

From Seeds to Flowers ...

report related to trip to Odessa, Ukraine
May 26th – June 1st 2009-09-02

>> Arriving in Odessa

I have been invited by Ukrainian cultural NGO KusiCreaVision(<http://kusicreavision.com>) to come to Odessa and teach a Master Class which will consist of what is most likely the very first class of Kinetic Awareness® in this country. The trip has been made possible by a travel-grant from STEP BEYOND, a programme of the European Cultural Foundation ECF (<http://eurocult.org>)

While I am in the bus from Kyiv Borispol Airport to Odessa, a movie is shown for entertainment. The story of a blond ice-skater girl who has a boyfriend-partner that in turn gets seduced by the evil red-headed (!) enemy-woman, and consequently drops her from a lift during an important competition. She ends up in the wheel-chair, totally devastated. Of course she gets around (partly with the help of a good, loving doctor/physiotherapist) I am happily surprised that the physiotherapist in this movie used rubber balls of different sizes to help her get better. This is very much in line with the movement technique & therapy Kinetic Awareness®, where rubber balls are used to aid gentle, multi-directional movements of the body in un-precedented directions. However this is where the comparison ends: the physio goes quite beyond the pain-limits of the girl and we get the time-honored morale of “no pain - no gain”

Finally we arrive in Odessa at 4 o'clock in the morning. Prof. Natalia Kusik of KusiCreaVision has been expecting me in the bus hall and we drive to a pension in the outskirts of Fontanka, which is directly next to the Black Sea. When we arrive at the pension in Fontanka I meet Baba Tonya: her full name is Antonia Grigorievna Lipatova. While I am allowed to stay at her pension for free, she “adopts” me in true Mediterranean / Central-Eastern European style, just like she has done with the two Natalias (Kusik & Volchenko)

It turns out the next day that Antonia is a licensed massage-therapist who is well-versed in alternative and traditional healing medicine. What surprises me even more is that she tells me they used rubber balls for their study in the Soviet Union as early as 1950, a method she claims came from China. This is a phenomenal finding for me as a certified Kinetic Awareness® teacher who learned his work from the originator of this body-therapy and dance technique, Elaine Summers (<http://elainesummersdance.com> / <http://kineticawarenesscenter.org>) Towards the end of my stay she agrees to an interview which is partly captured on video, partly on my cell-phone.

>> Yuzhny Art School

On the big day Natalia Volchenko, Natalia Kusik, and two student art-managers of Prof. Natalia Kusik help us during the day with driving a specially rented car and helping with extras. The balls that KusiCreaVision have bought for class of Kinetic Awareness® (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinetic_awareness) are too big to be comfortable for the neck-class that I had prepared. So on the way to the Art School I try to at the same time be social and also change my preparation for the class.

While we drive to Yuzhny, a related sub-urb of Odessa, we pass by a giant chemical factory-complex, to which this town is closely related. It has been bought by an American company. Yuzhny itself looks like my imagination of true Soviet-style: standard blocks of flats, large scale public figures, colorful life in between. My arrival at the School is a local event, the local arts administrator, also a former student of Prof. Natalia Kusik, takes the time to attend the Master Class. There is also a local journalist present, Violetta Panhidina who comes to take photographs and at the end of the class asks a few questions as well.

The headmaster of the School, Vlasova Yulia, comes out herself to greet us and we are lead to the studio. There are three rows of chairs and a video-camera. One of the participants, Natalia Zhurenko is also designated to be the recording camera-woman. She ends up having to jump off from lying on the floor to adjust the camera and change tapes, then go back down again and trying to concentrate on her body-sensations. All of this setup is at odds with a usual Kinetic Awareness® class where the accent is on intimacy and quietness. Here everyone seems to come in with very different expectations.

The participants are mostly students preparing to be dance teachers of different kinds, from ballet to social-dance sports. I try to deal with my nervousness and at the same time find relaxation as much as possible. Instead of directly working on just legs and knees, I remain partly stuck in my prepared neck-class, wanting to lead from the neck to the legs. This plan does not work out well, the students keep losing their concentration. After a while the few spectators are leaving, which is very understandable since the kind of work that I do with the students is very internal-oriented, there is not that much to see for an untrained eye from the outside.

Probably no one, perhaps not even KusiCreaVision would have expected that I would do something like this. I try to explain that I decided to give something unique that I practice and have an official certificate to do (currently I am one of four Certified Teachers in Europe) and that this work is something which they can do for themselves and would have to develop further to apply in their own classes. Since neither modern nor postmodern dance are taught or known at this school, this turns out to be a long way to go before more mutual understanding can be reached.

All of these notwithstanding, the final responses are very positive, if a bit shocked and I am surprised at the obvious patience and determination of my fellow professionals to try and deal with the new information. Director Vlasova Yulia even offers the participation of her Art School in further projects and we talk about the possibility of an artist-in-residency there. Natalia Zhurenko with whom I had the most agitated discussion about the uses of leg-alignment, gives me a CD with music for dance-competitions as a souvenir. Violetta Panhidina publishes a very positive and open-minded article in the newspaper of Yuzhny. (for the online-version click here <http://yuzhny.org/index.php?lang=&parent=111&type=full&id=1845>)

>> The 25th Hour

KusiCreaVision introduce me to young artists Andrew Sechkovsky and Larisa Bondarenko, head-organisers of the event "The 25th Hour" at the famous Odessa film-studio complex (yes, the one with Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin and many others)

The festival celebrates 90 years of film-industry in these studios. It is at the same time a political rally, because these studios are to be turned into yet another luxurious housing complex that is offered to (Russian) ultra-rich who want to continue to use the Black Sea as their holiday resort. An enormous amount of local artists have come together to re-vive the studios with installations, music, performances and mixtures of all of them. For the first time ever, the complex is opened up to the general public. (http://www.show-klas.com.ua/full/15-festival_25-y_chas_posvjashcenniy_90letiju.html)

By the time we meet Andrew, he, Larissa, and their team have been working non-stop for three days and nights to get the festival going. The fatigue is hardly visible and I am greeted with amazing kindness and helpfulness. Andrew and I discuss the place of performing my solo "available tension: Raven" for an example, see the excellent Romanian registration at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr_5a4CmPrI) It is a large hangar now full of installations on the side, but where the main space has been left empty.

The proposition is heaven for me and I get an instant rush of energy from it: not only do I get to perform my solo, but the team, all wearing white painter's overalls, agree that they will get together at one moment to perform my score "walking con-sens-us" in a projection of the Skyfilm I had shot back in 2006 at tüzraktér Budapest (HU) (<http://tuzrakter.hu>).

This would be a world premiere and a chance to try Odessa as the first station for the overall-project "Discover the East", where I would realize exactly this dance in a string of cities from Berlin eastward to as far as Cairo. Additionally there can be a showing of a filmdance by my teacher Elaine Summers, "Two Girls Downtown Iowa" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3veS3AWrh1k>) in the part of the film-screenings. We are also to be part of the press-conference to the event and can have one on our own as well.

Later that night I hardly sleep, I do the PR-preparations on my con-sens-us weblog (<http://con-sens-us.blogspot.com>) and have to re-render the sky-movie and export it to my memory-stick which takes a lot of time and has some complicated technical difficulties. The team around Andrew and Larissa are wonderful to work with, they really help wherever they can.

When we arrive at the opening the place is packed with people, the atmosphere playful but also powerful, it is a moment where ordinary people take control of an otherwise closed situation – a bit reminiscent of a squatting-party, but it's regular people taking power to gather and celebrate, despite the regular guards and security at the gates. I share the bill with two local dance celebrities, a couple producing something between showdance, ballroom, and contemporary dance with lots of acting to likewise music, and the performance artist, critic, and writer Uta Kilter.

The latter is the one to make a lasting impression on me, not so much in her infamous beginning of the show (she makes a public rage about how the entire program is hours late and anyway she didn't have time to prepare properly) not even by her mix of video-projection, self-produced composed music, and an amazing presence that owes to Japanese Butoh in style (spiky wisps of hair, face painted white with huge black smears around the eyes, lips painted bright red, in a bordeaux-red velvet dress and fitting ultra-high heeled shoes) but it's the energy that she creates by the combination of all of these. I am very impressed of the presence of something near sacred from a woman who had chosen to be clearly an outsider. Luckily she also has an adamant fan-core and gets plenty of applause and recognition, her performance has clearly touched everyone in the space, even after about 1,5 hours of delay on the part of the organisers.

My own performance goes lukewarm to my own perception. I, too, get worn out by the extra waiting and when I do perceive a chance to fill the space unannounced and breaking the agreed order of appearances, I hold myself back for a moment and loose the moment. When it is finally my turn the start is hastened. Some people start to laugh at what I do, later I am told that there were also loud comments ("My grandmother can do this too!"- "Why don't you go and get her, I don't think it will work the same!") Did I show something from another planet, similar to what happened in Yuzhny?

I still manage to finish the piece to some applause, feeling devastated. Both Natalias, joined by the painter Nadiia Fomicheva who made photographs of our city tour the next morning, as well as the students who were with us yesterday, are very supportive and encouraging. (later I get word from some people that this was one of the best things they've seen)

It has gotten too late for anything more, so we decide with Andrew to move the performance of "walking con-sens-us" to the next day of the showings in the same hall. Unfortunately this never happens: later that night expensive technical equipment is stolen despite the hired security and the festival breaks down as a result. When we get back to the site, we are informed with many other visitors that the festival is cancelled, including the press-conference. Many people are angry and say so. Some of them have travelled long-distance to finally see the studios, some of them are former employees who wanted to see their beloved place of work once more. But the organisers maintain their position and the two Natalia's and me are leaving for the beach park of Odessa to have a picknick.

>> A (non-) commercial side-adventure

Right after my performance a young enthusiastic woman talks to me and says she loved what I did and did I also teach? Would I be interested to teach for an hour at the contemporary dance-workshop she is organising that weekend? I sense the chance to make up for the gap that happened in Yuzhny and in the moment of excitement say yes I would if I got the chance. But I am warned by the two Natalias: this is very likely a commercial situation. I decide to keep my word and request that we should go, it feels like a good chance. KusiCreaVision agree to help and go there with me.

The workshop is given by choreographer and dancer Viktor Ruban and is based on New Dance. The participants are mostly amateurs and semi-professionals. However the place of the workshop is indeed a small commercial beauty & fitness center in Odessa. Nonetheless it is wonderful to be in an atmosphere that to me feels much more like home dance-wise and my contribution to the workshop is a full-out success for everyone involved, they do understand what I have to say and it is beautiful to see how everybody takes what is offered into their very own kind of dance that frees up the human body to move with ease and without harming it, on the contrary. I truly wish that this message of less exploitation and more exploration will last a little longer than a single hour during a workshop...

>> The last evening in Odessa

We end at Fontanka like we began, with Baba Tonya and an enormous dinner with grilled meats. She agrees to be interviewed about her experiences related to Kinetic Awareness® on video, which we do despite technical difficulties. We also discuss future plans with KusiCreaVision: do something on an outdoors-spot, with workshops and classes to accompany the event.

When it is time to say goodbye and leave I get a feeling that I earlier had only observed with Japanese friends of mine: an upwelling urge to cry because it is time to no longer see each other. Obviously I have felt very much connected to this place without even realizing it myself. I am very impressed by everyone's great hospitality and generosity.

May it be rewarded in return many times!