

A CANADIAN GIRL IN THE STREETS OF LONDON. . . ENGLAND: PART ONE

By Harmanie Shairp, AKA Wheelchair Girl

This summer, I had the amazing opportunity to fly to England and study integrated dance at theCandoCo Summer Lab 2007. The lab was run by very talented dancers of all physical abilities who had a lot to teach us (the participants) about dance, working together, exploring your own abilities, accepting others' unique talents and working outside your comfort zone. I really enjoyed my time at the Summer Lab, and meeting all of the extraordinary dancers from all over the world. Some (like myself) had little or no dance experience; others were professional dancers and others owned their own companies. It is hard to say what I enjoyed more: hearing about everyone's incredible stories, the scenery from any point of the completely accessible college in the rolling country side of England, or working hard learning yoga, dance warm ups, improv, starting points... the list goes on. It was all an incredible adventure. However, attending the Lab was only one adventure in many that I experienced in rainy England. After a nine hour flight, our plane touches down in England. Even at the airport, I could tell I was definitely not in Canada anymore. I loved everyone's accents, and how excited they looked when we told them we were here to attend a workshop on integrated dance. The taxi we took to the hotel was the cutest thing and completely accessible. It had handles in all the right places so it was easy for me to hoist myself in and sit in the back. There was also room for my chair and our luggage. The hotel, of course, had stairs to get into it. They did say they could bring out this portable ramp, but it was old and rickety and not very safe looking, and I was glad I had brought my crutches along for the ride. The hotel room was beautiful and the beds looked so incredibly comfy, especially after a long plane ride. The bathroom door was so teeny tiny that we had to put an ordinary chair in the bathroom for me to transfer on to so that I could maneuver around. In the room there was a kettle for tea and a TV (which came in handy later that evening). First things first, though; it was time for a nap. Later that evening, after we had rested and went out for a very expensive dinner (as well as taking a walk through Hyde Park), we used that very TV to watch the English news. The News talked about one thing and one thing only: how all of the flooding in the midlands had wiped out several major train routes, including the one to Gloucester, the very train route we were scheduled to take the next day to get to the National Star College. Lori, always being the one to find out as much as possible about any crisis during a crisis situation, called the train station. They told us to arrive very early and they may be able to reroute us so that we could still get there. So we did as we were told and showed up right after check out and breakfast. We were told by the man at the information desk to give up, because there was no way to get there. We were told by another man that they would put us on the train to Bristol, where we would then transfer to a train that would get us to Gloucester. So, we got on the train to Bristol, first class.



The greatest thing about being in a chair in England is that if something turns out to be unavailable or inaccessible, instead of being treated as if you were broken, like all of the toilets in England (I can't think of any other reason they would have labeled them "disabled toilets" unless they weren't broken), you were treated like a VIP. There was no accessible seating available on the coach trains, so we got to ride first class. That first train ride was really nice, and I loved watching the London countryside go flying by with random castles here and there. We got rushed on to the next train ride, then stuck there. I really didn't like trains much after that. Five minutes to the Gloucester station and the bridge over the river Seven was washed out. It took them at least an hour of staring at the water rising to figure this out. Meanwhile people were getting their friends to pick them up on a nearby road. Having no friends (on that side of the ocean), we had to wait. It took another hour to decide what to do with the stranded passengers, and then at least a half hour for that solution to arrive. That solution was a chartered coach. I was so excited that I was finally going to get off the train. However, that was not to be. The drop from the train to the people waiting to catch us was apparently fairly large. I still think I would have been able to figure it out, but the train conductor wouldn't even let me look. I was to stay on the train with Lori and they would take us back to the last station, where they would pay a cab to take us to the college. This is the part of the story where I was dubbed "Wheelchair Girl" by the train conductor while he was trying to sort out our transport, and I burst into tears. Lori thought it was a great name though, like some type of superhero. So, lucky for me, the name stuck for the rest of our trip to England. Two hours later, we were back not one but two stations and we were finally let off at Newport. The interesting thing about Newport is that it is not in England. It is in Wales. Wales is part of Great Britain but is a separate country from England. I only wish that I wasn't too exhausted



from the 7 hour train ride to enjoy the brief visit. When they finally tracked down our taxi, we had a nice hour and a half taxi ride to Cheltenham, England. From the closed Cheltenham train station, we caught another taxi up this beautiful winding country road to the National Star College where we met our instructors and coursemates, and were finally shown to our individual rooms so that we could sleep and not think about trains. I was exhausted, sore, a little overwhelmed by my new environment and I was excited for the days to come full of learning and dancing. It was quite an adventure just getting to the Summer Lab. However, for the three and half days it lasted, it was worth it. The flooding wasn't finished with us yet, though I think I will leave that story for the next SBHANA Newsletter where I will talk about the joys of navigating the London Transit system and watching Mary Poppins: the Musical! Till next time. . .