



Patricia Estacuy and Rosa Shreeves at El Hato School. Photo: Tony Ochoa

Dancing in the Landscape

Independent dance artist, **Rosa Shreeves**, reveals her dance encounters with the people and the natural world of Guatemala

Each year since 2006 I have visited Guatemala for a month at a time. I had previously travelled widely in Mexico researching dance in the context of the culture. Guatemala has a new venture, to find out more about indigenous dance and culture, to develop my own work through contact with new landscapes and to give something back to the people from myself.

I do this by following my curiosity and intuition; asking for information in the market place, striking up conversations, plans arising from the human contact.

'If your path has no heart, leave it.'
Amazonian Oral Tradition.

In reality and metaphorically my journey is seldom straightforward. Sometimes I lose my way, backtrack and then often arrive unexpectedly at wonderful destinations.

I have performed and run workshops in schools, village squares, an art gallery and created dance material in

outdoor locations, linking my movement and my photographic work. Often the most important times are in periods of quiet reflection where I am still, where I listen, watch and absorb the influences of this vivid landscape and reaffirm my connections to the natural world.

A workshop in San Pedro

Music Memories:

Felt in bones and muscles

Visceral response to slow violin

Haunting sadness of the flute

That jaunty rhythm

Percussion beat

Stop.

In a faraway playground

Eighty children dancing

Enraptured

To the music of the band

'Ready, I call out and off we go, swimming smoothly into dance, rising and sinking, turning and leaping, alluding to the connection with sky and earth so familiar to them from their Mayan stories and beliefs.'

In the village of San Pedro on the shores of Lake Atitlan I meet Juan Manuel, the director of an intercultural centre there. Juan is slight, dark haired and fizzing with energy; a passionate advocate for the education of indigenous children. He has organised a children's summer school and is keen that I lead a dance workshop there. Details are agreed including the provision of live music but the number of children who would attend is left vague. I suggest thirty children. He prefers as many as possible.

So two days later, In a hot, part shaded school playground, eighty one excited, expectant boys and girls are gathered, ranging in age from about six to ten years old with a handful of young teenagers around the edge. Juan, with a megaphone in hand and with great panache, introduces me and the four musicians, two drummers, a string player and a flautist.

I gather the children close around me and tell them we are going to make a dance together. 'Escucha bien. Escucha a la musica. Respirar.' 'Listen hard. Listen to the music. Breathe'. The band - no time for subtleties here, will watch my 'conducting', slowing down, pausing, quickening, a staccato beat or a smooth, melodic line. They prove to be brilliant.

"Ready", I call out and off we go, swimming smoothly into dance, rising and sinking, turning and leaping, alluding to the connection with sky and earth so familiar to them from their Mayan stories and beliefs. Slowly more details, more clarity. Stillness. A gradual absorption in the movement's flow of energy. Pausing as pleasurable. Praise as recognition. My part improvised Spanish is hardly necessary as the visual communication of movement deepens. Dance is a feeling process. Words may be a distraction.

After about fifty minutes we end with a unison two phrase dance and a breathing stillness; feeling the heat and the tiny movement of leaves in the trees.

The children scatter to retrieve their snacks and water. I did not really say a formal goodbye, but walking next day in the narrow streets, every so often I hear, 'Hola Rosa'.

We had shared an experience together.

WALLS - a performance at Las Capuchinas

Discovering movement

Enfolding the crypt

Absorbing history

Creating images amongst

Space and stone.

I meet Tony Ochoa, a co-director together with his brother Ignacio, of Nahual Foundation. Tony is an accomplished musician, singer and story teller, very knowledgeable about Mayan rituals and also prone to offering me short,

uncomfortable lifts on his motorbike!

He shows me around the convent of Las Capuchinas, built originally in 1736. Constantly damaged by earthquakes it is now rebuilt and is a museum which exhibits religious life in Colonial times.

Through a courtyard brilliant with bougainvillea, we go down some winding steps and enter a circular crypt, one small barred window high up; a cool, stone filled silence.

We wait, absorbing the stillness and the sense of powerful energy there. The walls echo the murmur of our voices. I begin to move slowly against the walls. Tony sings softly. Sound, movement and echo interweave. Later he fills the space with a huge voice sound, my movement expanding and diminishing in counterpoint.

Over the next week I return alone to the crypt, making and refining patches of dance, gradually a dance piece is emerging.

Throughout the whole process, transient audiences enter the crypt and watch, ask questions and share their responses, 'Beautiful and important. People need this'. 'Something other than thinking about money all the time.' Little boy, 'I felt frightened. I thought you were a nun in prison here.'

ROOTS

ROOTS is a performance for children devised and performed in the UK and subsequently in Spanish in Guatemala. It comprises story, dance, props and images which connect to beliefs about the natural world.

It was first performed alongside a group of teachers /clowns who like the Pied Piper, gather children in a village square on a Sunday afternoon to sing action songs and games together. Fred Zambroski, a visionary organiser of many local projects and a generous supporter of my work, invites me to perform ROOTS alongside the clowns and to share some of my movement ideas. On another occasion I led a participatory dance, Magic Bag, where children, teenage boys and a few adults all joined in. This gathering of community through dance feels satisfying and important.

Working with the clowns is challenging, enjoying being with the clowns while working from a different, creative perspective. They are now led by Carlos Gomez and are a popular, independent indigenous group, which makes a valuable contribution to the education of impoverished village children.

ROOTS continues to grow, fed and influenced by my dance experiences. One off shoot is when work in the El Colegio School in Antigua leads to an intercultural exchange between El Colegio and Castlewood School, in Sussex, following my residency there. For me this is an exciting development of a long held dream.

>



Rosa Shreeves, WALLS dance.
Photo: Fred Zambroski

'Here I learn of the efforts to empower local people to develop support systems in their villages, to educate people of their rights and to encourage their creativity to find solutions.'

El Hato

Now we travel high up into the hills to a small village and El Hato school. Ah ha, has there been a breakdown of communication? I am not sure that we are expected here! Never mind, the teachers are delighted. We quickly sweep the floor into clouds of dust, clear the space and perhaps helped by the extra adrenalin produced by this situation, the performance goes well. At one point there is a huge crashing sound from the room next door. Some of the audience rush out to see what has happened. Our taxi driver ushers them back in and on we go. In the audience such moments of touching absorption.

There is no music equipment here, just my home made shakers which I leave with the teacher, Patricia Estacuy, together with a brief set of notes to support her follow up ideas.

This venture was organised by Tony Ochoa from the Cultural Commission at Nahual Foundation, together with Ervin Chan, a community leader and teacher from El Hato. The Nahual Foundation is a volunteer-based community centre in Antigua. Its vision is the establishing of a Think Tank by and for the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas. Here I learn of the efforts to empower local people to develop support systems in their villages, to educate people of their rights and to encourage their creativity to find solutions. Tony's belief is that art is the way to rebuild society, so happily I fit into this structure.

An Indigenous dance lesson, San Juan, Lake Atitlan

Magdalena, an Indigenous friend, waits for me in front of the church. Women and children emerge in a flow of rich colour, all dressed in the traditional wrap around skirts and blouses in the distinctive designs of their village. There's a low murmuring of voices speaking Kiche, one of twenty three indigenous languages still spoken in Guatemala. They smile at us.

We wait for a passing open backed lorry which will give us a lift to the nearby village of San Juan. It is nearly dark. We clamber aboard. It suddenly rains hard. We shelter beneath my poncho and hold on tight round the bends and under the dripping trees.

We arrive at the village hall. Two days earlier I had tracked down Professor Baldomero, a teacher of

indigenous dance. He greets me, surrounded by his colourful instruments, masks and costumes, and introduces me to his class of teenage boys and girls.

With their kind help he teaches me Los Cargadores and other dances, which use a mixture of slow movements and quick repetitive travelling steps, all rooted in spiritual connections to Mayan beliefs and the seasonal significance of the Mayan calendar. These dances embody an ancient culture: a living history which is danced today. Sometimes hard on the knees!

Baldomero invites me to perform with his group, to wear a magnificent, colourful costume and also suggests that I perform ROOTS as part of the programme. This feels like a great honour.

However, due to perform at seven thirty that evening in the local Salon, at eleven pm the Band before us still has not finished. So sadly, on this occasion we decide to postpone my part in this event for another visit.

Summary

In Guatemala I have found great friendliness, inspiration and reconnections to my underlying dance philosophy and creativity. Although economically poor with enormous problems in society, the Guatemalans are spiritually rich, with strong, supportive bonds in their communities. We inevitably learn from each other and through the broad ranging language of dance we deepen our human relationships and communication.

"I have not come to resolve anything. I have come here to sing and for you to sing with me." Pablo Neruda (1).

contact rosashreeves@talktalk.net or 020 8995 5904

(1) Latin Spirit, published by Thames and Hudson.

Fundacion Nahual **visit** www.fundacion-nahual.org
Fred Zambroski **visit** www.letsbeready.org

Heartfelt thanks to the following: Juan Manuel, Ignacio & Tony Ochoa, Ervin Chan, Fred Zambroski, Carlos Gomez, Luis Aguilar, Alfonso Manzanares, Claudia Pacheco, Lucia Armas - Ballet Folklorico Guatemala, Diego Baldomero, Magdalena, Jennifer Kip, Rafael Chaves and Nancy Payne.