Building Skills for a Malaysian Homecoming
Phui Yi Kong, Class of 2015

The Nellie C. Watterson Summer Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts was used to fund two intensive workshops in preparation for post-collegiate theater work. The first was an intense fourteen days with Double Edge Theater featuring six to eight hours of rigorous non-verbal physical movement each day in Ashfield, Western Massachusetts. The second was a two-part workshop on the principles of Eccentric Performing with a master clown and voice coach, respectively, Avner Eisenberg and Julie Goell at Celebration Barn Theater, an international center for creating original physical theater. My goal over the summer was to advance as a performer as well as a facilitator. Together, these workshops inculcated an artistic independence and propelled my involvement into the Kuala Lumpur performing arts scene.

Each workshop served as foundational preparation for my theater work in Malaysia. In January 2014, I decided that I wanted to facilitate theater workshops for Malaysian secondary school students, aged 13-17, as a way to open up new ways of learning. Alongside that decision was the drive to make my own creative decisions as a performer and director. I ended up taking Theater Studio, an independent theater project class, and put together a thirty minute solo performance, a Malaysian short story entitled Cream of the Crop, about a Malaysian boy questioning his sexual orientation and the societal definitions of success.

By the summer’s end, I had engaged over 320 students of differing interest towards theater from five urban public schools in theater workshops and performed Cream of the Crop to two full houses. The principles picked up at Celebration Barn constantly fed into my facilitation and performing, while the physically demanding ensemble training at Double Edge increased my capacity for visual and spatial interpretation of bodies moving in space.

Participating in Double Edge Theatre’s Summer Intensive as a returning student, I could focus on the company’s pedagogy. As much as it prepared me as a capable mover, I was also disappointed with its teaching mechanisms in improvisational group work after having moved past training foundations. These initial sessions, taught through visual demonstrations and ‘follow the leader’ style mirroring work, covered safe movement and weight bearing techniques, and paved the way for more physically intense work.

The six to eight hours of training each day strengthened my non-verbal communication ability with the thirty other ensemble members. By the end, the confidence gained in perceiving and responding to the constantly morphing training environment made working with excited and rowdy Malaysian school students easier. At the beginning of workshops with Malaysian students, I maintained calm amongst student’s segregation, and, perhaps, defiance to the exercises, and, instead, set up games that inadvertently promote inclusive participation and mutual cooperation. In Malaysian society, race and language are points of segregation; being able to establish a common vocabulary for students to use in workshops is important to diffuse social barriers.

My contention with Double Edge Theatre training began as I observed how participants were given limited autonomy. After encouraging independent inquiry in training, trainers maintained power over any group they stepped into, commanding participation that bordered physical overexertion. Rather than intervening and easily co-opting a group’s established dynamics, trainers ought to allow participants to explore organically, stepping in when safety is a concern. Voicing my opinions to one of the trainers, the response I received dismissed the participatory obedience that was inculcated throughout trainings; the assumption was that if participants did not speak up when undergoing physical discomfort, they were faulted for their silence. From this experience, I recognize the power facilitators have over participants and strive to function solely as framework provider rather than instructor.

Two weeks later, I headed to Celebration Barn. My two weeks with Avner Eisenberg and Julie Goell felt like a continuous cycle of learning, failing, and succeeding through putting what I had learnt into practice. Every evening, we were given a chance to use the day’s lessons in a ‘numero’- a short performance. Rather than being taught skills, I was taught principles of performing, I was challenged on a personal level, and with each attempt at performing original work, I could only see myself getting better as a performer.

Observing Avner and Julie closely, I expanded my facilitation style to incorporate side coaching, an effective way to provide personal feedback to students. As such, I was able to engage personally with any workshop participant in Malaysia, establishing rapport with them while challenging them within the exercise’s parameters.

Working as a freelance theater practitioner in Malaysia for five weeks has brought me incredible satisfaction. I worked with students- both the academically successful and the often neglected-, exposed students and teachers to learning soft skills through theater exercises, and found a bold and LGBT friendly theater community. Having the opportunity to seek professional training has made all the difference. I thank the Nellie C. Watterson Summer Fellowship for giving me the opportunity to supplement my work in Malaysia’s emerging field of performing arts. In my final semester at Bowdoin, I will continue to pursue opportunities with the campus community in using performance as a means of civic engagement.

Faculty Mentor: Davis Robinson
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Theater Workshop Photographs
Venue: SMK Tropicana
Date: July 23rd 2014

Photo 1: Explaining a new rule.
Photograph courtesy of Ms. Foo Fong Say

Photo 2: Students balancing the space.
Photograph courtesy of Ms. Foo Fong Say.
Cream of the Crop Post-Performance Discussion with Playwright Pang Khee Teik
Presented by Theatrethreesixty.
Veune: Sparky Dawg Black Box
Date: August 11th 2014

Photo 3: Pang’s Homerian joke.
Photograph courtesy of Kakiseni.

Photo 4: No hiding.
Photograph courtesy of Andrew Khoo.