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Creating a Theatre for Young Audiences Study Abroad Program:

Reflecting on Challenges & Successes

In May 2011, I took a group of eight students to Sweden and Denmark for the inaugural University of Pittsburgh's Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) study abroad program. This paper explores the potential of this educational experience to change and develop students understanding of other cultures and global TYA, to encourage and enable international collaborations, to inspire new approaches to creating work in the US, and to spark an exchange of ideas and create dialogue.

A key component of the course is connected to the ASSITEJ World Congress and Performing Arts Festival. ASSITEJ (Association Internationale du Theatre pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse) is an international organization for theatre for children and young people. Theatre artists, students, and educators from around the world come together for workshops, performances, and lectures that showcase the most current and innovative global practices in TYA. Every three years, the ASSITEJ World Congress is hosted by a different nation, and this TYA study abroad program is designed to move around the world as well.

ASSITEJ 2011 was held jointly in the cities of Copenhagen, Denmark and Malmo, Sweden. Opening ceremonies were full of pomp and circumstance—each country highlighting its own rich arts scene. However it was a film short titled, "What

Children Know...” created by the Denmark-based Monitor Film Company that set the tone for the coming Festival. The film—in Danish with English subtitles—featured interviews with Danish children being asked about theatre.

In response to the question, “What is Theatre?” they had a lot to say: “It’s just some people who dress up.” “In some theatres you must not be seen, only the puppets.” “Pretending to eat.” “A movie for beginners.” “In some theatres if you’re lucky there is a restaurant next door.” When asked “What is theatre for kids?” there seemed to be some confusion. They answered: “I don’t know.” “Don’t know.” “Something with little bears or little people like *Little Red Riding Hood*.” “If things are big it’s theatre for grownups, if things are small it’s theatre for kids, if things are tiny it’s theatre for babies.” (“What Children Know...” Film.) In only a few minutes this film illuminated common confusions and misconceptions about TYA using humor and the inclusion of youth, our target audience. For my students, it reinforced my request that they approach this study abroad experience with an open mind and consider TYA in a global context.

My rationale for creating a TYA study abroad program connected to an international gathering like ASSITEJ was to provide a learning opportunity for students to expand their academic purview from the local to the global. In my tenure at the University of Pittsburgh, I regularly offer courses in Theatre for Children and Creative Drama. My Theatre for Children course serves as a prerequisite for this study abroad. Theatre for Children is designed to teach students about the history, literature and current practices of theater for young audiences, primarily in the United States. I also include international companies and works slated to be part of the ASSITEJ Festival. Student, Tara Velan had this to say about her experience in the class, “After a semester of

discovery...there was a particular moment of realization...that theatre as I understood it, need not be forced into a tiny box with a standard definition...I was fascinated to learn how much more open and experimental the pieces we explored in class actually were” (1).

With Theatre for Children as a foundation, the study abroad moves deeper into an exploration of the field emphasizing theatrical discourse from an international perspective. Students attend performances from around the world and are challenged to observe and analyze dramatic structures, differing methods of theatrical presentation, and shared practices. Rooted in this framework of theatrical performance criticism, this course exposes students to the vocabulary and concepts necessary to speak in an educated way about the performances they have seen.

The study abroad course fulfills both the Arts and the International/Comparative General Education Requirement for a liberal arts undergraduate degree at the University of Pittsburgh. Assessment tools for the course focused on evaluating students’ knowledge of structure, form, international awareness, and comparative analysis in verbal and written formats. A grade given for the daily seminars, reflects students’ participation, depth of preparation and thought, and general comprehension of discussed materials. Students are expected to apply terms and concepts used in seminars in subsequent discussions, journal assignments, interviews, and final reflection papers.

It was the daily travel journals that became the most useful assessment tool in the course. Viewing multiple productions and lectures in a single day was probable and finding dedicated time after each performance became a crucial component of the group experience. Students would find a quiet place to sit and free-write about the theatrical

piece they has just experienced. I wanted students to record their own thoughts and options before any verbal exchange. Reviewing the student's journals at the conclusion of the course provided a clear sense of the students' growth. In her final paper, student, Kjirsten Logan wrote, "This trip helped me develop the habit of journaling consistently to organize my thoughts... to really think critically about everything... Instead of just accepting the information... I was encouraged to challenge it, pick it apart, and decipher what exactly I liked or didn't like about it" (2). Of course, I encouraged students to record thoughts in the format that would best suit their own needs, Alexa Smith wrote, "for me, this included sketches of sets, detailing of props and costuming, identifying themes or theatrical conventions in the piece, and reflecting on moments in the show that struck me emotionally" (2).

ASSITEJ hosts a daylong pre-conference with The Forum of International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network (ITYARN)—a collaboration between universities and ASSITEJ to further research on theatre for young audiences. I have presented at past ITYARN gatherings in Australia, and most recently in Denmark and Sweden. This conference highlights the role and function of TYA in culture and society, with special attention given to the different contexts and circumstances under which TYA is generated and perceived. ITYARN in Denmark and Sweden featured scholars from Sweden, Zambia, Norway, Germany, USA, UK, Australia, Thailand, Korea, Israel, Argentina, Germany, and Finland.

The paper that I presented in Sweden and Denmark, titled "Entering an Experiential World: Practical Techniques of Audience Engagement in Theatre for Young Audiences", examines ways in which TYA artists and practitioners invite young people

to experience theatre by creating rich, multi-sensory worlds for audience engagement. My examination of how the theatrical experience is shaped through narrative—or lack of narrative—looked at two productions presented as part of ASSITEJ in Australia (May 2008): *Cat* presented by Windmill Performing Arts of South Australia, and *Goodbye Mr. Muffin* presented by Teater Refleksion and Teatret De Rode Heste of Denmark. I went on to discuss the influence of these international productions on my own work—productions of *Tomato Plant Girl* (University of Pittsburgh, 2009) and *Alice: A Play with Some Music* (University of Pittsburgh, 2010).

As part of the study abroad program, students attended the pre-conference as observers. For many students it was an introduction to some of the pertinent questions being asked in the field today. Student Samantha Murray was struck by “the idea that children’s theatre did not need to teach a lesson or moral...instead make us think deeply about things” (1). My intention by including the students was to provide them with an academic underpinning for the work they were about to see at ASSITEJ and to understand the context of my research and production work as their instructor at the University of Pittsburgh.

Of course, one of the best pieces of advice that I received when envisioning this study abroad program came from Suzan Zeder, my graduate thesis advisor at the University of Texas at Austin. She encouraged me to seek out the TYA practitioners attending ASSITEJ from around the world and to find meaningful ways to connect students with these valuable resources. I invited artists to join the group for informal meals and conversations. First on the list was one of the nation’s leading playwrights for family audiences, Suzan Zeder. We all sat down for lunch at a café in Malmo to discuss

her life and work. Student, Tara Velan commented on Suzan Zeder's down-to-earth attitude, "The way she addressed us, as if each of us had the potential to have the success she has achieved, was inspirational" (2). In addition to sharing stories from her experiences in TYA, Suzan Zeder also helped to prepare the students for the experience ahead. I was amazed (but not surprised) by the impact this exchange over sandwiches had on the students. In fact, a quote from Suzan Zeder found its way into many of the students' final papers: "The minute you write for an audience, regardless of age, you demean them. One must always write about, not for."

In addition to informal meals with artists, students were tasked with formally interviewing members of the Next Generation. This is a group of young leaders from around the world who create, produce and administer TYA. The Next Generation has 23 members from 17 countries. An important part of the academic course content, the interview assignment was designed to deepen a student's knowledge of a particular country's TYA practices, and to build their abilities to develop questions in an interview format.

This group was a nice match for the students; they found the accomplishments of the Next Generation members inspiring. Student, Ben Kaye wrote about his interview with Australian playwright, Finegan Kruckemeyer, "We spoke about how he finds children's theatre more of a rewarding medium as a playwright, and how writing for a young audience forces him to write through the lens of someone other than himself, a problem that can plague many a playwright" (2).

Student, Tara Velan interviewed, Johanna Figl, Artistic Director of a modern dance and performance art collaborative of Vienna, "Johanna believes that through

movement and performance art pieces, the imagination is rewarded as it is challenged, and that young people can discuss what their own meaning is. She says this opens the grounds for young people to begin to talk about performance in a healthy way” (3).

All of the student interviews with the Next Generation delegates were published online as part of the blog for Theatre for Young Audiences/USA—the United States chapter of ASSITEJ.

ASSITEJ offered a wide variety of lectures and forums for participants—everything from Changing Paradigms in Youth Theatre in South Africa to Theatre for Children and Young People in Mexico. However, it was the Babydrama lecture presented by Suzanne Osten from Sweden that had the biggest impact on the study abroad students. In 2006, Suzanne Osten’s company Theatre Unga Klara’s developed a drama for 6-month old babies, and created a film that documented the creation process, performance, and reactions of the babies.

I had introduced the concept of babydrama in my Theatre for Children course but as this is a relatively new area of performance and research in the United States, I was not able to acquire substantial materials to share with the class. Seeing Suzanne Osten’s film, as well as ASSITEJ productions specifically for this age group began to answer some of the student’s questions about work for very young. Student, Kjirsten Logan had this to say, “through Suzanne Osten’s explanations and video examples, her vision began to take shape and my opinions began to change. Their performances were simple, but told a basic story, and focused on big movements and bright colors. The most amazing part was the infant audience’s reactions; they were all rapt with attention the entire time” (3).

The core of the study abroad curriculum focused on TYA in performance. While in Sweden and Denmark, the students attended approximately 15 performances from all over the world, including The Netherlands, South Africa, Iran, Korea, Australia, Russia, Scotland, Iceland, Denmark, and Germany. I've included three TYA pieces here that the students spoke passionately about.

One particularly innovative production was *Prime* by Theatre Artemis of The Netherlands. Created in 2005 by eight actors graduating from the Maastricht Academy of Dramatic Arts, *Prime* is a piece about the pain of growing up. The actors used personal materials, photos and anecdotes about their own eleven-year-old selves, as a starting point for the piece. An exploration of play, sexuality, love, jealousy, and loss, *Prime* is a performance where the actor as a theatre maker is central to the production. The performance of *Prime* that we saw was in English although many of the shows were performed in Dutch. Student, Tara Velan felt a strong connection to this particular production,

“This show spoke to me. The characters were the people I knew in middle school and their struggles were real...I think a play like this would be a must to send to the US on tour, however themes of sex and partial nudity as well as the smoking...would unfortunately be considered too much for young audiences, or not appropriate for young audiences in the US. This is frustrating considering everything on the stage during *Prime* was exactly the norm for middle schoolers. The kids would not be seeing anything they had not experienced or questioned. This is truly a show about them”
(3).

In daily seminars, we had many heated discussions contrasting performance methods and styles between cultures, and attempting to draw conclusions about how TYA is approached differently as a result of culture, environment, and demographics.

Student, Matt Russak observed, “I was astonished by the lack of an overt educational feel in most of the pieces. In the States, TYA seems to be dominated by an education-first theory... [that] often leads to theatre that seems to talk down to children, that treats them as though they aren’t able to understand more complex themes” (4).

Another memorable production was *Berlin, 1961*, a German/English/Norwegian collaborative piece by the Junges Ensemble Stuttgart and the New International Encounter. This story was told from the perspective of a young teenage German girl and her family living in Berlin in 1961. When the family returns from holiday, they discover that their home has literally been split in two by the Berlin Wall. Student, Ben Kaye pointed out,

“The show isn’t really ‘about’ the barrier in Germany. Nor is the play about the wall itself, or the politics surrounding the wall. The play is about the girl, it is about the family, it is about love and unity in a time of destruction and chaos...they didn’t use the Wall to comment on Germany.

They used the wall to comment on us” (3).

Finally, on the last of the conference, we had the opportunity to experience *Kalejdoskop* a performance-exhibition by Carte Blanche of Denmark. Student, Matt Russak explains, “*Kalejdoskop* effectively created its own universe by drawing the audience members through a series of tunnels into different rooms, each with a different hands-on experience such as playing with shadows, listening to heartbeats, etc...All of

the design elements worked beautifully together to invent a world full of patterns” (3). Reflecting upon our immersive experience, the group discovered that each person had taken a slightly different journey adding to the mystery and appeal of *Kalejdoskop*.

In their final papers, I asked the students to write about how the knowledge gained from this experience will serve them in future endeavors. Student, Tara Velan wrote, “I think that the city of Pittsburgh is in dire need of a professional TYA company...I want to be a part of making TYA a legitimate and sustaining form of theatre in Pittsburgh and I want to show the city what I have gained and let the audiences, who are waiting without even knowing it, finally see what they are missing” (5).

Personally, this study abroad experience has opened up a world of possibilities to me as a faculty member and arts practitioner. International theatre will now be a larger part of the material that I share with students in the classroom—informing best practices and scholarly discourse at the University of Pittsburgh and the Department of Theatre Arts. I will strive to continue to influence and strengthen the department’s arts education offerings and provide new learning opportunities for the students.

I will coordinate more international projects that involve and benefit our talented students in the Department. For example, in December the University of Pittsburgh produced the North American premiere of *This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing* by Australian playwright, Finnegan Kruckemeyer. This production grew out of connections made at ASSITEJ and the playwright was able to connect with the director and cast via Skype throughout the rehearsal process.

The study abroad course was successful on many fronts and has been adopted by the Department as a formal component of the Theatre Arts curricular offerings. Plans are already underway for the next ASSITEJ Festival in 2014 in Warsaw, Poland.

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University of Pittsburgh Study Abroad 2011
Island of Hven, Sweden



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