateur choral and dance group events in the world, each year attracting more than 40 000 singers and dancers.*

The social aspect of the festival is inevitable. Every Latvian knows about the Song and Dance festival, and it would not be an exaggeration to claim that every Latvian knows at least a few national Latvian folk songs and the primary steps for Latvian dance, since it is being taught in schools and kindergartens and is part of national pride. Yet, the choreography

of Latvian National Dance that is performed on stage should be questioned and be a discussed as a critical issue in Latvian culture, because of what's happened in the past.

The roots of the festival go back to its start in the 19th century. Throughout various political changes, it continued to unify thousands of people, surviving even the time Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union. For a dance to survive throughout the Soviet times, it needed to be rearranged so that it would not contradict the official propaganda. Although it was still considered Latvian dance, and dancers would still be wearing national costumes and dancing to the national folk songs, slight details in the choreography occurred, such as including celebrating gestures that conform to the Soviet system.

Although Latvia has been an independent country since November 18, 1989, some of these choreographic details remain, although they have nothing to do with the traditional Latvian dance.

For Latvian dance choreographers nowadays it would be really useful to think about what they are staging, inspired by Kilian's research in Aboriginal dance. Choreographers should do ethnographic dance research and become inspired by it, as opposed to repeating Latvian dance choreography that is already set for the stage and has layers of different choreographers' points of view or even different historical time periods. Each choreography should start from basic forms. I feel that showing this dance documentary and giving a workshop for Latvian Dance choreographers could help to create ethnographically true dances from a contemporary perspective.

*More information about the Latvian Song and Dance Festival can be found at <http://www.dziesmusvetki.tv/en/about/history/> and <http://www.latvia.travel/en/article/song-and-dance-celebration>.

Gunta Liepina received her MFA in June 2016 and is currently working in different dance schools and studios in Orange County. She is also preparing students for Youth America Grand Prix and Cecchetti ballet competitions in Italy. She is a company member of Kairos Dance Company in Los Angeles and is currently working on a new piece for a show in Highways space in L.A. with Jess Harper, also a UCI alumna.
