

## **Trip to Ethiopia to work with Adam Benjamin and the Adugna dancers April 7<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> 2003**

**Written by Jo Parkes**

### **INTRODUCTION**

On April 7<sup>th</sup> 2003, I went to Addis Ababa to work as an assistant choreographer to Adam Benjamin, independent choreographer and co-founder of CandoCo. Adam had been commissioned to make a piece on the dancers of the Adugna project. Adugna are a group of eighteen contemporary dancers, who used to be street children, who now work as dancers/community arts practitioners in Addis Ababa. They work with hundreds of people on community projects each week and often have choreographers travel to the city to create pieces with them as performers. Each dancer supports their family on the income from their work, most of them being the sole earner in large families. Most live in the shantytowns of Addis Ababa.

The project was set up by Royston Maldoon and Mags Byrne of Dance United and the dancers have completed a professional training programme, validated by Middlesex University. The dance project is one area of work of the Gemini Trust, an NGO established over twenty years ago, to work with families with multiple births. Among other areas of work, there is also a media programme, Gem TV, also made up of young people who formerly lived or worked in the streets of Addis Ababa.

Adam went to Ethiopia make a piece with the Adugna dancers and with ten disabled dancers (the Adugna Potentials) who he recruited and has worked with over the last three years. Children with disabilities have a difficult life in Ethiopia. In rural locations they are considered to be a curse and often left to die. In the city, they have often been separated from their families and placed in camps as their families cannot afford to support them. They have little chance of finding work. The disabled dancers are paid for their work on the Adugna project and have now been training with the company for about three years.

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## **DAILY JOURNAL**

### **Pre-departure Preparations**

Two months of preparation - injections, organising and re-organising flights, buying sterile needles in case of emergency, getting the right insurance - are coming to their conclusion. It is 1pm on the day before I leave and I am almost packed. I take my first malaria pill. Three hours later I am standing in Boots with a basket full of diarrhea treatments, stomach settlers, suntan lotion, blister plasters, films etc when my body starts to tremble, my head goes light and I start to be violently sick. This lasts for several hours. Preparations delayed somewhat....

### **Day 1 Monday, April 7<sup>th</sup> Traveling**

It is 2 am. A call to NHS direct and trip to the emergency chemist leaves me clutching an alternative malaria treatment. Get home and finish the packing that I couldn't do while I was being ill.

It is 9am and I have had two hours sleep. I am calling a homeopathist to see if I can get a homeopathic malaria treatment couriered to my house in time for me to catch my flight.

10.30am and the taxi is arriving in 15 minutes. A knock on the door and my malaria treatment arrives. I get the taxi and get to the airport where I declare war on mosquitoes. I buy ever chemical agent available to kill them - sprays, plug-ins, repellents. I get on the plane. I have now not eaten for 24 hours and not slept for more than three hours in the last thirty. Needless to say, I am not the cheeriest of traveling companions. I grunt at my neighbor, prop my head on a pillow and fall into a deep sleep.

### **Day 2 Tuesday, April 8<sup>th</sup> Arrival**

Almost twelve hours later we are about to touch down in Addis Ababa. As we near the ground in the darkness I see buildings and stationary planes rush by the window. The wheels are in landing position and we are feet from the ground when suddenly the pilot pulls the nose up and the plane begins a steep, hair-raising (and stomach plunging) climb back into the dark skies. At this point the British government is busy bombing Iraq and my mind leaps to terrorism. I spend an anxious few minutes wondering if we have been hijacked. Then the pilot's voice crackles over the PA system: "Ah yes, sorry about that. We were about to

run out of runway so thought I'd better go around and take a crack at it from the other side..." I start to feel anxious. It is 2am in the morning and I am in the middle (or more accurately the east) of Africa...alone. I am about to spend three weeks living and working with two people who I barely know. In the last twenty four hours I have been violently ill and been involved in an air incident. It does not bode well for my stay in Ethiopia.

Yet competing with the anxiety is a rising sense of excitement...this truly feels like living.

We land, I get my bags and find my smiling driver without incident. As we walk to the car, I find myself in a small crowd of beggars. Wrapped in white cloths against the brisk night air, with a mind-boggling array of crutches, stumps, shriveled limbs, injuries and wide-eyed children, they follow me to the car. One clutches my bag, offering to carry it. The driver snatches it away. This scene will be repeated many times in my stay in Africa. It is the beginning of a perpetual anxiety - who to give to, how to give, how much to give.... I thrust a few notes into a few hands and the driver quickly speeds away. Welcome to Addis Ababa.

I arrive at the guest house and Adam has left me a note, helpfully reminding me to brush my teeth with bottled water. And so the dodging of the dodgy stomach begins...

10am - I wake and Adam and Rosa (Rosa Verhoeve, unidentified lump in the second bed in my room, soon to be revealed all round fantastic woman and project photographer) have gone to work. I am nervous. I hear banging in the kitchen and poke my head around the door to receive my second warm Ethiopian greeting. Showayeh, our ebullient and enthusiastic cook/mother for our time in the guest house, a short, round woman with an apron and wide smile clutches my hand and kisses me on the cheek three times. Her beautiful, smiling daughter Ganet, (who will wash clothes by hand in the bath, back-breaking work which will make my white t-shirts whiter than I have ever seen them) comes in and gently offers me her hand. The Gemini trust have put us up in their guest house and we will be treated like royalty for our stay.

At lunchtime I am collected by the dynamic American project manager, Leah Niederstadt, who will make life easy for the duration of the stay - responding to every request with speedy efficiency. After a brief lunch (eat with your right hand, it's impolite to eat with your left, don't lick your fingers, it's impolite to lick your fingers, don't have ice, make sure the seal on the water bottle is not broken....) we arrive at the dancer's rehearsal space - Kassanches.

We walk up a rocky, uneven lane (how do disabled people manage this?), through the corrugated iron fence of a compound and towards a breeze-block structure, with a large open entrance on one side. This will be our rehearsal space in the afternoons. I squeeze past the watching children and Adam and I

perch on wooden benches to watch the dancers run their material from the morning session. I am a little nervous, still tired from my journey and illness.

Adam and I are slightly uneasy together - we need to find a way of working. For a while we sit and watch. I tentatively suggest making the material travel and Adam is generous enough to go with the idea. We split the group and start to combine the material to make sections. Suddenly I am in the thick of choreography. Incomprehensible names rain down on me - I try to get them by latching them to familiar things - Alamu, like the car rental firm, Mekbul, like McDonalds! I smile and nod a lot. Good. Good. Students step forward to translate. I ask them to join certain sections. Microscopic moments of focus on individuals in the chaos of people - too many people in a tiny space. Dusty floor. Clumps of children watching. Who are dancers who are watchers? Smiling faces. Twinkling eyes. Every time I finish with one pair someone shouts out to me "Jo, will you come and look at this?". And the names. The names! Unpronounceable. Indescribable. I will never get the names...

Adam takes over the session, beginning to combine the two sections that we have made. A moment for me to step. He thins out the movement, taking out several people. He has three people learn one's movement material. The section starts to get clearer and suddenly I feel a sense of relief. We can work together. I am going to learn something from this man. It will be worth the cost and the effort it took to get here. I fit in here - I can do this.

We get home to be greeted by Showayeh and fabulous home-cooked dinner. After dinner, I ask Adam to go through the dancers' names with me. I write them all down phonetically. He describes each one as we go through the list. I can barely picture two or three of them.

At night, I experience for the first time the nightly dog chorus. Howls and yelps rebound around the house as the neighbourhood dogs tune-in for their nightly chat. My mind is filled with a collage of wild and dusty pictures and sounds: speeding cars, crunching roads, brittle, loud laughter, crutches flying through dusty air, goats by the roadside... Each night of my stay in Ethiopia I will experience this. A rush of images playing double speed on my retina as I try to sleep. Sensory overload.

**Day 3**  
**Wednesday, April 9<sup>th</sup>**  
**Getting into the groove**

Our driver collects us at 9am. Today my skin feels paper thin and the images of the city leave me short of breath and fighting tears. Small children run up to the car at traffic lights, begging or trying to sell tissues to us. Trucks whiz by them, missing them by inches. One child's eyes are full of redness and swelling. The blind and the lame lie next to dusty, rocky roads.

The dancers counter the images of the city. They are so bright and able - I feel challenged by their capacity to create and learn. Adam and I plan a session but the warm-up massage leads gently into a movement improvisation and I watch Adam follow the moment. The students make sensitive duets based upon manipulating each others' bodies. Over lunch we discuss the afternoon. I am trying to find a way to support Adam in his process, while not making him feel that he has to try my ideas or be distracted by me. I try to ask him questions which will help him to discover where he wants to go: What of the movement generated so far really interests you? What do you think the piece might be about? "The piece is about not having a voice, not being able to speak, then being able to speak."

In the afternoon Adam asks the dancers to tell each other their stories, refining them down and down until they are two sentences long. The students tell each other the stories and vote whose they think are the most interesting. I have to record their votes - the way the students pronounce the names sounds nothing like my phonetic spelling from Adam's pronunciation. The names, the names... It is strange to listen to stories in a language that you don't understand. I find delight in watching the responses in the faces of the listening dancers, in the melody of each storyteller's voice, in the articulacy of their gestures. Sometimes the air is electric. I want to know what is being said...

In the evening Adam and I talk about the project. There are so many performers it is difficult to work in detail. I suggest that we might want to split the group, making three smaller groups. I find myself offering to lead on one of the groups, perhaps working with them to make a dance video which might convey some of what the project is about. I feel undecided about this course of action. I know I will enjoy the challenge of making a piece and the project seems to need both of us working in leadership roles, but I came to Ethiopia to learn from Adam and observe him and I feel that if I am working with a separate group this will not happen. He is aware of this and brings it up. We decide to try it and see - we can look at work and feedback in the evenings. I reassure myself that our working relationship will endure after the trip so there may be other opportunities for me to observe him work.

**Day 4**  
**Thursday, April 10<sup>th</sup>**  
**Unexpected inspiration**

Adam suggests that I film the journey to work for the video. We hope to give an impression of the bone-shaking, mind-blowing experience of that daily trip. What seems like an easy suggestion is actually very difficult. As a hangover from the communist era, people are wary of video in Ethiopia, thinking they may be being spied upon. This issue is intensified when the camera woman is a "firenge" (foreign person) as they are justifiably alert to exploitation. We are anxious.

Adam places a T-shirt over the camera to disguise it. I dip it behind the seat as we pass soldiers. We pass typists sitting on the street waiting to work, men shoveling sand, the railroad tracks, swarming with people walking, sitting, trading goods, having their shoes cleaned by young boys and girls.... Three lanes of traffic surge by a goatherd, moving a small cluster of scrawny goats across the bald grass verge, hunting for a few green shoots.

In the morning Adam and I split up to coach the material which we have already made with the dancers. I pretty much know their names by now (hours of repetition, poring over my journal and asking as they warm-up) and have found a collaborative exchange in making material with them. It is a delicate balance - I am trying not to create too much new material, shifting the dance away from what Adam is making, but want to refine the movement and test some ideas. Each time I finish with one couple another calls me "Jo, look at this". As I select one couple, looks of disappointment flash across the faces of three others. The enthusiasm is heady and exciting - I wish my dancers and students in London were this eager. I feel like I barely have time to breathe and certainly don't manage to watch Adam work.

By the afternoon, I am exhausted. Over lunch we have planned that I will take two groups outside to work so that Adam can have some space (physical and mental) with the third group. This is definitely the "assistant" role - I am trying to clear a space for Adam. Fortunately my experience as a teacher allows me to find a way to set twenty people to work on different things simultaneously, yet usefully. I work on finding songs and music to accompany the dance with one group and use my mini-disk player to record stories with the second group. I feel, however, that I am doing what I know, that this is not a steep learning curve for me.

And then it happens....crowd control turns into one of the most memorable afternoons of my stay in Ethiopia. This is the joy of working in unusual locations with unusual groups of people - when you think you are on the most familiar ground is when you are most surprised.

I ask one group to find a song which connects to any of the stories which they had told the day before. We are crouched on a patch of grass in the compound. I am moving between two groups, dodging the fierce afternoon sun. Children play noisily on nearby swings. Andwellelem, one of the Adugna dancers, suggests a song and suddenly ten voices raise in a melody about motherhood. The drums ripple as the cora picks out the tune. Melodic and yearning, they sing, calling and responding, harmonising. In my stomach, I feel a deep sense of excitement - tears well in my eyes. I have never heard music like this and it speaks to my heart. I have had difficulty connecting with one dancer, Ganet, but as she sings her pure, true voice rises above the others. She looks at me directly for perhaps the first time and we smile. From now on music will be how we connect. On my last day in the country, I will record her singing this very song.

I move inside a rough shelter made of wood and blue plastic to work with the second group to uncover more stories about their lives. I have a minidisk player and one dancer who has an injury is keen to take on the role of sound recordist. I teach him what little I know about the equipment and hope for the best... I ask the dancers what they each did before they began dancing - selling cigarettes, carrying loads of metal from the market, selling second hand clothes... I have a sense that the dancers have told these stories many times before. They are well rehearsed.

Then it happens. One disabled dancer, Hewatt, tells me about her brother. He died recently. I can tell she is sad and that there is a story there, but am unsure whether I should ask or not. I don't want to upset her, but she seems to want to share her story. I tell her about losing my grandfather who was very dear to me and ask what happened to her brother. In the midst of tears, she tells me about growing up with him, the games that they used to play, how he got sick and the doctors did nothing so he died. He was twenty-six. The mood of the group shifts and others start to tell stories. Tariqu tells about the time that he entered a soldier's camp to get food and was so hungry he did not notice that he had walked into the middle of a fierce battle in the civil war. "To this day he does not know how he walked through the bullets" Mekbul translates. Minyahul wanted to be like the fancily dressed men in his area - the suits, the shoes, the swagger. I laugh. I can see it in him. He found out that they were thieves and was on the brink of joining them when he found out about the Adugna project and got involved in dance. Tilahan, a disabled dancer, was in a camp for disabled people where he got education, food and clothing, but he was not allowed to see his brother. He decided to leave the camp and the security which it provided so he could be with his brother, from whom he was split when his grandmother died. Rosa and I laugh and cry with the dancers. Leah comes to tell us that the session is over, but somehow the stories keep coming and we can't stop. Rosa and I share our own stories and the dancers ask us questions. Adam pops his head in. It is time to go. Still we don't stop....

At home that evening Adam Rosa and I are like children. We trip around, making stupid jokes, laughing until we cry, until our stomachs hurt. This banter will become a feature of our stay. I think it has to do with being in such an extreme situation, seeing such things and hearing such stories - a kind of release. Adam and I talk late into the night. I talk to him about my sense of unease at encouraging Hewatt to talk about her brother. I am concerned about exploiting her - upsetting her for the sake of getting a good story. It is good to have someone experienced to discuss such things with - I spend so much of my time teaching less experienced artists it is good to have a chance to learn and challenge myself. We discuss dance, the world, our respective careers, the challenges of being a choreographer.... I realise that my learning on this trip will happen in these moments as much as when I am formally working.

**Day 5**  
**Friday, April 11<sup>th</sup>**  
**Venturing out**

My first trip out alone. After rehearsal, I get a cab to go to Gem TV to meet the production crew for the video shoot. Gem TV is also part of the Gemini Trust, a media company run like Adugna and also populated by former street children. I feel that I have been very protected since I got to Ethiopia - always a driver to take me from place to place, always a student at my side to chaperone me, never walking alone... I am a little nervous.

No need to worry - the cab driver is lovely and when we can't find the unmarked compound of Gem TV he asks at least five people. One jumps into the car to show us the way. The driver speaks a little English and tells me that he is from the neighbouring country Eritrea, with whom Ethiopia is at war. He has to move house every few days to avoid being caught and sent back.

The production meeting goes well. We show each other our past work and agree on a schedule for shooting. I have never directed a video before - I usually work with a director, so I feel a little out of my depth. What have I let myself in for? I figure I came to Ethiopia not planning to make anything myself, so anything I make is better than nothing...right?

By the time I get home, I feel like I have all the dust of Africa up my nose. Adam has been busy thinking in his time alone. He has formulated a plan to fundraise to build the Adugna project a dance studio. The Kassanches studio is small, dusty and has a concrete floor. Several of the dancers have severe injuries caused by working every day on concrete. Clearly they need a space which allows them to function at the level of professionalism of which they are capable. As we sip beers, Adam, Rosa and I talk about how we might raise such money, how much money, to build what...it feels entirely possible and the right course of action. Adam wants to use the video I am making to raise money, showing it at a fundraiser where Rosa will exhibit her photos. I spend several hours planning shots and locations - the ante has been upped and I am under pressure.

In the evening, we go to the Sheraton to see a Senegalese rap artist perform. As we drive up to the hotel it takes my breath away. It is the most ostentatious building I have ever seen, all gold pillars, marble and fountains. This is one of the hardest things to deal with in Addis Ababa - the contrasts. Virtually next to the hotel is a shanty town. I go to the toilet to hide the hot tears which spring to my eyes...I am angry, sad, embarrassed to be there. I am not sure I can stay. When I come out four of the dancers have arrived (their entrance paid for by the Alliance Francais with whom they are doing a project). With them there the concert seems tolerable and we end up dancing until the early hours - definitely discovered some moves which will make their way into my next piece. That Mr Benjamin can sure burn up the dance floor! By 9am the next day Jo, an English

friend of Adams, living in Addis Ababa, will have written an article for the local newspaper on what happens when choreographers go dancing!

## **Day 6**

**Saturday, April 12<sup>th</sup>**

### **Tourists and location scouting**

Our first “day off”. The morning is spent buying souvenirs and seeing a little of the city. In the afternoon, Rosa and I go out with Mekbul to scout for locations. When I get out the video camera the local children cluster around me and begin to perform their “gansta” rap moves. I have footage of children in the east end of London doing the same thing - a universal gestural language... I laugh and play with them and find great locations. It is good to be walking in the city.

## **Day 7**

**Sunday, April 13<sup>th</sup>**

### **Day of Learning, day of humility**

I am tired and I do not want to go out. Rosa and I have arranged to meet two of the disabled dancers to visit their homes. We both desperately want to go, but we are exhausted and the lure of a day spent lounging is strong. We haul ourselves to the Kassanches compound to meet Tilahan and Morca. Again - when something seems chore some is when the most intense experiences present themselves.

We film Morca and Tilahun on the way to Tilahun’s house on the outskirts of the city. I feel glad that we invited Minyahul, the injured dancer who has become so inspired by technology - sound recording and the camera. I think he might make an excellent filmmaker. He likes to take risks and pushes difficult moments to get shots. I know that without him we could not have shot this footage - two white women, two disabled boys and a video camera worth a year’s salary in a difficult area shooting footage with anxious people. Nice move Jo!

At Tilahan’s we are met by his two brothers. The younger one was a bouncer in a club (he had to threaten Minyahul once for refusing to pay for a broken glass!). He was getting into fights a lot so he gave up and is now unemployed. He and Tilahan share a room, with one double bed and two chairs. No water inside. Nowhere to cook. Tilahan’s elder brother was put into prison for seven years - “disappeared” in the middle of the night because he was a member of the opposition party. He is now released and living with his girlfriend around the corner. This is the first time in their lives that the brothers have been able to live close to each other. They are clearly very happy.

The tiny room is painted a beautiful bright pink and, despite there being no identifiable place to wash (aside from a jug and bowl), they are all dressed in immaculate clothes, looking like movie stars. Their pride overwhelms me.

We all go for drinks and they explain that the black strings around their necks are to indicate that they are Christians. They ask me what religion I am and I say that I was brought up Christian, but don't really have a religion. For the first time since my Grandfather died over five years ago, someone asks me why I don't believe in God and I am embarrassed that I don't have a clear argument. They are so convinced by the truth of their religion I don't know what to say. I don't believe because I haven't really thought about it that much...

**Day 8**  
**Monday, April 14<sup>th</sup>**  
**The arrival of Taref**

Adam has a stomach bug and an early morning meeting, so I lead the warm-up. I feel a little nervous as it is the first time that he has seen me work with the whole group. We have decided to make a whole group piece after all - combining the material that we have made and then I will shoot my sections separately after Adam leaves (Rosa and I are both staying on after the end of the project - ostensibly to travel but this will soon be consumed by a desire/necessity to keep working. It seems impossible to leave the intensity of the experience with the dancers).

At the end of the day we meet Taref.. Since we arrived in Ethiopia, we have heard about this girl in a wheelchair - profoundly disabled - who wants to join the project but who no-one can reach. Today she arrives. Her dad wrestles her wheelchair out of the back of their old VW car. The chair is old enough to be in a museum. Taref is smiley and open, clearly intelligent and able to understand English. We agree to have her work on the project. It is one of those moments, so familiar from my work at NewVic, when you know the easy course of action would be to ask her to watch and to include her next time, but you know that you will never do that. You know that she may never return, that the moment is now and that this may shift her life immeasurably. Adam asks me if I agree to include her in the performance and I nod. Of course...

**Day 9**  
**Tuesday, April 15<sup>th</sup>**  
**Taref's day**

I lead the warm-up so that Adam can dance with Taref. We need her to begin dancing with the group fast, so dancing with him seems the obvious way in as his experience will help her to learn and become at ease more quickly. She does not want to leave her wheelchair, so she dances in it. The room has an air of tension and excitement in it. The Adugnas and the Potentials are so used to dancing with each other that they have become a little complacent. This is new. They have never danced with someone in a wheelchair before and Taref's delight at moving and being with the group is infectious and attractive. Soon the

pair work becomes a group improvisation and Taref is dancing with the group.

Adam has lots of work to do, so has asks me to start working with Taref to integrate her into the performance. I feel a little pressured, as I am trying to get the pieces together for both he live show and the filming on Friday, added to this Leah needs to borrow two dancers to go to a presentation at the Finnish Embassy. I try to take a deep breath and concentrate on one thing at a time. I have a very competent group, so I let them get on with rehearsing while I work with Meseret and Taref. It is slow going, as Meseret needs to learn to work with the wheelchair (which is old, unpredictable and has sharp edges) and she is tentative. We make some material which lacks risk. Adam comes over. He quickly take she material and starts to teach skills of working with the wheelchair. Suddenly I am learning fast. As I move on to work with my group other dancers start to play with Taref and suddenly the wheelchair is being integrated into the group. Adam does some fast teaching about empowering Taref to make choices - not pushing her, offering her the opportunity to be moved and letting her lead the movement. It would be good for the group to be able to discover these things slowly, but we have to create a piece fast, so teaching them directly seems the only choice.

In the afternoon, Adam and I work to combine the sections into a whole piece. Again, I try to read Adam's creative flow to work out the best way to make suggestions. I ask him questions to help him think. He looks grey and sick so I try to do the running around - being dynamic to keep the group moving, standing up and moving people when he gives instructions. In the evening, we spend several hours with me moving around pieces of paper with the sections of the piece on them, trying to work out the order. It is fun to structure a piece with someone. This is the part of the creative process which usually feels the most difficult and lonely for me.

## **Day 10**

**Wednesday, April 16<sup>th</sup>**

### **Putting the piece together**

I lead the warm-up again and Adam gets Taref to leave her wheelchair and work on the floor. The room holds its breath and tears glisten in lots of people's eyes as she laughs with delight. It feels as if she has been dancing with us forever. Yet I know from her writing that this is the first time that she has had an opportunity to be with a group of her peers, that she has been frustrated at always being shut away at home and not being able to express herself or use her intellect. Her father glows with happiness and pride when he drops her off. He clutches my hand, shaking it vigorously and stumbling over his thanks. I am embarrassed. I don't want his thanks. Taref has brought something incredible to the group. I try to explain this but he just clutches, shakes and thanks me. We thank each other. Another of those moments of which my trip has been full - warm, human exchanges, deep emotion expressed openly....

Extracts from Taref's writing which we included in the piece:

After ten years I began to crawl without help.

They bought a plastic alphabet for me and I began to join the letters to communicate.

In the future I want to feed myself and dress myself with money that I have earned myself.

We continue putting the piece together. I feel able to step back a little as Adam constructs the piece. He is feeling better and has regained his dynamic energy. It is interesting to watch him work under pressure. He is very patient with the dancers, explaining what he wants quietly. My energy is louder, more explosive, so I watch their responses. Perhaps there would be a different way for me to work.

The structure works pretty much as we had planned, although the end does not and we do not have time to work it out...

## **Day 11**

**Thursday, April 17<sup>th</sup>**

### **The show**

We arrive at the school where we are to show the piece. There are no stage lights. We get Leah to get the Aduana technician to bring portable lights and spend the day constructing the piece. This requires extreme patience from me. Adam works quickly, but without an overt sense of urgency. He experiments with ideas, layering sound of the movement and structuring transitions between sections. I enjoy watching him work and feel I am learning about trusting your instincts, improvisation in the creative process and tips and techniques for building soundscapes and linking movement. Still - I have to bite my tongue as Adam focuses upon what feel like details to me when we have yet to complete the piece. I would be sketching everything roughly and getting to the end then going back for details if I had the time. Again - it is good to experience a different process, to consider other ways of working which are not natural for me. I try to support him, jumping in with ideas when he seems stuck, applying his instructions, coaching dancers. Ten minutes before the curtain goes up we don't have an ending and there are still no lights. We draw the curtains across the stage and quickly make an ending as the audience come in.

The audience sits on hard chairs in a school hall, crammed together - an odd mix of school children and dignitaries. The dancers dance beautifully. You would never guess at the frenzy of the last few hours. The lights are working patchily and the dancers start to redirect them as people move so that they are lit. Lights veer wildly around the stage and dancers are sometimes brightly lit from one direction, sometimes in darkness. The effect is sometimes breathtakingly beautiful and sometimes cringingly bad. The audience does not seem to mind.

I am sitting next to Taref's dad. As she first enters the stage, he begins to cry. He cries for the next twenty minutes as his daughter lights up the stage. The energy in the room seems to revolve around her. The hairs on my arms and neck stand on end as I see her find her medium, her sphere, a fish in water... Her dad looks at me, clutches my hand and begins to thank me profusely. I thank him back and so it goes on. At the end of the piece the audience leaps to its feet. Many are crying. Integrated work is so established in the UK, it is easy to forget how new and usual it is to these people's eyes...and how revolutionary a concept it is for them.

**Day 12**  
**Friday, April 18<sup>th</sup>**  
**Going solo**

Adam has gone - whisked away at some unearthly hour and I am left alone to shoot the video, which I hope will help raise money for the Adugna studio theatre. We spend the day rehearsing shots in the studio - just seven dancers and our crew from Gem TV. It is a relaxed and easy day. I feel inspired by having seen Adam work, but also pleased to get to lead a section of the project myself. I am solely in charge of a shoot for the first time and trying to remember all I have learned from watching the excellent directors with whom I have collaborated before. I am tired though - being in Addis is a difficult experience even without working this hard - coping with the stares, the begging, the sight and the sounds, the heat, the mud.....

**Day 13**  
**Saturday, April 19<sup>th</sup>**  
**Shooting**

We arrive at Kassanches and there is a problem. Somehow we have not managed to let everyone know, who needs to know, that we are going to use the space. One of the dancers has a class and his students will be arriving soon. We wait around for an hour and persuade one dancer to teach his class outside. I feel terrible. I feel that my work is being placed above his and I want him to know that I do not feel that my work is more important than his. But I have to leave Ethiopia soon and we have to shoot the section.... It goes well and we get out fast. So far so good.

The afternoon goes less smoothly. We are shooting outside the compound and have to cope with the inevitable crowds of people. The ground is filthy and rocky and the dancers don't want to roll on it. I get down on the floor to roll to persuade them to do it. I have long since got over any squeamishness I may have about dirt - I have been rolling in acres of it since I arrived. With the dancers ready to go (they behave like complete professionals - never complaining, giving fantastic performances in burning sun) we start to shoot and then the fun starts!

About fifty to a hundred people have gathered around to see the shoot. Mothers start to push their children into shot, trying to get them on camera. The dancers and I line up to try to defend the space of the shot, but it is impossible. We pay one of the biggest guys to keep people out of the shot, but he keeps wandering backwards into the shot. I squat down like a quarterback, facing away from the shot, ready to tackle any stray child who tries to run into the frame. I have no idea how the dancers are performing or if Teddy is getting the shots. I just hope for the best. Mothers keep pushing children into the shot, other adults, trying to help us, start throwing stones at the children to get them out of the shot. I am encouraging cruelty to children. HELP! Bob, the fabulous English director supporting the Gen TV guys acts as a child decoy, chatting to crowds of kids, wearing his baseball cap and making an exhibition of himself. I fluctuate between tearing my hair out and laughing out loud. If we don't get anything at least I will have good stories to tell....

**Day 14**  
**Sunday, April 20<sup>th</sup>**  
**A test....**

It is Palm Sunday and the students taking class at Kassanches have palms folded into beautiful designs around their heads, on their fingers, on their wrists. It turns out that today is the day that I will need to call upon all my Christian spirit to generate enough patience to survive. Teddy has brought the wrong camera, so we have to wait for an hour while he gets the right one. He seems a bit absent.

When he returns we start shooting. Today is a tight schedule and we have the most difficult sections to shoot, left until last so that I have established a working relationship with Teddy. The dancers are leaping around in burning sun. The weather in Ethiopia has become erratic as the rainy season seems to have started early. For hours the sun burns us up and then suddenly there is a downpour. We wait it out.... I am learning patience, learning to be more relaxed about problems...we will get what we get.....

As the shoot progresses, I find Teddy seems not to be listening very hard and when I watch shots back the dancers are sometimes wholly missing. Then Bob tells Rosa that today is his "Chat" chewing day. Chat is the Ethiopian drug of choice and suddenly everything becomes clear. I decide to watch every shot back and occasionally act as camera-woman myself.

As the day wears on I get a bit snappy - it seems like an impossible task to get the shots. The dancers dislike my choice of location - an area of decayed fencing and rubbish. I think it is beautifully poetic, speaking of decay, the transience of life - they just think it is dirty and shows Addis in a bad light. I can see what they mean and understand that they want their city to look good, so we move. And it

then it starts to rain. It pours. We wait.....

Finally, I get almost all the shots and we finish. The dancers have been patient beyond believe - professional to the last and Teddy too has driven on through the day without once complaining, being wholly supportive.

At home, I decide not to watch the footage back as if it is not as good as I wanted, it might make me want to continue working and I really need to stop and take a day or two off before returning to work next week. I collapse.....

**Day 15**  
**Monday, April 21st**  
**Tears**

I am exhausted and it takes Rosa three attempts to get me out of bed. Today we have agreed to go to Alert, a home for adults and children with disabilities, situated about forty-five minutes away from where we are staying. Morca, one of the disabled dancers, lives there and he and Tilahan have been doing some dance with a group of about eleven young boys there - a project initiated on their own. I am touched by the invitation to go to Morca's home and by their enthusiasm. I want to support their independent work, but the urge to lie down and sleep is strong...

The camp is dismal. Long rows of bunk beds, black cloths at the windows blocking the light, personal possessions in little tin boxes. The excited children are dirty and, as they hug me, I hold my breath for the smell. I hug them back tightly. There are hundreds of pictures on the walls, mostly drawn by hand, lots of them drawn by Morca. This is the camp that Tilahan left in order to be able to live with his brother.

We walk around the camp. Everywhere we look are smiling faces - adults and children, eyes watching us intently. I am struck by the fact that no-one seems to have anything to do. They sit and watch us or walk with us. Pop music is piped through tinny speakers. Morca and Tilahan have bought us Coke and Fanta, they have prepared for our visit in detail. They take us outside and on a muddy field they show us the work that they do with the young boys. They warm up carefully and then plunge into a series of activities. I recognise exercises which Adam uses regularly. The children balance precariously on each other, they are sensitive and athletic, paddling through the mud and ignoring the beating sun. I am moved beyond words. The children are so proud of what they are doing and Morca and Tilahan are so confident - an inspiration for them. I dance with the boys, doing a blind leading exercise...it feels like the best dance I have ever had.

On the way back in the minibus with Mekbul, Rosa, Tilahan and Morca, I cry. It is the first time I have cried in front of the dancers, but I just can't stop. The children, the dirt, the boredom, their joyous movement, the power of Morca and

Tilahan's work....

In the early evening, Teddy, Rosa and I get shots of Addis for the video. We work out that if I show Teddy the shot and then Rosa and I walk away it is possible to shoot without it becoming a circus. The tiny Teddy often finds himself surrounded by big burly men, but diffuses each situation with humour and his good natured banter. He is a true professional and it is nice to see him in his element.

**Day 16**  
**Tuesday, April 22nd**  
**Quite a journey**

Rosa and I set off for our one night of relaxation at Lake Langano - a lake about five hours to the south of Addis. Mekbul is our chaperone and we have hired a car and a driver. It feels like a vast relief to have finally finished working and to get to relax. Little do we know...

To make a long story short - the car breaks down, we think we may have to hitch, hours of negotiation with lorry drivers and locals, Mekbul negotiates a ride to the lake with the driver of a passing battered VW bus, the car driver tries to persuade us that he can get us another car, we get in the VW. Rosa: "I don't mind picking up other people on the way as long as I don't end up with a goat on my lap.....".

**Day 17**  
**Wednesday, April 23<sup>rd</sup>**  
**Quite a journey - chapter 2**

After a night of relaxation (swimming, baboons and HUGE bugs), the VW bus arrives almost two hours late (again - we were preparing to hitch as Rosa's flight is leaving tonight). The five hour journey back to Addis is accompanied by the one tape that the driver has (and lots of chat chewing by the drivers.....) Let me tell you, if I ever hear early Madonna, Whitney Houston or Boy George again, I think I will have to kill myself...

**Day 18**  
**Thursday, April 24<sup>th</sup>**  
**Farewells**

I go to see the Adugna dancers to say goodbye. I am excited to hear that they are already implementing some of the things that Adam and I have suggested. They are developing integrated teaching teams, more integrated classes and several integrated projects, including one with Morca, Tilahan and Mekbul at Alert. I am again overwhelmed by the intelligence, skill and motivation of the dancers and the vision and efficiency of Leah. Ask and you shall receive.....

I say goodbye with a heavy heart - promising to return soon...

**Day 19**  
**Friday, April 25<sup>th</sup>**  
**Home**

At 4.45am the car arrives to take me to the airport. It is raining so hard I can barely see the driver or the guard. I tie a plastic bag on my head - an Ethiopian form of protection against the rain, learned from the students. There is a hair-raising drive to the airport with the driver vigorously wiping away the mist on the windscreen and forgetting to turn the wheel while he does it. We career through puddles and the car surges sideways. We accelerate and slow down in surges. It would be ridiculous to have survived shooting the video, the journey to Langanu and the daily dice with death of riding in taxis to end up in an accident on my last morning and I start to pray to some higher force. Maybe that's why the Ethiopians have such strong religious beliefs....

On the plane I look at the rushes from the shoot. I did not dare to do it before. They are good. I am relieved.

I arrive home and feel like I have landed in an alien world. I can't understand why there are no dogs barking and miss the call to prayer, the heat of the end of the day, the dust and the fumes. England looks cold and grey, damp, lacking the depth and intensity of colour, sound, smell and experience. Boring and plain.

I immediately start negotiating my return to Ethiopia.....

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