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Spring 2020

Trinity Theatre and SASAH: Compassionate Companions

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Citation of this paper:

Ing, Chantelle, "Trinity Theatre and SASAH: Compassionate Companions" (2020). *SASAH 4th Year Capstone and Other Projects: Publications*. 13.

<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/sasahr4pub/13>

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SASAH CEL

Dr. Bruce

Sunday, December 1, 2019

Trinity Theatre and SASAH: Compassionate Companions

It has been approximately three months since I finished my summer internship at Trinity Theatre. In conclusion, I am extremely grateful for the opportunity I had and for the tools that SASAH has given me – it made the experience even more fruitful. In writing the reflections and through the final presentation, I was given multiple opportunities to sit down and take the time to properly recount my experiences; I have developed new and existing skills, while also drawing relevant connections between Trinity Theatre and SASAH. My summer experience allowed me to take the important soft skills and arts appreciation I have gathered and nurtured in SASAH and translate them into a real-life professional setting. The combination of SASAH and Trinity Theatre has given me guidance and hope that I can achieve a professional career that also combines my passion for the arts and humanities.

Trinity Theatre is a registered charitable organization located in Toronto. It was founded in 1982 by co-directors Alan Richardson and Sandra Crockard. The organization's mandate is to help youth develop resilience to overcome challenges and make successful transitions throughout their lives. They receive funding support from multiple school boards, including the Toronto District School Board, and other organizations such as the National Crime Prevention Strategy and Justice Canada Youth Justice Fund. Overall, Trinity Theatre has over 35 years experience in

creating youth-led leadership programs (such as the summer Leadership Lab) in schools across Canada and America.

I noticed that Trinity Theatre set itself apart from other youth organizations by its foundation in theatre and overall continued appreciation and integration of the arts. Although we are currently participating in a society that stigmatizes the arts as an inferior school or field, Trinity Theatre's programs work to dismantle these assumptions and provides education and workshops for youth that promote self-leadership, career preparation, and community participation in a way that combines the benefits and adaptability of the arts. This is very similar to how SASAH provides an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural arts and humanities education that sets a strong foundation that is relevant and applicable to a career path in any discipline.

My internship took place during Trinity Theatre's summer Leadership Lab. This is a six-week intensive summer masterclass for youth. Post-secondary students are hired for a variety of leadership positions to facilitate this program. I noticed that this drew a parallel to the frequent peer-led and reverse-classroom education that SASAH provides; this kind of learning experience allows students to develop interpersonal skills such as communication, collaboration, and leadership alongside the topics being taught. By having a peer-led environment, the often-intimidating nature of teacher-student dynamics was removed, allowing more freedom and less anxiety for individuals who have a harder time interacting or communicating with figures of authority. Post-secondary hires filled a variety of leadership positions to facilitate the program: project leaders, lead researchers, and communications interns. Project leaders were responsible for a group of students from a specific community and high school (Greenwood, Malvern, Rexdale, and Weston). Lead researchers worked closely with project leaders on uncovering and collecting relevant information to the community projects being developed by each group.

Communications interns worked as a team (there was six of us this summer) to complete a variety of tasks, ranging from promoting and rebranding Trinity Theatre to creating graphics for the youth groups.

During my internship, I was able to develop a strong familiarity in digital creation. I designed business cards for my post-secondary colleagues (using applications such as Adobe Cloud), created several digital surveys using Google Slides, and created infographics using online websites such as Piktochart (use this link to see the demographic infographic I made: <https://create.piktochart.com/output/40199553-tt-demographic-2019>). Now I am quite confident in my digital creator abilities for surveys and graphic creation/collection; I eagerly anticipate using it for academic, personal, and professional purposes.

Although I specialized in research and surveys (each communications intern had a speciality: photography, videography, podcasting, marketing, etc.), the open-nature of Trinity allowed me to expand my skillset and work experience through a variety of tasks that were not all related to research and surveys. I used my background as a research assistant in the English

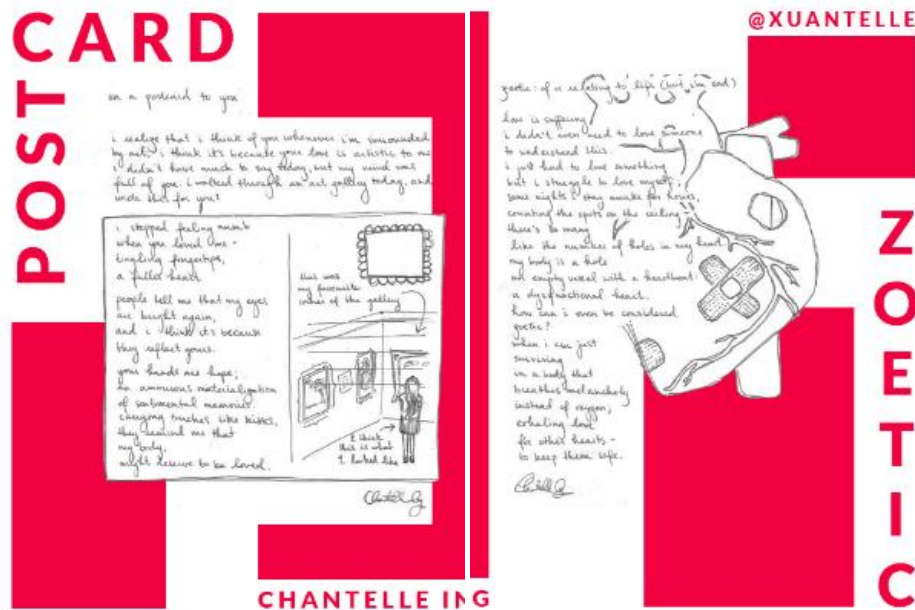


Fig 1. Pages 80-81 of the publication "Who is Toronto?" which contain my handwritten poetry and illustrations. To view the full document: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YVnbmx_0UqmQG6WXC364220D1jactAw/view?usp=sharing

and Writing department at Western University for research-related tasks and my prior work experience as a senior project manager at Carefirst Seniors & Community Services Association to conduct and distribute internal and external surveys. However, I was most excited in being appointed the lead editor for Trinity Theatre's brand-new art publication; this allowed me to take the English writing and editing skills I had developed in SASAH and translate them into a professional work experience that was still very much integrated in the arts. I am also pleased to say that it gave me the opportunity to publish some of my creative work too.

The arts publication that Trinity Theatre produced this summer (their very first publication, ever!) has a special place in my heart. Aside from the more practical aspects of the publication I mentioned earlier (skill development and application), this publication encompasses Trinity Theatre's compassionate values and combined it with the artistic brilliance of both the high school students and the post-secondary workers. In many ways, this publication is a physical manifestation of what I think are the shared values between SASAH and Trinity Theatre: artistic expression, creativity, and diversity. As the lead editor, my job was to polish and refine texts to make them easy to read and seamless. Over the course of several weeks, I had the opportunity to refine my editing and writing skills by looking through submissions and proposals for the final product. It was an enjoyable experience given its relation to artistry and creativity; I was given the privilege of engaging with deeply personal and artistic works while using and practicing my skills as an editor and writer. This experience gladly reinforced the intersection of art in my understanding of communicating with others. In many ways, this opportunity also provided me with an educational experience into the importance of listening and recognizing indirect cues when interacting with other people. My interpersonal skills were heightened as I was reminded of the importance of recognizing the little details and unspoken forms of

communication in my interactions with others. For example, I would notice stylistic details in someone's poetry, which I was able to translate into my direct interactions with them. One high school student used a lot of deliberate pauses in their poetry, and when talking to them in person, I recognized they took meaningful pauses in their speech too; where I may have misconstrued this as boredom, a lack of interest, or confusion before, I was able to perceive it as possibly a moment of thought or to collect their ideas, and wait patiently for them to continue, rather than mistakenly interrupt. This improvement in my awareness of nonverbal cues will benefit me in current and future leadership/teamwork positions in SASAH, further education, and my future career. Here is a link to the publication: <https://issuu.com/trinitytoronto/docs/whoistoronto>.

I have always had a bit of trouble in leadership positions due to my soft-spoken nature: I tend to be too quiet and I get anxious in situations that require public speaking (although this tends to be more easily overcome when I am speaking on topics I am passionate about). My time at Trinity Theatre really helped develop my confidence, and I am grateful for the accepting and compassionate nature of everyone I worked with this summer. While many of the conversations I had at Trinity were relevant to the social issues I am passionate about, my peers' consistent active listening and validation of my voice and opinion gave me the opportunity to properly build a foundation of confidence; I noticed that I started speaking louder and more clearly. As a result, I found that, by the end of the summer, I was participating in activities and conversations much more effortlessly. I have already seen this benefit me in my fourth year of SASAH, and I am excited to continue putting this newfound self-worth to use; I believe that my improved leadership and public speaking skills will work harmoniously with SASAH's opportunities and education. I anticipate a fruitful year of academic success and fearlessness in standing up for what I think is right.

The combination of working with the personal and artistic sides of the youth (through their creative work for the publication) in addition to my more developed and outspoken nature allowed me to experience a kind of leadership I will wholeheartedly embrace moving forward. In developing a meaningful relationship with the high school participants, I was able to connect with them or understand them better. As a post-secondary student, naturally, I was a role-model figure in our environment. Therefore, I combined a compassionate and artistic understanding (as best as I could – we do not always understand each other perfectly) of the youth’s experiences and thoughts with the most confident and outgoing nature I could. I think it paid off; I not only led and mentored, but also learned with and from the students. It was wonderful to see how much joy, learning, and growth the Leadership Lab brought to the youth throughout their experiences; it made me even happier when they acknowledged me as a part of their development. On Comms Day, when the communications team gathered everyone part of the Leadership Lab for feedback, I had some of the longest and most in-depth conversations with the youth. From this, in addition to reflecting with them on their growth as youth leaders, I recognized that I also did some growth of my own—as not only a leader for youth but for myself as well.

I have come to recognize the importance of being a good role model and being cognizant of my actions. The work I carry out will impact the next generation of artists, advocates, and leaders. I learned that I want to do more than set a good example and inspire the youth that will eventually take my place, but I want to lay out a strong foundation for them to build platforms of social advocacy and creative output. From my time at Trinity, their work on community outreach with the youth in Toronto has inspired me to engage in work that is thoughtful of youth, and how art can play a positive role in their life. For example, should I choose to pursue a career in academia, I know that my focus will be on East Asian and/or South East Asian diasporas in

Western literature. My research and writings will render visible the minority group I belong to - I want to inspire the next generation of minority youth to be proud of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and to be unapologetic about their passions in social advocacy. I hope that in my fearlessness, that it creates a foundation for them to be fearless too.

Not only am I grateful for the experience in terms of work and skill development, but also for the people I met and the relationships I built. My supervisor, Matt, was an excellent leader: capable, knowledgeable, and understanding. Besides mentoring me on my digital creatorship, he properly embodied Trinity Theatre and SASAH's mutual value for compassion through his advocacy for mental health and wellness. His fair and accommodating nature allowed me to function at my most comfortable and optimal levels, while also being a constant role model of good leadership. His emphasis on mental wellness was shared throughout the entire communications team that he supervised, and through this, I also developed close working and personal relationships with my coworkers. We were absolutely an effective and well-communicated team; it made going to and being at work anything but tedious. I looked forward to every day and what new experiences and lessons I would learn. In addition to the exemplary model of leadership that Matt was, my coworkers expanded my horizons in communications. Ariane Te, who is also an Asian Canadian and an identical twin (like me!) contributed to my graphic creator skills by helping me navigate Adobe Cloud. It was also nice to have someone to talk to that could understand my experiences as a twin and a person of colour. Charu Sharma and Rebecca McLaren, who are also Western students, taught me about photography and marketing respectively. Deema Abu Naser and Raj Jain shared their enthusiasm for podcasting and videography with me. Although all specialists in different fields of communication, our skills were complimentary in providing effective and reliable communication within and for Trinity

Theatre. We successfully re-branded Trinity Theatre's social media pages and updated the colour scheme. This all was made possible by the safe space that Matt introduced, and the rest of my team worked to maintain. Being in SASAH, I have been nurtured by an understanding, accepting, and compassionate environment. Working at Trinity, I realized that SASAH's safe environment that I have grown so accustomed to working and collaborating in is completely possible in a professional environment. I strongly believe that a safe and welcoming setting is the best foundation for my future professional and academic endeavours.



Fig 2. Including myself, there were two other post-secondary summer employees that were twins and of Asian heritage: Ariane Te (white button-up) and Nikki Pagaling (grey t-shirt). We had many conversations of mutual understanding on our unique experiences as Asian

As seen in the pictures above, one particularly heartwarming and validating aspect of my experience at Trinity Theatre was meeting Ariane Te (who was on the communications team with me) and Nikki Pagaling (the Malvern project/team leader). Studying in the department of English and Writing Studies in the faculty of Arts and Humanities at Western, I rarely meet individuals who belong to the same racial and cultural group as me. But working at Trinity Theatre, I was able to work in an arts-related environment with individuals who could understand me culturally. They were identical twins too! A large part of the experience at Trinity

Theatre revolves around multiculturalism and different lived experiences. It was validating to be expanding my professional work experience with coworkers who I could identify with and relate to. I am pleased to say that it was uplifting to see them grow alongside me in an inclusive environment. We all thrived because we were surrounded by like-minded and relatable peers. Again, this drew a parallel to my growth in SASAH and how gratifying it is for me to be able to learn in an inclusive environment where I can also see my peers growing too. Through my experiences, I have witnessed the benefits of working in an environment that accepts and celebrates diversity; in these environments, collaboration and teamwork excel, and individual growth and personal leadership is encouraged by your peers.

As a Torontonians I learned quite a lot too. Although being raised in Toronto as a young child, and frequenting areas of Toronto as I moved around the GTA and York Region, there was a lot I learned about Toronto's community that I did not know prior. The Leadership Lab incorporated field trips in addition to skills training and workshops to promote exploration of the community and city. All employees participated in these trips too. The places we visited and were educated on offered an immersive opportunity for students to develop a curiosity for their city's infrastructure, history of immigration, integration and inclusion, the arts, the environment, etc. We visited notable places such as the St. Lawrence Market Gallery (I did not know prior that St. Lawrence Market even had a beautiful art gallery above it!), the AGO, Toronto Archive, Old City Hall, and CAMH. I saw the benefit of these excursions and how they transformed the students' perspective of their city and how they feel they belong to it. I also noticed my own deeper rooting in the broader community; I developed a stronger civic awareness, appreciation for diversity, and built a stronger sense of citizenship and belonging. For example, going to the St. Lawrence Market Gallery was an opportunity for me to learn more about Toronto. In addition

to gladly learning that there was a gallery above the market to begin with, I also had the chance to examine the current exhibit, which was early Toronto artwork done by women. The exhibit was called *Through the Eyes of Women Artists*, which displayed art and elaborated on the impact and engagement of Canadian women artists in Toronto over the past 170 years. Their beautiful brushwork, pencilling, etc. inspired multiple facets of my life. I was inspired by the talent of women, and their pursuit and participation in art albeit the patriarchal nature of society; I found that this influenced my personal and academic work, and my most recent creative writing projects and academic essays focus significantly more on women and their impact/contributions to the societies they belong to. Overall, seeing the gallery allowed me to reflect on the intersections and valuableness of art in the community. In my time of reflection, I drew parallels



A painting of flowers by Mary Ella Dignam at the Market Gallery in Toronto.

between the gallery's art's relation to the Toronto community with the creative output of my SASAH cohort and how it has contributed to the SASAH community. Coincidentally, my

current cohort is entirely female; it creates a safe space where we can understand and relate to each other through our lived experiences as women. We all come from a diverse range of backgrounds. Every instance in which we had to develop creative projects and share it with our cohort, we grew closer – we learned new things about each other and learned to appreciate the diversity of the communities we belong to (for many of us, the Toronto community, the Arts and Humanities community, the female activist community, etc.). Communities and the strong relationships that make it up are essential to individual and group development.

Another significant example of art moving and relating to me was the mural painted by Ness Lee at Underpass Park. Ness Lee is a Hakka-Chinese Canadian artist who is known for her signature hand-drawn, curvy female figures with long, jet-black hair. The minute I saw her mural I felt drawn to it, and upon further research, I immediately knew why: Ness Lee also struggles with her hybrid identity and uses art as a way of exploring, defining, and reclaiming it. Her art made me feel represented and visible. As a Singaporean-Chinese Canadian, I constantly struggle with my identity, especially when it comes to pursuing an education and career in the arts. I am a visible racial and ethnic minority in my faculty at Western but also a minority in terms of my



Ness Lee's contribution to the Multipli'city mural at Underpass Park.

field of study in the Chinese community. But, Lee's art gave me refuge, the way SASAH and Trinity Theatre have welcomed me in with open arms. These three combine a hopeful foundation for me to continue crafting my passions, albeit their deviation from norms.



A circle discussion with the high schoolers at Underpass Park on one of our field trips in Toronto. Here we were discussing the history of Fort York, what transforms a space into a place, and the demographics of Toronto.

The Arts and Humanities are an important and cultural part of communities. My experience, in addition to the experience of my SASAH peers has properly confirmed my strong belief in this. During the CEL presentations on Friday, November 15, 2019, I got the chance to listen to my fellow cohort members on what they did for their CEL(s) and what they learned, gathered, and developed during them. Like me, there was an importance and value placed upon an arts education, and it was a vital factor in their successful completion of their placement. These presentations, along with my internship, demonstrated to me the diverse application of the Arts and Humanities. An arts education (SASAH especially with its interdisciplinary nature and cross-cultural application) brings forth an effective combination of what I have labelled “the four

C's": compassion, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking! The wide range of my SASAH cohort's CEL experiences celebrates unique experiences and really proves the multifaceted nature of the Arts and Humanities. Furthermore, our successful completion and enjoyment in learning and working in our experiences highlights the benefit that an arts background brings to professional settings. I noticed that everyone in my cohort had made a meaningful contribution or significant impact during their placement; I now have a wide range of proof to back up my belief that the Arts and Humanities is an important contributor to community outreach and building. Our out-of-the-box critical thinking skills that we have developed in SASAH, which combines pragmatism and logicity with creativity and inclusive thought, allowed us to contribute to our CEL placements by solving problems or coming up with ideas that are perhaps unconventional, but useful. For example, Alex Busch's unique critical thinking skills, which were a product of her unique combination of SASAH and math, helped her to find a solution for bringing pets into Anova shelters.

I believe that any SASAH CEL placement will be a fruitful and rewarding learning experience. SASAH provides a strong foundation of Arts and Humanities education which gives students a unique and diverse skillset to tackle real-world problems and conventional professional settings. However, I do recommend taking an internship at Trinity Theatre, especially for someone who has connections to Toronto. Given Trinity Theatre's close ties with Toronto and other organizations in Toronto, whoever takes a placement here will have the opportunity to deepen their relationship with the community and learn more about its history. Additionally, Trinity Theatre already has a shared appreciation for the arts, which allows students start working immediately in an arts-collaborative environment. In my experience, although I think it would be rewarding to pioneer arts-integration into a workplace that

previously did not, entering an environment that already shares my value for the arts allowed me to go straight into collaboration, teambuilding, and developing working relationships. In doing so, I was able to work on finding intersections and diverse applications for my arts education in a professional setting, thereby giving me the tools and experience to demonstrate to future employers and graduate programs the real-life application of my arts background.

This CEL/internship opportunity gave me a place to translate the skills and values I have learned and developed in SASAH in a real-life professional work environment. I developed methods on interconnecting my values and skills in a harmonious way that paves a path for success in my future. This experience helped to solidify my strong desire to enter a future career that is integrated in both a more conventionally professional setting with an arts-valuing environment. I have and continue to be reminded of the unique set of skills and forms of critical thinking that an arts education provides. I also emerged from this experience a more confident and capable person – I learned that I can be valued and that I am an asset to whatever organization I work with in the future. Rather than fearing my “differentness” as person of colour, a queer person, and an arts-educated person, I recognize how this is a valuable asset and special lived experience to have. As a result, I have developed a unique outlook on life that is useful and important to generating work that is inclusive and advocative. Furthermore, my education in SASAH has provided me with a strong foundation in multiple fields in the arts, cross-cultural studies, and intersecting communities. My lived experience as a minority in my community as well as my specialized and diversely applicable arts education contributed to my finding success in my internship. This has given me hope for my future endeavours and aspirations.