Field Notes: Two Americans in Paris (and London)

School of Theatre, Film and Television
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Hank Stratton, artistic director for Arizona Repertory Theatre [1], traveled to Paris and London in November with School of Theatre, Film and Television [2] Director Andy Belser to explore study abroad opportunities for students. In this guest column, Stratton, a stage and screen veteran [3], shares his experience.

As part of the strategic planning process for the College of Fine Arts, we surveyed students about what experiences or opportunities they would like to see added to our offerings -? a programmatic wish list of sorts. A clear No. 1 emerged ? the opportunity to study abroad.

In my experience, traveling and studying abroad is a life-altering opportunity. It changes the texture of a student. They come back more independent, worldly, empathic and curious. We want to provide this opportunity to our students. To that end, Andy Belser, director of the School of Theatre, Film and Television, and I traveled in November to Paris and London in search of potential partners.

Jacques Lecoq was considered the preeminent authority on physical theater and pioneered many techniques that we teach at the University of Arizona. Our first stop was L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq [4], the school he founded in 1956. The very exclusive conservatory has been left in the charge of his daughter, Pascale, who is also an architect.

When I walked in, I saw students walking around with long poles. Pascale explained to me that this was a beginning exercise to teach students about space. The poles encourage the students to think about their energy extending into space, so the actors begin to think about themselves as extending beyond their physical frame. Another part of the school is a former boxing venue, allowing for great elevated observation space where you can look down on the students creating.

The potential study abroad opportunities are still in the early stages, but we are also looking to bring some of the overseas experience back to Tucson. In order to ignite excitement about this work, we are working on bringing Pascale Lecoq to the University of Arizona to do a workshop with our students later this year. This is extremely exciting, cutting-edge training that would be available to our students in their own backyard.

After two productive days in Paris, a trip through the Chunnel brought us to London for visits with several schools. We met with leaders at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art [5], where the late Alan Rickman won a young actor award. We spoke with the vice dean of The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama [6], which could provide a potential study abroad opportunity for students who are majoring in design and technical production. We toured Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts [7], a global leader in musical theater, which boasts
several alumni in the London company of "Hamilton."

Andy then split off to visit St. Mary's University [8] to talk about potential study abroad opportunities for liberal and fine arts students. For me, it was off to my alma mater, the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art [9], housed in the former rehearsal spaces and administrative offices for The Royal Ballet. It has this amazing rehearsal space flanked by state-of-the-art soundstages and performance theaters.

I had the pleasure to meet with Debbie Seymour, who is the senior tutor at the academy, and Head of Drama School Rodney Cottier. They talked me through a grid of what would be a comprehensive study abroad curriculum that almost identically mirrors what I teach in the fall of my students’ junior year: Shakespeare-based training, poetry, stage combat and physical theater.

Amazingly, this would only scratch the surface of the opportunity theater students would have through this program. They would start with a week at Shakespeare's Globe [10] theater, where they would receive backstage tours and take master classes with directors. In the middle of the program, they would spend nearly a week attending plays and meeting with directors in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's birthplace and a global destination for theater.

It would be unrealistic to think a couple of theater guys could make a trip like this without taking in some performances. The highlight for me was "The Antipodes," staged at the Dorfman Theatre [11], housed in the Royal National Theatre in London. It's about a virtual reality think tank, with the central themes of creativity, status and commercialism. The entire set consisted of a large, glass boardroom table, 100 boxes of bottled water and wheeling office chairs. It was wickedly funny and brilliantly staged – simply breathtaking.

I have high hopes for study abroad opportunities for our theater students. We are working with UA Global [12] on accreditation and talking with potential partners about finalizing agreements. My hope is to send a cohort of students overseas in the fall of 2020.

Study abroad is a programmatic priority for the School of Theatre, Film and Television, and I truly believe this trip is a crucial building block leading to a future where training in some of the theatrical capitals of the world is a key component of our offerings.

Hank Stratton is an assistant professor in the School of Theatre, Film and Television and artistic director for the Arizona Repertory Theatre. He was profiled [3] by Lo Que Pasa in October.

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