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USOAR Final Report

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Reflection and Final Report:

Greece: An Exploration of Ancient Storytelling for Modern Audiences

This past summer, I had the pleasure to travel to Greece for a month with my fellow colleague and classmate, Abby Ferree, to research and delve into the origins of Ancient Greek Theatre as well as discover the past's success at marrying verbal and physical storytelling. We each received \$2,500 from USOAR to help support our research. My entire grant went toward paying tuition for the Playing to the Gods intensive at Hydrama Theatre and Art Centre, located on the island of Hydra. During this intensive, Abby and I had many lectures from working Greek artists and historians, took classes, traveled to see ancient Greek theatres, saw performances, toured museums, read as much as possible, and participated in a mask making master class. We also collaborated with the 18 other artists participating in the intensive to put together an original production that we performed both on Hydra and in a theater on the island of Poros. This allowed us to gain firsthand experience with performing in Greek amphitheatres in front of audiences that spoke very little English and test out our theory that a physical performer was necessary to bridge the gap between verbal, "museum" theatre and vivid, striking storytelling.

For this collaborative project, Abby and I centered our research on the study of the body and actively searched for answers by exploring the origins of theatre itself in Ancient Greece. We knew that theatre itself began with the body and with people onstage expressing their stories in order to pass the time, worship, connect with each other, and reinforce the importance of history and recordkeeping. In traveling to Greece, our goal as researchers and theatre

practitioners was to gain knowledge about the origins of storytelling in the past in order to help highlight new ways to improve and build upon American theatre today. We focused on delving into past generations' patience and appreciation of the arts and borrowing from it to sculpt theatre today that appeals to the technology-obsessed, 60-second attention span that currently dominates America. We aimed to recapture the universal appreciation for theatre and physical storytelling.

Theatre is a full-bodied, expressive art form that has the ability to serve as an escape from reality as well as a roundabout way to call attention to various aspects of your own life that mirror the characters onstage. The stories told in Ancient Greece aimed to bring about a feeling of catharsis that aided in distressing, processing, and expelling negative or traumatic emotions. Ancient Greek theatre was considered a place of spiritual and mental healing. Because of the arts' connection to healing in Greece, it was common to find healing centers next door to most theatres. When Abby and I discovered theatre's past with healing through theatre and stories, we knew we needed to go back the place it started. In Greece we worked to gather information that would aid us in exposing and reintroducing America to the highly physical theatre of Greece and Europe. We wanted the world to see that verbal and physical story are able to live in harmony, aiding each other to appeal to the different types of learning and education. Not everyone thrives by reading or listening, many people need to see and vividly experience. Abby and I went to Greece feeling excited to learn about where our art form began, experience the culture, and discover Greece's secrets of highly impactful, breathtaking theatre, which allowed us to be much more susceptible and taken in by the adventures, lessons, and practical application.

As a whole, I believe that Abby and I succeeded in accomplishing our goals. Of course, there is always more to uncover and learn, but the amount of knowledge we gained in four short

weeks have changed my life and my art for the better. While studying at Hydrama Theatre and Art Centre, I was exposed to Greek Theatre as it was in the beginning. Hydra is a small island that has no cars or bicycles and little to none telephone signal or wifi. We had to take boats, walk, or use donkeys to get around, which gave me the chance to disconnect from modern society and completely take in the environment and Greek way of life. The instructors encouraged us to write every day in order to assess the new information from that day and formulate any questions we had about the information, so we kept very detailed journals while in Greece. We also stayed true to our idea in the original USOAR proposal to record video diaries while we were in Greece. We recorded our first video in the airport before our departure, discussing our expectations and desires for the trip. We then recorded videos every few days to talk about the lectures and shows we saw while on the trip and recorded the final video after we returned from the trip and taken had time to think about the experience as a whole. Overall, this way of cataloging our trip worked really well for me because I had the chance to think about the information that was given to us while also discussing and delving deeper into the topics while on camera with Abby.

In the Special Topics Course that Abby and I taught in conjunction with Dean Kassel this semester, we incorporated the lessons learned in Greece to educate and spread this new knowledge about the relationship between theatre of the past and improvements for the future. In Greece, the theatres themselves were outdoor amphitheatres that left us exposed and susceptible to the elements, forcing us to live and learn just as the Greeks would have centuries ago. We studied, rehearsed, ate, and had lectures outside. This constant time outside in the environment definitely reminded me how important the body really is. If I wasn't supporting my body and keeping it healthy then I would not have been able to take part in the course or perform my part

to the best of my ability. Being at mercy to the elements helped me see the dichotomy between the using the body to the fullest in order to tell the story and safely conserving energy to ensure physical health. This was my biggest takeaway from Greece because I was forced to see that our bodies could not function if we weren't properly supporting them, which is true for all theatrical arts as well as in life. I learned that Greek theatre requires a larger awareness of space and subsequent lengthening of the body to ensure the story reaches the back of the audience, which sometimes ended at the top of a mountain. The Ancient Greeks told their stories with their entire body, stretching and lengthening their bodies and their voices in order to make sure not only the audience, but also the gods at the top of mountains could hear their stories. We taught our students that every movement has to be motivated and larger than life. The goal of our class was to help the students understand the importance of the body in performance and execute a contemporary story with the energy and large body of the Greeks. The stories we tell as artists are not small and insignificant, so why allow our bodies to reflect that?

While I believe the class was an overall success, I do wish we had more time with the group. We met once a week for two hours, which was not a lot of time to teach and put together an entire production. However, this class has left me even more eager to keep learning and teaching in the future. I thoroughly enjoyed looking over my lecture notes and practically applying them in the classroom. I made so many connections with other artists and learned far more than I ever thought possible. This trip has left me very excited to keep researching, exploring, and making a difference by exposing America to visceral, true storytelling.

Overall, I would not have the knowledge, passion for teaching, and experiences I do today if it weren't for USOAR. It is honestly hard to express just how thankful I am to have been considered for and awarded this grant. I firmly believe that I would have never gone to Greece to

study without USOAR, and I would not have had the opportunity to teach. Because of USOAR I have now unlocked a passion and excitement for teaching that I may have never discovered if USOAR were nonexistent. I pushed myself to continue researching the topic I was intrigued by only because I knew that this grant was available to help me further my education. Preparing for USOAR has helped me acquire the skills to formulate and write grant proposals that actively fight for and clearly expresses the importance behind my idea. Without a doubt, USOAR has not only left a huge impact on my academic career, but also enabled me to explore my passions and find a possible new career in teaching. From here on out I know that I can push myself to accomplish seemingly unattainable goals in my life. USOAR has taught me that nothing is impossible. I now know there is a way to make my dreams come true and further my academic career if I am willing to work for it.

In the end, my time in Greece opened many artistic and professional doors for me. I was given the chance to explore my passions and learn from people with intimate knowledge of Greece and its past. I was able to sit in the ancient theatre of Epidaurus surrounded by 12,000 other people that were so enamored by the production that rarely any person looked at their phone throughout the crowd. I was able to stare down from the steps of the Parthenon and see the Theatre of Dionysus, the first theatre ever created, the birthplace of theatre itself and reflect on how far we come and how much we still have to learn. I was able to experience the culture and gather clues as I observed and learned from every person around me. Because of USOAR I have had the chance to mold my knowledge into a lesson plan, execute lessons, direct a show, and watch my research come to life. This grant has given me many more opportunities than I could have ever dreamed of and helped me believe that hard work pays off.