BBM Youth Support Award for Highland Dancing Report – Sabrina Lee Muszynski

Scotland Trip 2015
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Introduction

My name is Sabrina Muszynski and I was the 2014/2015 BBM Youth Support Highland Dancing Awardee. Such an award assisted me to travel to Scotland and learn more about the art and heritage of Highland Dancing for a total of two and a half months. Highland Dancing and the Scottish culture have always been present in my life since a very young age due to my grandmother’s heritage and background. Therefore, this opportunity not only allowed me to improve my technique and understanding of Highland Dancing, but it taught me the importance of tradition in such culture.

To say I had a fantastic time dancing Highland in Scotland would be an understatement! I truly believe I had the best time of my life! The places I have visited, the things I have seen and especially the people I have met have allowed me to view the Highland Dancing world in a different light. Highlights of my trip include performing in the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, dancing and helping children in dance classes, dancing in front of the Queen, sightseeing, preparing for and completing my Teacher’s Exam, and most importantly being mentored by Debra Waugh.

Description

Whilst overseas, I visited many places not only for highland, but also to see more of the world. Before reaching Edinburgh, I travelled up through England visiting places such as The Lake District. Likewise, after my time in Scotland, I visited Ireland, Italy, France, Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Switzerland and the Netherlands at my own expense.

Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo

The 1st month in Scotland involved performing in the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. The shows were on 6 days per week (including a matinee and evening show on Saturdays) for all of August, thus were very tiresome but also exciting. Although this section of my trip was added at my own expense, I’m grateful for the scholarship to allow me to experience this show, as it was the perfect opportunity to travel to Edinburgh. Our accommodation and food was provided for at the Edinburgh University, thus allowing me to focus solely on the show. Working as a team was probably the most significant aspect I learnt whilst dancing within the tattoo. We had to support each other as well as think and dance as one. This was critical especially during TV week where the BBC would film the cast from various angles, one of which was a high angle shot capturing a bird’s eye view. The precision of the performance not only for TV week, but also for all the shows, would not have been met if it wasn’t for the dedication of the cast working as a team.
Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo
Edinburgh

After the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, I stayed in Edinburgh to receive lessons from Debra Waugh. I rented an apartment located in the historical area Grassmarket, Old Town. Its setting was amazing as it was positioned directly beneath the Edinburgh Castle, thus every day I was welcomed by an impressive sight. Also, I was approximately a 3-minute walk away from Debra’s town house, making it easy to visit her. It was fantastic to have my own independence and to experience living on my own.

Debra Waugh provided me with highland lessons three times a week, which were all located outside of Edinburgh. Before my classes begun, she allowed me to co-teach the younger students within her dance school. Not only did this give me the opportunity to improve my teaching skills, it allowed me to reinforce my knowledge of highland technique. As the weeks continued, I noticed the students improving their technique, thus giving me the confidence I was helping them. Although sometimes this was challenging as it was beyond my comfort zone, it was also rewarding as I felt like I was passing down my own knowledge of dancing. What was interesting to observe is the standard of young highland dancers. It seemed all younger dancers were at a high level, thus older dancers were technically amazing. This was very inspiring as it made me want to improve my own grace and style.

During my classes with Debra, we focused on highland technique that Scottish judges look for at competitions. She broke down all the dances and attended to small improvements that could be made. What was inspiring was how she motivated me to become better both physically and emotionally. The way in which she critiqued my areas of improvement was very positive and sometimes amusing. For example, she would joke she would give me a “wee” smack on the leg if I didn’t turn out my knees. Once I improved, her praise was so encouraging that I felt I had made a difference. Also, it was effective how Debra would allow other teachers to help her within the class. This allowed everyone to have praise and missions directed at them. Not only was she a good teacher, but she also recognised and supported other teacher’s opinions of her students.
A major achievement whilst in Edinburgh was completing and passing my teachers exam under the guidance of Debra. Whilst preparing for this exam was hard work, it also taught me the detail and dedication given to Highland Dancing. I learnt aspects of dances I never knew, I also learnt how to approach teaching new dancers and/or young students. Debra and I would meet every Wednesday and Friday to thoroughly study the textbook and discuss possible exam questions. This intense work allowed me to confidently complete my exam feeling proud and rewarded once my results were posted.

Braemar

During my time in Edinburgh, I also participated in Highland competitions across the country. My first competition, which was the most memorable, was the Braemar Highland Gathering where members of the Royal family attended. Debra Waugh and her husband drove me to Braemar for the day and we returned to Edinburgh late in the afternoon. Dancing in front of Queen Elizabeth II was incredible to fathom. It did not occur to me during the day how amazing this experience was until I returned home to my apartment in Edinburgh. Once the day had “digested”, I realised I was dancing less than 100 metres away from the Queen and was representing my own country. Although I was very nervous, sometimes whilst dancing I actually forgot she was there. The atmosphere was so intense and there were numerous events happening around me, that all I could do was concentrate on my dancing. I will never forget this amazing experience and memory. This was even more memorable when I realised that this took place at a history making time – The Queen reaching the milestone of being the longest reigning monarch in Britain.
Forfar
Other Highland competitions included the Royal Burgh of Forfar Highland Dancing Pre-Championships, the Granite City Pre-Championships in Aberdeen and the Solway competition held in Dumfries. Again, Debra and her husband drove me to Forfar to participate. We returned home late at night. Fortunately I was lucky to win the National award where I was given a shield to inscribe my name and country.

Aberdeen
Next I travelled to Aberdeen with girls from Debra Waugh’s dance studio and their mother. We stayed overnight at a Premier Inn where Toby Carvery was located next door, therefore providing us with dinner and breakfast. The accommodation was comfortable and cheap, and was close to the competition’s location. The competition was situated at Aberdeen’s Beach Ballroom, opposite the beach. The dance floor was very bouncy, aiding us dancers whilst jumping. To some extent this worked in our favor as it felt like I was going to jump through the roof. At this competition I won the Pre-Championship and was awarded a shield and gorgeous bunch of flowers. However, the most memorable aspect was marching around the dance floor behind a piper playing ‘Scotland the Brave’. This achievement was rewarding as it increased my own self-confidence and I received another Scottish shield where my country would be inscribed on it.

Dumfries
The last competition I participated in was the Solway Championship located in Dumfries. I stayed overnight at a friend’s house that attended Debra’s dance studio. We drove to Dumfries the next day and returned to Edinburgh late in the afternoon. This competition was memorable as I was dancing amongst dancers who had placed in the World Championships in Cowal. For some dances, I was awarded prizes and had to stand with the other place getters. It was amazing to place against these talented girls, as they were very inspiring to watch.

Overall, I believe competing in these competitions improved my confidence as a dancer and person as I was highly independent. Although it would have been lovely to have family members with me, it was reassuring to know I could cope by myself especially in a new environment and country. Also, it gave me the opportunity to meet new dancers around Scotland and the world. Whilst being proud of my success, I cherish more my experience and participation in these competitions.
Well done to Sabrina who won the 16 and over national trophy today! X

Granite City competition
**Recommendations**

I would highly recommend future awardees to visit and compete in the Braemar Highland Gathering as it was an opportunity I will never forget nor regret. Dancing in front of the Queen was so special that I still find it amazing that I not only saw the Queen, but actually danced less than 100 metres away from her. Also, the atmosphere of the highland games as well as the natural beauty of the highlands was fantastic to experience and observe.

I would also recommend dancers to audition for the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. This experience gave me life skills of teamwork and the chance to make friends across the world. You become more independent as you are given many responsibilities, however this only helps you become a stronger person. Also, why wouldn’t you want to dance to thousands of people with a majestic, medieval castle looming behind you? However, if this were not appealing, I would recommend competing in the World Championships in Cowal. Unfortunately, my commitment to the tattoo inhibited my opportunity to participate in such an event, as Worlds is during the same time as the show, but I would still encourage dancers to compete, as it would be amazing to experience such a prestigious event. Not only would you be inspired by World Champions, you would acknowledge your achievement of dancing on the World’s dancing stage.

I thoroughly enjoyed living in Edinburgh. It allowed easy access to other parts in Scotland due to its centrality and excellent transport system, such as trains and buses. I also felt safe living within the city, becoming accustomed with areas and having a good understanding of the city layout. The people living in the city were helpful and very welcoming. It was a place where you could feel at home, especially after returning from a long day at a competition. This feeling was really comforting. Lastly, there is much to see during your free time. I purchased a Historic Scotland concession membership valid for one year, which allowed me to visit many historic places within Edinburgh and all of Scotland. Such places included Edinburgh Castle, Craigmillar Castle, Linlithgow Palace, Palace of Holyroodhouse, and Aberdour Castle and Gardens.
Craigmillar Castle

Aberdour Castle

Linlithgow Palace

Palace of Holyroodhouse
Lastly, I would highly recommend seeking instruction from a Scottish teacher. Receiving tips on ways to improve my highland technique was incredibly helpful. As dancers, our constant focus is how we can improve, thus obtaining information from a Scottish teacher who knows the current style and what present judges are looking for, aids you for future competitions. Other than improving, it is also refreshing to gain advice through the words of a different teacher. They may explain things differently and identify improvements you may not have noticed yourself. You may also understand new strategies to dancing through the words of a different teacher. Furthermore, I would also suggest receiving lessons from a range of teachers to gain various opinions and ideas of your dancing. The more advice you receive, the better you will become as a dancer and student.

One tip is advised before leaving for Scotland - be aware of organisation in terms of accommodation and itinerary plans. Organise your accommodation before you leave the country, this includes hotels where you would stay if visiting a competition. Be conscious of transport. Although the transport system in Scotland is better than Australia, some places are still difficult to travel to, such as Braemar. A car is necessary to travel to such a place, therefore hire a car if able. In my case, I was very fortunate to receive help from Debra Waugh and her husband, as I was too young to hire a car. In terms of your itinerary, have a rough idea of all the places you want to visit and all the competitions you want to participate in. Also, don’t worry if you cannot see all these places as things can change or you may run out of time. Lastly, be aware that you may make friends in the studios you visit and that they may help you in terms of travel arrangements. The people I have met in Debra Waugh’s dance studio were supportive and helpful. Numerous times I was offered transport to competitions, which I truly appreciated.

**Conclusion**

Overall, my trip to the United Kingdom has certainly provided me with an experience I will never forget. It’s incredible to reflect on amazing memories filled with friends who I believe will last for a lifetime. I am actually surprised and proud of myself on how much I was alone in a foreign country and how I coped in challenging situations. This opportunity has sparked a new love for Highland Dancing, especially once returning home. Already I feel this trip has helped me not only in my highland technique, but also my own confidence to challenge myself in everyday life. After completing and passing my teacher’s exam, I hope to open my own Highland Dance school so I may pass down the knowledge I have learnt from my teachers here in Australia and Debra Waugh.

This trip has also provided me with additional opportunities here in Australia and overseas since returning home. Recently I performed in the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo in Melbourne, performing to a total audience of 150,000 people in one weekend. I have also been contracted to dance in the Virginia Tattoo to be held in Norfolk, USA in April of this year, an experience that would not have been possible had I not danced in Edinburgh.

Visiting Scotland has reinforced the importance of culture and how we must, especially in Australia, maintain this vibrant tradition.
References

Airbnb website – accommodation in Edinburgh:

Braemar Gathering Website:
http://www.braemargathering.org/

Forfar Championship:
http://www.sobhd.net/event-list/royal-burgh-of-forfar-highland-dancing-championship/

Granite City Championship Aberdeen:
http://www.sobhd.net/event-list/granite-city-festival-of-highland-dancing/

Accommodation in Aberdeen:
http://www.premierinn.com/gb/en/hotels/scotland/grampian/aberdeen/aberdeen-anderson-drive.html?ARRdd=12&ARRmm=03&ARRyyyy=2016&ROOMS=1&ADULT1=1&CHILD1=0&COT1=0&INTTYP1=DB

Solway Championship in Dumfries:
http://www.sobhd.net/event-list/solway-highland-dance-championships/

SOBHD events:
http://www.sobhd.net/events/

UKA – teacher’s exam:
http://www.ukadance.co.uk/
Expenses

Travel
- 25 pounds ($52.25) – train ticket from Edinburgh to Birmingham
- 36 pounds ($74.24) – Huntly to Edinburgh
- 500 – travel insurance
- 2,152 – flight
- 11.90 pounds ($24.87) – Aberdeen to Huntly

Food
- 178 pounds ($372.01) – from 30th August to 12th of October

Accommodation
- $3796

Lessons
- 185.50 pounds ($387.68) Gratuity Gifts in lieu of lesson payments

Competitions
- Forfar – 24 pounds ($50.16)
- Aberdeen – 16 pounds ($33.44)
- Solway – 12 pounds ($25.08)

Exam fee
- 220 pounds ($459.78)

Dance wear
- 49.95 pounds ($104.39) – Blochs
- 81.95 pounds ($171.27) – Pumps

Total
= $8,204.17
Colosseum, Rome

Eiffel Tower, Paris

Amsterdam

Tower Bridge, London
Swiss Alps, Switzerland

Arc de Triomphe, Paris

Nice, France

Venice, Italy