

# Independent Arts Foundation (IAF) Project Report 2023

## Clementine Benson

*I would like to gratefully acknowledge Russell Starke and his family for allowing me this career defining opportunity.*

### Project Report

Under the auspices of the Independent Arts Foundation (IAF) and as grateful recipient of the Russell Starke "Broadening access to the arts in country SA" Grant, I embarked on a professional development journey to the United Kingdom, spending a month with distinguished UK-based choreographers and their companies. This immersive experience was designed to build my capabilities as an emerging choreographer and regional dance artist, enriching my understanding of contemporary dance practices through direct mentorships and performance opportunities.

The initial fortnight was spent in Leicester, where I was warmly welcomed into the Aakash Odedra Company. It was an immersive opportunity to not only observe but participate in the company's routine, providing a practical perspective of the operations within a successful dance company. This experience enabled me to understudy for their renowned performance of "Samsara", contributing to a profound understanding of the piece's essence and technical demands.

An exceptional aspect of my time with the Aakash Odedra Company was a personal mentorship with Aakash Odedra himself. Through his careful guidance, I learned the solo "Constellation," originally created for Odedra by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui for the show "Rising." This piece, performed worldwide for a decade, was a valuable lesson in emotional storytelling through dance, extending my comprehension of choreographic structures.

Upon concluding my fortnight in Leicester, I ventured to London for a three-week mentorship and residency with Russell Maliphant and his company. This segment of the project allowed me to engage deeply in the creation process of contemporary dance, as I shadowed the company during the development of their new work "Vortex." Attending company classes each morning provided a comprehensive foundation for each day's activities, equipping me with the necessary skills to understudy for "Vortex" effectively.

This period also facilitated a collaborative relationship with Russell Maliphant and Dana Fouras. Both generously invested their time and expertise in teaching me "Two," a piece of repertoire crafted for Dana Fouras in 1997. This hands-on experience amplified my grasp of diverse choreographic practices, enriching my stylistic repertoire and technique.

In summary, the one-month professional development project was a transformative experience that combined instruction, performance, and mentorship to expand my capabilities as a regional dance artist and emerging choreographer. The opportunities to understudy for "Samsara" and "Vortex," learn solos like "Constellation" and "Two," and work closely with accomplished choreographers like

Aakash Odedra and Russell Maliphant, have indelibly shaped my artistic vision and professional trajectory.

### **Successes and Achievements:**

The project was resoundingly successful, enabling profound growth in my artistic capabilities, understanding, and network. Learning and performing alongside world-class choreographers and their companies expanded my technical skill set and enriched my choreographic approach. The exposure to such diverse creative environments has made a significant impact on my personal style and informed my perspective on the craft of choreography.

The opportunity to learn the solos "Constellation" and "Two", as well as sections from "Samsara" including Aakash's own "Agni" solo was a particular highlight, offering insight into the unique choreographic languages of Aakash Odedra and Russell Maliphant, and unexpectedly, another luminary of the contemporary dance world, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Equally, understudying for "Samsara" and "Vortex" provided valuable experience in adapting to different roles, an essential skill in the fluid world of contemporary dance.

Establishing connections with key figures in the international dance scene was another vital achievement, fostering relationships that will significantly influence my future career development. Additionally, the project's international aspect gave me an invaluable glimpse into the broader contemporary dance ecosystem, improving my understanding of global trends and standards. Particularly important is my connection to both Russell and Dana, who have invited me to help them remount and then perform the work "Two x Two" at both European and Australasian performance venues in late 2023/2024.

### **Challenges and Difficulties:**

The project was not without challenges, chief among them being the steep learning curve required to assimilate into two diverse company environments within a short timeframe. Adapting to the rigorous physical demands and different working methodologies was initially taxing. However, these challenges also provided opportunities for growth and resilience, enhancing my adaptability – a crucial trait for any artist.

Another difficulty lay in reconciling the differences between the project's anticipated and actual scope. The one-month timeframe was intensive and at times, limiting, given the scale of learning and engagement required. Despite this, the experience proved to be an efficient catalyst for my artistic evolution.

### **Evaluation against Expected Outcomes:**

My initial project outline identified this opportunity as a unique platform for professional development, with the objective of refining my choreographic methodology, understanding company dynamics in a different artistic setting, and building a professional network. The project delivered on these goals.

Despite the demanding schedule, I was able to absorb a wealth of knowledge about choreographic methods and company structures, applying these insights to my practice. The relationships formed have established a solid network for future collaborations and exchanges.

Variations to the initial plan occurred mostly due to external factors, such as scheduling changes in the companies' calendars. However, these variations were skilfully navigated, and the project's core objectives were met with success. Through these alterations, I also gained a deeper understanding of the fluidity and resilience required in professional dance contexts. I am particularly pleased to have been able to share what I learned over the course of this professional development opportunity through a led workshop at Dance Hub SA during Fringe 2023.

Overall, the project provided an invaluable platform for professional development and networking, aligning with my long-term goals of becoming a locally and internationally recognized independent performer and choreographer. While there were challenges along the way, they were overshadowed by the wealth of learning and experience gained, underscoring the project's effectiveness and value.

*Photo: Russell Maliphant coaching me in the work "Two" at his studios in London - photo by Dana Fouras*

