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Winter 2021

Final Experiential Learning Report: The Stratford Festival Archives & Ecuador Women's Empowerment Trip

Julia Campbell

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Julia Campbell

Dr. Barbara Bruce

ARTHUM 4492/3G

18 April 2021

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The Stratford Festival Archives

When I first began university, I believed that my two degrees were polar opposites. To be an English major *and* a business major felt impossible to me, as I saw these not only as different areas of study but also as diametrically opposed personality types. My Advanced Entry Opportunity (AEO) status at Ivey was something that filled me both with excitement and dread, as I was both looking forward to learning a new skill set and skeptical that I could find a career that truly allowed me to use both of my degrees in a greater capacity than “English = business communications.” I am so grateful for my summer at the Stratford Festival, as it was my experience there as an archive intern that opened my eyes to the intersectionality of business and the arts. Not only that, but my time at the Stratford Festival also helped me identify both my ideal workplace culture as well as what useful skills I bring to the table as an employee.

As part of our onboarding process, myself and my fellow intern, Nat, were given tours of just about every part of The Festival you can imagine. As a Stratford local, I had thought that I had a strong understanding of The Festival and how it operated; however, it became quickly apparent to me that there is much more than meets the eye. I began to understand that The Festival is not just a theatre: it's also a thriving non-profit organization that relies on all kinds of business functions to operate. Whether it be in marketing, fundraising/sponsorship, grant writing,

finance, legal, operations management or general management, there are numerous opportunities to use business skills to support the arts.

While the traditional profit model of a business (I want to make a profit; therefore, I create a product/service to sell) is certainly one type of organizational ethos, it is not the *only* type. In fact, there is another type of business model, one that I like to call the “sustainability model.” A company operating with a sustainability model is a company that has a product/service that they are passionate about. Their goal is to provide that product/service, and they seek a sustainable revenue source to achieve this goal. In this type of company, the product is not exploited for profit; rather, a sustainable revenue source ensures the continued existence of said product. The Stratford Festival is a great example of a company with a sustainability model: they solicit donations and sell tickets to fund the creation of great theatre. In this way, business becomes a tool for the arts rather than its binary opposite. This made me realize that a business degree is not simply a degree to help me work in consulting or investment banking; rather, it is an education that will allow me to work for any for-profit or nonprofit company whose mission I want to support. Suddenly, my future after graduation seemed filled with opportunities.

In the role of archive interns, Nat and I were asked to 1) research and identify key information about costume pieces and their corresponding productions (name, date, director, designer, actor, etc.), 2) write a detailed description of each costume piece (cut, colour, style, relevant history, fabric, etc.), and 3) photograph the costume piece. The Archives had recently decided to create their first-ever digital catalogue, and the information and photos we took were to be the first costume pieces added to the online catalogue. Nat and I were given complete freedom as to what the descriptions would look like, what information would be included in the catalogue, and in what format we would compile the data.

As a theatre fan, I was a kid in a candy store. In my weeks spent researching the hundreds of productions The Festival has put on since 1953, I developed an extensive knowledge of production history. I have found that this has not only been personally interesting but also professionally useful. While networking, I find this conversation happens constantly:

Recruiter: “Oh, you’re from Stratford? I visited the theatre there once.”

Me: “Oh really? I’m a huge theatre fan. Which production?”

Recruiter: “It was *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* a few years back.”

Me: “Oh, the one with Evan Buliung? He’s one of my favourite actors. What did you think of what they did with the wedding scene at the beginning? It was certainly polarizing!”

And so on. Finding interests in common is my favourite way to network, and this role has led to some interesting—and, most importantly, genuine—conversations with people who subsequently went on to help me secure summer employment.

One such instance this background came in handy was when I was selected as one of the Ivey students invited to a dinner with the CEO of BMO and his staff. I ended up talking with the Managing Director of the Office of The CEO (who, as it turns out, is an English major, theatre fan, and previous member of Dalton McGuinty’s staff) about SASAH and my experience at the Stratford Festival. I was subsequently invited to Toronto to meet him for lunch and talk about how I might be able to pursue a government summer internship. I do not exaggerate when I say that this role has truly been the best networking conversation starter I have ever had and that the uniqueness of SASAH internships can lead you to stand out as a candidate!

This role also allowed me to discover a skill of mine that I have since used in every internship I have worked: strong organizational skills. To say that I like the things around me to be organized is an understatement: I keep my closet organized by type of clothing, then colour,

then fabric, and my Google Drive is an endless tree of colour-coded folders in which every file has a place. Imagine my surprise, then, when I arrived at the Archive to find an organizational system that was, as my boss described it, “a bit chaotic.” It was not unusual to find a costume piece in the wrong box or even in someone’s office! Nat and I set guidelines not only for how descriptions were to be written, what information was to be included, and in what format the information was to be collected but also for where/how costume pieces were to be stored to ensure pieces could be found where they are expected to be. This ability to organize both information and projects is something I have since embraced wholeheartedly, whether it be in my role as a marketing & strategy intern at Fresh City Farms (organizing research and presenting recommendations), my role as project manager at Pillar Nonprofit Network (organizing deliverables and project information), or my role as AVP Student Experience with the USC (organizing research and recommendations into clearly written policy documents).

My SASAH education was proven to be an asset in this role. Firstly, SASAH has allowed me to develop strong research skills. This role required more than your typical research, as much of what we were looking for was not easily available: Nat and I had to get creative by interviewing employees, searching through old promotional material, and digging through production photos and Stage Manager’s Bibles. The general academic requirements of SASAH taught me how to do traditional research, but it was the gravestone project specifically that helped me develop the research tenacity needed to identify some of the costumes in our collection. Furthermore, SASAH taught me to consider the themes and greater implications of each costume piece. Nat and I looked at each piece not as simply a piece of fabric to describe, but as an important piece of the overall narrative of the production reflective of the time period, the play, and the director/designer’s point of view. Because of this perspective, Nat and I took the initiative to add historical context to the costume descriptions, whether that was the history of

the clothing style, the history of the production, or even noteworthy decisions made by the director/designer. It is undoubtedly our SASAH education that helped shape this outlook, leading us to create a very thorough online catalogue that will demonstrate the greater significance of each costume piece.

Lastly, this internship helped me better understand what I look for in a manager, a colleague, and a workplace culture. Every day, my boss, Liza, insisted that the entire staff take a tea break together. This emphasis on staff bonding is something that I greatly appreciated. It led to a workplace culture where everyone was comfortable consulting one another, creating a productive, friendly, and psychologically safe environment. I have learned that I would like to work for an organization that emphasizes social interaction and mentorship amongst all staff. Furthermore, Nat and I had a fantastic working relationship. While it is common for interns to be competitive with one another, Nat was incredibly supportive. Despite knowing much more than I did about fashion history, she consistently shared articles with me to help me catch up rather than flaunt her extra knowledge. This made me realize that I value a workplace where my colleagues are supportive team players, and I will strive to emulate that behaviour in the future.

I would absolutely recommend that any SASAH student that is interested in theatre and/or fashion and who enjoys research apply for this position. While Nat and I catalogued over 300 costume pieces, there are *thousands* of costume pieces in the Archives, with two new full costumes being added from each production each season. Specifically, I would love to see a future intern continue my passion project: giving credit to the amazing cutters!

Every production has a costume designer. It is this person's job to create conceptual drawings for each costume and suggest possible fabrics. This design sketch is then given to the head cutter, who creates a pattern and determines feasible fabrics in order to bring the designer's concept to life. This pattern is then given to the team of cutters, who build the costume according

to the head cutter's specifications. The process of creating an actionable costume pattern from a conceptual drawing is both difficult and impressive; however, historically only the designer is given credit for the costume piece in the Archives. In an effort to give credit where credit is due, I asked my supervisor if I could begin researching cutters in relation to each costume. As much of this is not documented, this involved me pouring over production design bibles and conducting interviews with the current cutters. While I managed to make a great start, there is still so much more to do, especially with older costume pieces for which the cutter is more difficult to determine. I sincerely hope that future interns will continue my work in this area.

Overall, this was an amazing opportunity. This internship allowed me to gain experience in an arts-related field, helped me learn about the intersection between business and the arts, and most importantly, helped me develop professionally. I had the opportunity to discover my own workplace preferences and skills and learn how I should act as a young professional in the workplace. These are invaluable insights, ones which have greatly informed my recruiting efforts over the last four years.

Ecuador Women's Empowerment Trip

In July 2018, I travelled to Ecuador for sixteen days as part of a ME to WE Women's Empowerment Trip. It is an odd name for a trip, but what distinguishes it from the others offered is that it focused primarily on cultural exchange. The goal of the trip was to meet with different women's groups to better understand the ways Ecuadorian women are working to empower each other. This, in turn, will allow us to inform our own empowerment efforts at home and will help us better develop an intersectional, global feminism.

I travelled with a group of thirteen young women plus two trip facilitators. We began our trip in Quito, the capital city of Ecuador. While there, we did some preliminary team-building

exercises and were given a tour of the city, the latter providing us an introduction to Ecuadorian culture. After one full day and two nights in Quito, we travelled by bus to Chimborazo, a city in the mountains (south of Quito). There, we participated in a number of activities: we had meetings with two different women's groups with girls around our age; we participated in a water walk with a local family (Theresa and her children, Nellie, Joanna and John) to understand why the local community's water projects are so impactful; we assisted the local project manager (Manuel) in a school build project in order to A) learn about the state of education for women in rural Ecuador, and B) give the local build crew a couple days of rest; we attended a skills-building workshop offered by one of the local women's groups to learn about A) how the women were developing alternative revenue streams for themselves, and B) how they were empowering one another to do so as a community; and we participated in numerous exercises each evening to both bond as a group and to better understand concepts of intersectionality, global development, and respectful cultural exchange.

After a week in the Chimborazo Mountains, we travelled by bus to the village of Kanambu, located in the Amazon Rainforest (Western Ecuador) right on the Amazon River. While there, we: learned about the lasting negative effects of Spanish colonization in Ecuador, indigenous culture in the Amazon, the current environmental devastation of the Amazon Rainforest, and socioeconomic inequalities in Ecuador from Sandra, a ME to WE partner and member of one of the local indigenous communities. We planted banana trees for Mr. Vargas, a fruit farmer who then taught us about local fruits and the current landscape of the Ecuadorian cacao industry (and, specifically, the disruption of local farmers' profitability due to companies like Nestle entering the space and growing only the cheaper, hybrid strain of cacao); did a walking tour of the rainforest with our jungle guide, Carlos; met with the Kanambu women's group; assisted the local project manager (also named Manuel) on a school and water build

project; and conducted more learning and self-reflection exercises with our trip facilitators. I can genuinely say that this trip was one of the most impactful experiences of my life, enough so that I broke down crying when my plane landed on the tarmac of Toronto Pearson Airport at the end of the sixteen days.

While this trip certainly taught us a variety of interesting skills—how to plant banana trees, make chocolate from scratch, mix cement, stretch and weave wool, and speak basic phrases in Spanish and Kichwa—these skills were simply a byproduct of the main goal of this trip: to teach us about global development, respectful community support, and intersectional feminism. While I have always considered myself well-educated on intersectional theory, I realize that my thinking was very North American-centric. With the internet at my fingertips, I subconsciously felt that I understood the general state of the world. However, travelling to Ecuador made me realize I had absolutely *no* concept of what life is like outside of the countries I have visited myself, and that my understanding of life in South America, Africa, and Asia was entirely mediated by narratives from news media in the Global North. Considering the harmful narrative of the “Third World” informing much of the North American approach to understanding the world, my perceptions were skewed. Thus, this trip taught me that, if I am to be a global citizen who looks at the world through an intersectional lens, I need to actively experience other countries and seek out cultural exchange with an open mind.

One of the most impactful moments of cultural exchange was our fireside meeting with Sandra, a leader and member of one of the local indigenous communities. In this meeting, Sandra taught us about the drinking of guayusa tea, a drink made from guayusa leaves that has much cultural significance in her community. As she taught us how to make it, she explained the history of the ritual and its significance to her own life: specifically, how the drinking of guayusa tea is a way of connecting with loved ones that have passed. She then had our group engage in

the same ritual with her. By the time the tea was finished, there was not a single dry eye in the room. As she then transitioned into a lesson on environmental devastation and the impact of colonialism on Ecuadorian culture, it was much easier for us to have an emotional connection to the injustices. When we learned about the indiscriminate and wasteful destruction of the rainforest in order to extract a tree useful in chewing-gum production, I was deeply upset. The loss of sacred plants is now more than just an environmental statistic to me: I understand from my participation in the ritual just how important to communities these sacred plants can be.

Furthermore, Sandra's sharing of her lived experience made the injustices of the Spanish colonizers much more visceral. She explained the impact of colonization—the loss of life and property, a privileging of Spanish language over Kichwa, and a very prevalent class divide—in terms of the direct impact on herself, her family, and her community. This demonstrated the power of lived experience: when you hear about specific peoples' experiences, injustices can no longer be “just a statistic,” and it is much more difficult for listeners to achieve detachment. I learned from this experience how important it is not only to listen to lived experiences that are different from my own but also to elevate the voices of others to allow these stories to be heard.

In addition, I learned three important lessons about global development. Firstly, ANY philanthropic/community building efforts in another country should be led and controlled by local leaders and any outside support should be expressly invited and wanted. Secondly, a “hand-up-not-hand-out” mentality should be taken. The goal of global development is always to create *sustainable* community change: efforts that rely on the charity of or work crew from another country is less a way of improving a local economy and more a colonial method of economic control, no matter how unintentional. Thirdly, it is a good thing to visit other countries, but only if your intentions are grounded in cultural exchange and mutual respect. Visiting other communities with the intention of learning by sharing information as equals is wonderful;

visiting other countries to impart a sense of North American exceptionalism or misplaced, self-serving pity is not. As I begin law school next year and consider pursuing international law, these are lessons that I will strive to keep top of mind at all times.

While I learned many impactful lessons, the absolute greatest part of the trip was the relationships I built with both the local community partners and my trip mates. Even years later, the parts of the trip that are the sharpest in my memory are the people: drinking guayusa tea with Sandra as she told us of its cultural significance, watching Shakira smile shyly before knocking me down on the soccer field, catching Carlos's infectious enthusiasm as he guided us through the jungle, listening to Mr. Vargus's thoughtful lessons, enjoying Celine and Marilee braiding my hair, admiring Juan Carlos for patiently listening to our 100th terrible rendition of "Since U Been Gone," playing Stella Ella Ola with the kids—I could go on forever. Even now, nearly three years later, I find myself thinking of them frequently; though brief, each relationship is one I will always treasure.

My trip mates and I have never fallen out of touch: in fact, we still have an incredibly active group chat. We began the trip as strangers but left it as close friends, crying in the airport as we sang "Since U Been Gone" one final time. From team building exercises to hiking the mountain path to herding sheep to eating jungle peppers, we tackled each new experience together. Moreover, these girls helped me regain my faith that small acts DO change the world. After entering university and feeling demotivated by the sheer magnitude of inequalities in the world, I found it was beyond refreshing to travel with a group of girls who wholeheartedly believe in the power of group empowerment. As we repeated frequently, *empowered women empower women*. I left this trip with a support group with whom I can share my ideas and my frustrations alike as I advocate for equity, diversity, and inclusion, and whom I can support in return. Truly, I gained thirteen lifelong and life-changing friendships.

While SASAH did not prepare me for this trip in the conventional sense (ie. travel skills), it certainly helped propel my learning to the point where I was ready to try something like this. SASAH taught me the importance of a global outlook. SASAH gave me an introduction to topics such as intersectionality and postcolonial theory. SASAH taught me the importance of narrative learning. Most importantly, SASAH taught me to think critically. I was incredibly concerned that the trip would become a “white savior” trip and thus evaluated each day with a critical eye. I would frequently reflect on my own actions and how I felt about them, what impact our trip was having on the community, etc. The ability to reflect on and be critical of my own actions and beliefs is something that I absolutely learned from SASAH and is something I believe is essential when engaging in an experience like this.

It was in Ecuador that I first understood how the theory I learned in class can connect to real-world issues. In Chimborazo, we were asked to participate in a debate activity wherein each person is given two options (i.e. “chocolate” or “vanilla”) and is told to justify why their choice is superior without speaking poorly of the other option. It was only as I was drawing on Audre Lorde, Frantz Fanon, and Judith Butler to debate “end racism” or “end homophobia” that I realized just how well my in-class learnings relate to important social causes. I also further realized that connecting theory to real-world issues to argue a case is exactly what a lawyer does. That moment of realization marks the first time I seriously considered a career in law. As I will be starting law school at the University of Toronto in September, I consider that day one of the most pivotal moments—if not *the* most pivotal moment—in my career journey.

I would absolutely recommend that everyone take part in a trip like this. I believe that it is incredibly important to engage with other cultures in order to view the world through a more intersectional lens. Furthermore, seeking out new experiences and meeting new people can be a joyful, engaging, and all-around eye-opening experience. However, if you are going to travel to

another country for any global-development-related purpose, you must be extremely critical of the proposed trip.

It is essential that your presence in that community be requested and welcomed. If your trip has a certain “mission” attached, any help provided must be help that the local community asked for (and all efforts must be managed by local leaders). Furthermore, you must ensure that your activities are supporting the local economy: taking the place of local employees, importing materials rather than contracting with local companies, and providing disruptive charity (e.g. shoes) rather than providing infrastructure support to local business (e.g. shoemakers) is actively harmful and perpetuates colonialism. Your group and the local leaders should be interacting as equals and/or your group should be subordinate to local leaders; any trip that uses infantilizing white-saviour rhetoric is not one in which you want to participate. Lastly, you should always be critical *during* your trip to make sure the actions of your team are always respectful and wanted.

In general, my trip was very positive. We were always working under the leadership of local leaders, and when we would join build sites, we were there to do “grunt” work (digging holes, prying nails from boards, passing along bricks, mixing cement, etc.) that would allow the construction workers to work faster/on other, more important functions. We were never doing work that replaced local workers. All our food was locally sourced and cooked by Ecuadorian chefs, and our educational activities were led by community partners. Nonetheless, there were a few aspects of the trip that made me uncomfortable. While in Quito and Chimborazo, we stayed at local-owned establishments; in the Amazon, we stayed at a ME to WE property that only employed locals. Furthermore, while I am a staunch supporter of social enterprise, it is important always to be wary of any trips like this with a for-profit model. There is a fine line between a “sustainability” model and a performative charity “profit” model, and ME to WE’s recent scandals seem to suggest that they may be tipping more towards the latter. Before you commit to

any trip—ME to WE or otherwise—make sure you do your research; ask the tough questions; and continue to be critical before, during, and after the experience.

This trip helped me develop a deeper understanding of intersectional feminism, allowed me to gain meaningful friendships, taught me the importance of cultural exchange, educated me on global development best practices, and helped me discover my career path. I learned first-hand how CEL experiences supplement your classroom education in a deeply impactful way. Indeed, I can say with confidence that travelling to Ecuador is one of the best decisions I have ever made.

The Presentation

Overall, I enjoyed the presentations during SASAH's Learning from Experience event very much, and I was reasonably happy with my own presentation. I enjoyed the Zoom webinar format, and I felt that the timing was very well managed.

In terms of things that went well, I was very happy with my presentation visually. I spent a lot of time on making it aesthetically pleasing, and I feel that I was successful in that endeavour. Furthermore, I think my presentation was well-structured, and I succeeded in following my own outline for the presentation very closely. Despite the magnitude of content, I am proud of myself for not exceeding the seven-minute allotment. I enjoy giving presentations very much, and I therefore feel that I deliver presentations confidently and give off an air of comfort with public speaking. I really enjoyed the questions during the Q&A period, and I feel that I answered them to the best of my ability (even though some were somewhat unexpected).

Regarding areas of personal improvement, there are a few that come to mind. Firstly, preparedness was an issue that I was not expecting to face but face it I did. As it turns out, I had plugged in my laptop charger to my laptop itself, but I did not check if my laptop was actually

charging. It was only as I closed my browser window to share my screen that I realized my laptop was seconds away from dying and that my charging cord was not actually plugged into the wall. Having to get up in front of everyone to plug in my laptop was extremely embarrassing, and I therefore learned an important lesson of Zoom presentations: ALWAYS double check your computer set-up before you join the call!

Furthermore, I found the seven-minute time allotment to be incredibly difficult to achieve. Though I was successful in adhering to the time limit, I had originally thought I would have 7 minutes for EACH experience and thus had to cut my presentation in half on the fly. While I like to consider myself a great improviser, that is not an experience I would like to repeat. Because of this, I feel that I did not get to address each experience with the depth that I would have wanted. In addition, my experience doing business presentations has made me extremely attached to always having a formal introduction/conclusion, table of contents and brief introduction to the presenter. While I feel that these things add polish to a presentation, I also worry that I wasted valuable time including these things.

With regards to suggestions for the future, I would recommend that the time allotment be changed to 20 minutes (16 minutes for presentation and 4 minutes for Q&A) for all participants. This will ensure that both 1) people who have two experiences have sufficient time to address both, and 2) people who had only one experience have the time to delve deeply into their topic. This would also allow for a longer Q&A, which I think would be appreciated by all. The Q&A was actually my favourite part of each presentation, and I think allowing for more questions will allow listeners to better engage with the content. With these presentations being longer, the presentation day could perhaps be split into two days of presentations to ensure engagement and energy stays high.