

Regional

SIUE theater students find inspiration in London

Nearly 400 years after his death, William Shakespeare continues to fascinate people of all ages from around the world. And young theater students are certainly no exception, a fact brought to light once again this past summer when a group of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville faculty and students traveled to England to learn more about the Bard of Avon and the history of English theater.

We spoke with some of them: Teryl Thurman, a double major in theater and psychology, Ryan Wiechmann, also a double major in theater and mass communications, and the faculty member who led the trip, Johanna Schmitz, an associate professor in the department of theater and dance. For Schmitz, who developed the London program, this is an experience for students so that they “can connect to real and experiential learning.

“Instead of talking about the Parthenon, I show them bits of the Parthenon that have been taken to the British museum,” she said. “Theater can be about anything and it can be about everything. London has such rich resources that instead of describing the Rosetta Stone I can say, ‘Here is the Rosetta Stone,’ and then I can back away and let them interact with the artifacts.” Teryl said that she learned about this opportunity by hearing Schmitz talk about it in class.

“I have always had a love for theater and a lot of the theatre I have been taught is Shakespearian theater, which originates in London,” she said. “So being there and being able to stand where The Globe theater was and where Shakespeare stood and came up with all these great plays just seemed like an opportunity I couldn’t miss.” For Ryan the trip itself was like a suspense movie.

“Dr. Schmitz even told us, ‘I’m not going to tell you what we’re going to do because that ruins all the fun,’ and that to me changed my expectations because I knew that it wasn’t going to just be about seeing shows,” he said. “It ended up not just being the shows we saw, but also the museums we went to and the artifacts and even stuff that wasn’t in museums, the sites and all the important historical



Dr. Schmitz (in black) and her students with the Tower Bridge as a backdrop.

figures and structures that were there. And the idea of just being in a place that you are not used to was something I took away.” Obviously one of the thrills of the experience was to watch British actors performing the quintessential works of Shakespeare.

“Our first big experience with Shakespeare was the second or third show we saw,” said Teryl. “We went to the Globe, which is a reconstruction of the original theater, and we saw ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’ at midnight on midsum-

mer’s night. That in itself was crazy and there was this eerie thing of ‘wow, we’re here, it’s midsummer’s night, and we’re going to see ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’.”

The logistics of a trip like this are not easy. Schmitz had to buy the theater tickets early in January to make sure that there were enough seats for her students in July.

“I was very lucky that the run of ‘Othello’ was extended because Adrian Lester played Othello and Rory Kinnear

was Iago,” Schmitz said. “I got them really good seats, and my goodness it was a master class in acting. They inhabit the language, Rory Kinnear especially, to the point where you have to wonder if they did some strange edition where they have modernized the language.”

Regardless of planning, there are always unexpected learning opportunities for the students.

“One thing I have realized, not only studying abroad but also in my studies in theater, is for a student studying theater

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

to know that it is just constantly being redefined.” He explained his own evolution of learning.

“At an early age you see a play and you think, ‘Oh, that’s theatre.’ Then you go to high school and do a production and you think, ‘No, this is theatre.’ Then you go to college and you realize that you can’t really define theatre. And you go to London and you see some shows that are just bizarre, and some that go straight to your heart. You just realize that not only is this the life that you chose but it’s really limitless what theater can reach,” said Ryan.

“Everything was very visually appealing,” he said of the London theater. “Even some of the not-so-great shows were absolutely astounding to watch. The first show we watched was a children’s show, which when we walked in we were kind of iffy about, but when we walked out we thought it was one of the greatest things we had ever seen.”

Schmitz said that she is always amazed at how much of an impact these trips have on her students.

“There are faculty members on this campus who can speak to how we are changing culturally and socially better than I can,” she said. “But I can say one thing that’s interesting. The students on the trips in 2008 and 2010 created a blog, but now that technology seems to be outdated. The students had fantastic Facebook pages but seemed to be less patient with the older blog technology. I’m noticing I need to keep up faster with how we record and communicate and disseminate experiences.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

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