

The travelling thespian

PAULA LINDO

Thespian and theatre-in-education (TIE) facilitator Dr Danielle Lyndersay said she's had itchy feet all her life, with a love of travelling bequeathed to her by her parents, she told an audience at the Monday Night Theatre Forum on May 22. Dani, as she is fondly known, was born in Australia. She lived in Indonesia, Holland, Portugal and Canada as a child. She said she decided early on that she wanted to be an actress and fortunately she was good at it.

Lyndersay, who locally is best known as a lecturer and co-ordinator in theatre arts at the UWI (St Augustine) Department of Creative and Festival Arts, was the featured speaker at the most recent edition of the forum. The Monday Night Theatre Forum takes place monthly at the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, Belmont.

She went to the Banff School of Fine Arts in Canada on scholarship after high school but after a year, she was accepted into the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (Rada) in London, where she spent two-and-a-half years. She also took part in a summer stock theatre programme in Connecticut, which gave her the opportunity to experience everything about theatre, she said.

Lyndersay said after graduating from Rada she went to live in a kibbutz in Israel, and took part in the Six-Day War between Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Syria. She tried hitch-hiking to Australia, travelling through Istanbul, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan before going back to Montreal via Paris and London. Lyndersay then joined the Canadian Peace Corps and was sent to Nigeria, where she spent 10 years between 1968 and 1998. She was asked to teach drama at an advanced teacher training college. As she had never taught drama formally, she went to the University of Ibadan to ask for advice from the renowned director



Dr Dani Lyndersay with her Walket-Puppets.
PHOTO: PAULA LINDO

Wole Soyinka. Soyinka was in jail at the time.

Instead, she recalled, "I met a six-foot-eight Afro-Trinidadian who asked me what I could do and I said I could teach children's theatre and knew about costuming. So I got transferred to the university to teach French and I just clicked with this Afro-Trinidadian." He was the late Trinidadian Dexter Lyndersay, writer, playwright and actor; the two married in 1971. They became a team, travelling to North Africa,

Sicily and Europe, putting on traditional Nigerian stories adapted as plays.

It was during this time that she collected material for her book *Nigerian Dress: The Body Honoured—The Costume Arts of Traditional Nigerian Dress from Early History to Independence: An Illustrated Sourcebook for Nigerian Costume Design*.

After working with Soyinka at Ibadan University, the couple went on to co-found the Calabar Univer-

sity Theatre Co, a laboratory that provided dancers, drummers and singers for the acting school at the university. Lyndersay did her master's degree in theatre-in-education at the University of Victoria in Canada, focusing on costuming and masquerades. It was then that she invented Walket-Puppets. These are life-sized puppets manipulated by actors dressed in black from head to toe, including a black lace head covering, so the audience interacts only with the puppets. In 2004, she

went to Sri Lanka to help victims of the Christmas tsunami through art therapy using puppets and drawing with colour pencils.

At Victoria, Lyndersay also met Augusto Boal, whose Theatre of the Oppressed would become important in her later work.

The family came to Trinidad a week after the attempted coup in 1990, and Lyndersay went all over Port-of-Spain taking photos. In response to a call from the Minister of Culture for programmes for young people, she put together Youth Crossroads, which gave 50-60 young people a crash course in TIE, which they took into their communities.

Part of the programme was what Lyndersay called "celebration theatre" where young people were encouraged to honour elderly people in the community through improvisational theatre and the planting of trees. She noted that some honourees would die soon afterwards, so they had received the recognition they deserved "almost at the last minute".

She travelled all over Trinidad, and worked at the National Museum, the Trinidad Theatre Workshop and the then-Creative Arts Centre, now the Department of Creative and Festival Arts at UWI, St Augustine.

Lyndersay brought out the children's Carnival band Here Come the Clowns with Carlisle Chang in 1991. It won 32 prizes and created history, as "no one had ever seen children on stilts crossing the stage before", she said.

In 1994, she launched the outreach programme Arts-in-Action, which uses TIE and drama in education to address issues in communities around Trinidad.

Lyndersay said the basis of her educative theatre philosophy was that "the performing arts are one of the few careers where the inner life of the practitioner affects the product of their work. It is in the processing and constructing of art that we learn and we learn more by teaching".