Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The View from London

Tim Sullivan · Thursday, January 26th, 2012

London was never the plan. I was going to be a big Hollywood star, or perhaps star in my own sitcom, and I knew I was destined to live a glamorous lifestyle in sunny southern California. So after being born and raised in Boston, I packed up all my belongings in two huge duffel bags and flew 3000 miles to Los Angeles to study at USC, where I was sure fame and fortune would follow shortly.

Without giving it much thought, I decided to apply for a study abroad program that would see me spending my junior year in London. I liked Shakespeare, I liked Judi Dench, I liked being able to drink from age 18, so I figured I could do worse than spend eight months in the British Isles. But from the moment I got into a black cab at Paddington station one bright September morning, I had a feeling that this city had something in store for me that I couldn't have predicted.

Over the course of that school year, I found London to have the most innovative and exciting theatre scene in the world. There's no question that Broadway can rival (or even best) the West End in terms of blockbuster musicals, but what struck me was the quality, quantity, and variety of theatre you can find in London. That year I saw on average two shows per week across a wide spectrum of genres. Exciting new writing, outstanding British playwrights that are rarely produced in America, dozens of vastly different takes on Shakespeare, acrobatic mime shows, an improvised and utterly bizarre theatrical experience held in the cavernous vaults under a train station, a puppet show about alcoholism – I was opened up to a whole new world of theatrical possibilities that I had never seen before in the US.

That one year changed my life forever. After seeing such a range of productions, I recognized my true passion lay in theatre, and not film or television as I originally thought. Through a series of intensive theatre courses that saw me "ha-ha-ha"-ing my way through endless voice classes and nearly strangling the Russian high comedy teacher who forced us to spend eight weeks on the first six pages of the dreadfully dull restoration comedy *The Way of the World*, I found that I was more inclined to direct than act (that I was not a very good actor was also doubtlessly a factor). Most of all, I realized that London was to be the great love of my life. Everything about the city – its Victorian and Edwardian architecture, its dry wit, its fascinating history, even the tube – convinced me that this was the place for me.

I spent two years after graduation doing whatever it took to get back to foggy old England. Through a series of strange encounters and coincidences, I found myself working for a women's fashion company who sponsored my visa to return to London. After a few months of wallowing in creative idleness, I founded my own theatre company on the London fringe dedicated to uniting British and American artists. For the next two years, I added 20 hours of rehearsals per week onto my 40-hour work week, before finally securing a visa that allows me to work in theatre full-time.

Working on the fringe has been the most incredible experience. There are over ninety venues that

make up the Off-West End scene, mounting an extremely diverse selection of new plays, innovative revivals, devised work, and more. What strikes me most is the audiences for these theatres: a substantial percentage of people who go to the fringe theatre are members of the local community. Going to the local fringe show is as common as going to the cinema for most people in London – something that doesn't happen in most American cities. As a result, not only does the average citizen have a higher than average understanding and appreciation for theatre, but theatre has become an integral part of the city's culture. Within weeks of the riots in London this summer, a number of plays were opened in response to the events. Theatre makers are actively influencing and influenced by society as a whole, and it is a privilege to be a part of this thriving community.

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