

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

TEDxFulbright 2015, in LA September 26 at The Broad

Eric · Wednesday, September 16th, 2015

I've had the good fortune and privilege of traveling abroad twice as a Fulbright Scholar – once to Islamic Malaysia in 2002 shortly after 9/11, and a second time to Bucharest, Romania in 2010. The first time I was a Fulbright Senior Scholar, the second, a Fulbright Senior Specialist in American Studies (Theater). Unlike most academics, I was not a “lecturer” per se; rather I was a teacher of theatrical workshops in solo performance, improvisation, and clowning.



Clowning in Kota Kinabalu, Borneo

Both Fulbright grants offered extraordinary experiences, for me personally, and I hope, too, for my students and colleagues in each of these unique parts of the world. I like to think that I was able to spread the concepts and practices of freedom, initiative, self-expression, and creativity, things that America is known for throughout the world, and things for which I was funded to spread. You can read about [my Fulbright experiences](#) on TCG's (Theatre Communications Group) website.

Now the current news: The [next TEDxFulbright Conference will be in LA, September 26th, 2015](#), at The Broad Stage in Santa Monica.

Fulbright and TED... a match made in heaven.

The international Fulbright Program, established in 1946 by Senator William J. Fulbright, is a competitive, merit-based program created to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and other countries through the exchange of persons, knowledge, and skills. It is currently the largest academic exchange program in the world. The Fulbright Association, established in 1977, was created to promote opportunities for life-long learning, collaborative networking, and service at home and abroad for alumni, supporters and friends of the Fulbright Program.

TED is a nonprofit organization devoted to “Ideas Worth Spreading” that started as a four-day conference in California 26 years ago, and has grown to support those world-changing ideas with multiple initiatives.

TEDx is a local, self-organized event (this one organized by the national Fulbright Association in Washington D.C. and the local LA Fulbright Chapter) that brings people together through TED talks, video and live speakers, all of which combine to spark deep discussion and connection in a small group.

There will be [an impressive lineup](#) of 18 speakers of mostly former Fulbrighters:

Dolph Lundgren, Hollywood action star (yes, he is a former Fulbrighter); Ryan Bart, magician; Alice Blumenfeld, flamenco dancer; Brian Boxer Wachler, physician; Ralph Gibson, photographer; Kate Conklin, performer/educator; Michael Goldberg, venture capitalist; Solomon W. Golomb, mathematician/engineer; Alice Kimm, architect; Samantha Lakin, genocide expert; Leland Lazarus, public relations expert; James Mary O'Connor, architect; Ruairi Robertson, nutritionist/microbiologist; Priyali Sur, journalist; Catalina Talero, civic engagement educator; Cristina Trenas, filmmaker/communications expert; Brigham Yen, broker and urban development expert; and yours Truly, Eric Trules, blogger/clown. The event will be hosted by Debra Levine and Laura Trombley, and speakers have worked with coach, John Bates and his assistant, Grant Graves.

TEDxFulbright's 2015 theme is "Fights Worth Fighting." It reflects the spirit of Fulbrighters, spreading mutual understanding between the people of the US and the rest of the world, sharing ideas worth spreading, and the fierce fight Fulbrighters take on to protect their beloved Program. TEDx, similarly, has shown immense promise in furthering ideas for the benefit of all societies in a way that is both personable (revolutionary story-telling) and powerful (demonstrating incredible feats of intellect, creativity, and collaboration). It is TEDxFulbright's 2015 continuing desire to provide Fulbright alumni a unique framework to most effectively excite and gather others to join efforts in working for the sake of humanity's progress.

It may seem a rather odd theme to some, "Fights Worth Fighting," because Fulbright is known for educational and cultural exchange through primarily peaceful and diplomatic means. But I will always remember, as a young teenager in October, 1962, American UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson making his combative remark over the Cuban Missile Crisis: "I am prepared to wait for my answer *until Hell freezes over*." It was shocking. And confrontational. And Stevenson will always be remembered for it. Because sometimes, one simply has to hold one's ground. Stand up for one's principles. Not placate, not compromise, not fold – in the face of stubborn opposition.



"Until hell freezes over!" Adlai Stevenson

It's funny, but at the beginning of both my Fulbright residencies in Malaysia, I had to stand up for myself and hold my ground to even be able to teach the workshops I had been granted to present. Remember, as I said, this was shortly after 9/11 in Islamic Malaysia. Many of my friends and family told me not to go. "You're crazy, Trules. You're a New York Jew. You're not gonna come back alive." Well... I thought about it.... but how could I turn down the opportunity to live on the island of Borneo for four months, followed by another four months in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital? I couldn't. So... I went. And it turned out that not only did Malaysians not know what a "Jew" really was, but they treated me with respect and appreciation. Of course, in Kota Kinabalu, the biggest city in East Borneo, I had to live with the image of Osama Bin Laden on the screensavers of my colleagues and on t-shirts in the shopping malls, but that was part of *my* education and cultural exchange.



Get your Bin Laden T-shirts!

Still, when I arrived in Borneo in January, 2002, my University of Sabah colleagues had no idea what to do with me. Yes, they had a "theater school"... of sorts... but it was part of the

Communications School. They asked me to teach stage lighting and production design, two areas I knew nothing about. I think an earlier version of myself might have simply accepted the assignment, given myself a crash course on the two subjects on the internet, and carried on. But that's not what I chose to do in 2002. I chose to fight for what I knew I could contribute as a Fulbrighter. I was being paid by the good ol' USA, not by the Malay government. I had something unique to offer, workshops in individuality and self-expression, two things that my hosts knew nothing about. So I just said, "No, I can't teach stage lighting and production design. Let me teach what I was brought here to teach, what I am expert in, and you won't be sorry."

And after a "little negotiation," they did. I taught students from the *kampongs* of East Malaysia to tell their own stories, to improvise with sound and movement, and to actually go out clowning in a public mall... which, of course, made all the Borneon headlines after that once-in-a-fool-moon day.



Oddly, the same thing happened four months later. Thanks, professor Cumeezi! when I arrived in Kuala Lumpur at another government-run Islamic university. Here I had even a heartier adversary; he was from Brooklyn, New Yawk, and he ran the theater program at UPM (University of Putri Malaysia in KL). Unfortunately, he was an overworked Brooklynite who saw my Fulbright grant as the perfect opportunity for me to teach half *his* classes... which, of course, I refused to do.

"C'mon, Sal, just let me teach what I know. The kids'll love it."

"Sorry, no way, Jose. I'm the boss here; you'll teach what I want you to teach."

Okay. This was a fight worth fighting for. I went straight to the Fulbright administrator at MACEE in KL, the Malaysian-American Commission on Educational Exchange. She was immediately and uncomfortably caught in a power struggle between two head-strong Americans. It wasn't pretty, but... with some diplomacy and skill, Kala intervened on my behalf and convinced Sal that my grant was actually for being a guest lecturer, teaching my area of expertise, not a UPM employee, teaching what he wanted me to teach. And... four months later.... after the final solo performance at the end of my residency, Sal was the first to congratulate and thank me.

"Well, you certainly taught those students something new. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Sal. My pleasure."

Because it was. And I certainly had. With the support of Fulbright.

But not... without a fight... worth fighting for.....

REGISTRATION is NOW OPEN! Please visit: www.tedxfulbright2015.com.

To GET YOUR TICKETS: <http://www.tedxfulbright2015.com/#!/ticket-store/cjmy> .



William J Fulbright

“The Fulbright Program aims to bring a little more knowledge, a little more reason, and a little more compassion into world affairs and thereby increase the chance that nations will learn at last to live in peace and friendship.” – Senator William J. Fulbright

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