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CEL at The Grand Theatre

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Experiential Learning

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The Grand Theatre Final Report

In 1901, The Grand Theatre was known as The Grand Opera House. At this time, it was purchased and owned by Ambrose J. Small and his business associate. When Small eventually disappeared in 1919, the theatre was purchased by Trans-Canada Theatre Limited; when that company went bankrupt in 1924, the theatre was purchased by Famous Players. It was later sold to London Little Theatre, which eventually changed its name to become the present-day Grand Theatre that we all know (“The Grand Theatre”).

For my experiential learning credit, I worked with The Grand Theatre. Specifically, I worked with their archives, helping to create digital lists of all the documents that they have kept over their many years. Alongside three other SASAH students, I have spent numerous hours going through boxes upon boxes of documents, photos, and other random artifacts owned by the Grand. Overall, the history of the Grand has only a little impact on my experiences working with their archives. I find their history fascinating, being a bit of a history buff myself. I specifically find it interesting that Ambrose Small was never found after his mysterious disappearance and many people believe that he currently haunts the Grand Theatre today. However, it is also useful to know the theatre’s history when I look at all their documents. Having the knowledge of the theatre’s past allows me to better understand what I am looking at when I open each new box, but it is not essential to doing the job well.

The experiential learning credit is an opportunity for SASAH students to engage with the community, meet new people, and develop unique and interesting skills. It is theoretically a once-in-a-lifetime chance to help someone and make a change doing something about which you are passionate. As a required credit, I think that the CEL placement is incredibly important and useful and I am so glad that SASAH offers it. It has so much potential to have a positive affect on SASAH students and the communities in which they are involved.

That said, that is not what I found during my experiential learning project. I think this is a direct result of my project being so separated from the community. While I was working for a community company (the Grand Theatre), I did not engage or interact with them directly. Most of my project hours were spent working in the SASAH offices, which really did not help contribute to the feeling of being engaged with the community. If anything, it only made me feel more isolated and alone – and a lot like the work I was doing did not matter. Now I am not saying that the work I did does not matter, just that it felt like it sometimes. I know that helping the Grand Theatre with archiving their documents is valuable to them. However, when I talk to the other people in my cohort and I hear about their CEL experiences, I wish mine had been a little more interactive and a lot more interesting.

As I stated previously, during the course of my experiential learning project, I worked with the Grand Theatre helping to archive their old documents and materials. This task involved going through multiple boxes of old documents and recording their information into a computer system. This system was set up by Natalie Scola, a member of the SASAH cohort below mine, and is done in Microsoft Excel; it involves recording information about each document's condition, age, and what it is. Originally, this system of archiving was created by the American Theatre Archive Project (Taylor). The ATAP wrote out a "45-page do-it-yourself manual" on

how to archive theatre documents (Taylor). It is my understanding that this is what inspired Natalie and helped her in the creation of the system we have been using.

I have gone through many documents since beginning this project. Such documents include, but are most certainly not limited to, “playbills, programmes, posters, scrapbooks, stage designs, playscripts, audio and video recordings, correspondence, administrated files, and diaries” (McCallum & Pincoe). Along with all these documents, I have also encountered resumes, headshots, production photos, negatives, slides, faxes, press clippings, radio broadcast scripts, costume designs, and financial records. Every box I have gone through has been unique and different from the rest. Sometimes, not knowing what documents I will be sorting through next adds a little excitement to an otherwise boring job.

These “records serve as evidence of the important work that went into the making of that production and its impact” (Brady et al. 1). Without them, theatres would have no record of their past productions and other important aspects of the theatre’s history. As such, keeping the documents provides an opportunity to retain this information. However, leaving them in boxes does not. This is where we come in, tasked with going through and creating order out of the chaos of these boxes.

Patrick also assigned us the task of sorting through and organizing the remaining boxes. I did this piece towards the end of the term and the project. It was a joint effort between myself and Sarah MacDonald, who had done some similar work towards the end of her time at the Grand during the summer. Using her previous experience as a guide, we re-boxed some of the boxes that were falling apart (of which there were many), labelled the boxes so we would know what remains inside to be archived, and organized the room in the SASAH offices to make it easier to access said boxes. This job is important because, as we approach the end of the term,

we are realizing that there is simply not enough time to complete all of the boxes that still need to be archived. We will not even be able to complete the boxes that are in the SASAH offices, let alone the ones still at the Grand. In organizing them like we did, we hope to have made it easier to prioritize certain boxes as well as making it more efficient for any future archivers to access and understand.

Our experience doing this was a lot like how Nicole Estvanik Taylor describes in the opening of her article: “You drag open the door and choke on a cloud of dust. The first box you grab collapses, pelting you with dead spiders, rehearsal snapshots and crumpled scripts.” This is an obvious exaggeration, but at the time it felt eerily true. Some of those boxes we went through were so old and dusty that our hands were covered in dust and grime just from touching them. By the end of the few hours we spent working on them, our hands were dirty enough to turn the soap in the women’s washroom black. While I would not call that the most exciting moment ever, it did give Sarah and I a chance to bond over our mutual disgust for what we were mutually experiencing.

The value I found in this project was not the typical value that was probably expected for me to find during my experiential learning credit. I feel like most SASAH students find a lot of value in their placements from doing valuable work that contributes to the community; or perhaps from making connections that will benefit them into the future. In fact, after listening to everyone’s presentations, I know that a lot of my peers did indeed experience these things. Listening to most of them talk about the values and benefits of their projects made me realize just how much I did not experience mine in the same way. However, I found value in one aspect of my project: making the connections not with the community but with my fellow SASAH students.

Due to the nature of this placement, I was in very little contact with anyone outside of SASAH. My main connections during this project were Patrick, Natalie, or Nicole and Sarah, who were also working with the archives. Prior to beginning this project, I was already close friends with Nicole and had a passing acquaintanceship with Natalie. I had never met Sarah, as she is still relatively new in SASAH, so I suppose that this project did introduce me to someone new. Over the course of the project, I developed stronger relationships with everyone involved; in particular, I became closer with both Nicole and Sarah.

Unlike Natalie, Nicole, and Sarah, I did not participate in the archiving process over the summer last year. My project began when I first met with Patrick in June, essentially begging for something that would count towards this credit. When he told me about the archiving project that was likely going to continue into the school year, I was fully on board. I like both art and theatre, and the prospect of archiving seemed like a skill I might be able to use one day. Mostly, though, I was desperate to find something and terrified that I would not be able to graduate if I did not.

However, as a result of me joining the project late at the beginning of the school year, I never really interacted with anyone from the Grand Theatre or the London community. There is a rather large part of me that strongly wishes I had connected with someone outside of Western and the SASAH bubble. I feel like that would have been a very useful connection to have made and to potentially continue to maintain, even past the end of the project.

That said, my growing relationships with Nicole and Sarah have proven to be incredibly beneficial – both in a personal and an academic sense. While these are not professionals I can connect with to potentially benefit me in the future, they are peers I have become close to and can now call better friends. Nicole and I have known each other and been close since first year –

a result of being in the same cohort, same major, and same awful first year astronomy course. We bonded. Naturally, I asked her to train me and show me the ropes of archiving; I already knew her and felt most comfortable around her. But I have also gotten to know Sarah better and that has been a truly important addition to my life. While I would not say we are the best of friends, we have more of a friendship now. I feel comfortable talking with her or saying hi randomly in the SASAH room. It is something I value and have gained from this project.

Additionally, throughout this project, I developed a stronger appreciation for and talent at using Microsoft Excel, especially in terms of having multiple pages and spreadsheets on the program. My knowledge with Excel was rather elementary prior to this project. Honestly, I would say it was passable at best. I had really only used it previous to make charts or colour-coded schedules, but rarely for anything more complex. And while those charts have been complimented for their beauty, they do not really utilize anything from Excel aside from the grid format. As well, I developed a stronger understanding and appreciation for the work that theatres do. Before this, I had had very little interaction with theatres or theatre professionals. Aside from attending the occasional show, I did not have much of a connection with the theatre. I feel as though this project amended that for me; not only do I have a stronger connection now, I also have an appreciation for what goes into producing a show.

While using Excel was a good way of organizing and keeping track of the archiving that had already been done, it did present us with some challenges. For one, we originally had no way to compile all of our data. Patrick had to source out a computer to be brought in and set up in the SASAH offices. This caused some major delays in our ability to get started with the project itself. The challenges did not stop there, however. We also had to deal with the fact that we could not have multiple people archiving on a single computer. While we each had the Excel

spreadsheets available to us on our individual laptops, we still needed to make sure we took turns transferring our data from our laptops to the main computer. While it is a minimal challenge, it was something we needed to navigate. The other challenge that came out of sharing the computer was that it made our organizational system a little difficult. Instead of clearly marking the boxes we had done in Excel, we struggled to keep track of our boxes in an easy to understand way. I think there could have been a better way to go about that – perhaps using SharePoint as a sort of shared Excel drive would have been a beneficial way to organize ourselves and our work.

I also found value in working on a project I did not feel particularly invested in. While being trained in how to do this project, I remember Nicole telling me that the work is very boring for the most part but every now and then something interesting comes up. I also remember thinking *how boring can it be?* Boy, was I wrong. Now, seven months into the project, I can confirm that this is true, and I was absolutely mistaken to ever think otherwise. A lot of the work I do feels like busy work, but I have learned how to do work that I find boring. As well, a lot of the time I spent archiving was incredibly boring – I found it tedious and repetitive. Most of it was not at all engaging or exciting, like I had originally hoped, but rather dull and mind-numbing. Archiving is by no means the most exciting or entertaining job out there – I have most definitely learned that from this project. A lot of it is sitting in front of a computer, looking at ten copies of what appears to be the same document, making sure that they are indeed identical. Then, once concluding that they are identical, copying the information that is on the document into the computer. And repeat.

I also simply did not find myself invested in the work I was doing. As much as I developed an interest in the study of theatre documentation, I still do not find it to be something about which I am overly passionate. I am not interested in pursuing theatre studies, museum

studies, or archival work in the future. As a result, working with the Grand has provided me with very little in the way of any potential future value. The experience I gained is still valuable, it is just not going to benefit me as I pursue my future goals.

The aspect I found most interesting was researching and coming to understand why theatres archive in the first place. Before beginning this project, I had never even heard of theatre archiving, so I had no insight into what it was or why it was done. Through doing the research for my annotated bibliography, as well as through simply doing the work, I have learned a lot about the actual act of archiving and its history in the theatre world.

Marianne Combs wrote a blog post for the Minnesota Public Radio's website outlining what it means to preserve history through the act of theatre archiving. Especially, when it comes to archiving, it is important to note that "archivists find value in things [others] often take for granted: old ticket stubs, playbills, and notes written in the margin of a script" (Combs). In my experience, I would agree that these are the things that theatres and theatre archivists find valuable. I could not count how many old ticket stubs or playbills I have come across. In the room of boxes in the SASAH offices, there is an entire box filled with old ticket vouchers – hundreds of them, at least. These are vouchers that had once been handed out to people and then redeemed to see a show. I have yet to archive this box – in fact, I keep putting it off because it kind of scares me – but it is coming up quickly in the to-do list and will, I am sure, involve a lot of counting and a lot of papercuts.

Having a theatre archive is important and so is digitizing the records. Simply stuffing all the documents into one corner of the theatre is "a hindrance to the day-to-day running of a company, a setback for scholars, and a lost opportunity to share a company's legacy with its community" (Taylor). When all the documents are in boxes in a dusty room that nobody has

access to, it is almost as though they do not exist at all. If they are never going to be looked at or used for future purposes, it begs the question of why theatres should bother to keep them in the first place.

Combs begins to answer this question by quoting Neal Cuthbert, who states that “by preserving the legacy of theatres, it becomes possible that others can gain support, meaning, faith, and energy from the work theatres do today.” This quote really helped me to understand why we were doing this project in the first place. Theatre archives are a way of preserving the past in a way that makes it accessible for the future. A lot of good can come from having theatre records archived, especially digitally. For one, it eliminates the need for excessively dusty boxes in the basements of these theatres. Another reason to digitally archive these documents is to provide people with a way of accessing them easily in case of someone ever needing to search through a theatre’s records. Whether this be to look up an old production or to go through old financial statements, having these documents organized and archiving is incredibly beneficial to any theatre, including the Grand.

While I can understand these reasons very well, and I do support the process of archiving, it is still hard for me to fully understand exactly why the Grand kept some of the documents that they did. For example, the other day I came across an old plan for a remodel that never actually happened. If that project was scrapped and never occurred, why did the Grand feel the need to keep those documents? This is a question I cannot answer. Maybe, like me and my grandfather, the people at the Grand Theatre are packrats; maybe they found a value in these documents that I, as an outsider, simply cannot see; or maybe they kept them for some other important reason. I might never know.

The one thing I can honestly say I have taken away from this experience is an appreciation for the people who do tedious work like this as a full-time job. I understand now why the Grand Theatre requested students to assist with this task: it is not an enjoyable one and it takes a lot of hours to complete. It is a very slow process; the American Theatre Archive Project considered “150 boxes” to be a huge milestone (Taylor). While 150 does not seem like that large of a number, especially considering how many boxes there are, that many boxes would have taken a very long time to accomplish. As such, having students do it part-time on a volunteer basis means the Grand does not need to hire anyone nor do they have to pay them to do this long-lasting job.

As we come to the end of the term, it is time to work on our deliverable. Since the CEL project requires some sort of deliverable final product, it was decided that Nicole and I should put our heads together and write a report to deliver to the Grand upon completion. We have already begun outlining this report. After discussing it with Patrick, we decided that the things we needed to include in it were as follows: an overview of the project as a whole, an outline of the process which occurred in the summer, an outline of the process which occurred in the fall and winter terms, what has so far been completed, what the next steps are, and any recommendations for improvement that we might have. As the ones involved in the project, Nicole and I are best suited to provide these recommendations, since we have firsthand experience with what worked well and what did not. We will also be reaching out and contacting Natalie, Sarah, and Paul Fujimoto-Pihl (who works at the Grand).

What happens next is currently a little bit up in the air. At one point, apparently, the Grand had plans to send these documents onwards to Guelph to be stored – once they were all appropriately archived, that is. We also need to discuss what else they would like to see come

out of this project and determine if there is more that needs to be done. I do not know if there will be students who continue with the archiving in future years. I know Sarah has not yet completed her hours and will continue to work over the summer; however, it is currently beyond my knowledge as to whether or not this will be offered as a project to future SASAH students looking for a CEL credit.

Personally, my recommendation would probably be not to offer it again – unless someone desperately wants to do it. It was not the most enjoyable experience for me and I feel like I missed out a lot on the community involvement that my peers experienced. I think SASAH can do better with the internships they offer than the Grand Theatre archives. By all means though, if someone is very interested and invested in the project, it needs to be done by somebody eventually. Since it does need to be completed, I can understand if SASAH chooses to continue using it as a CEL opportunity. That said, I would hope that it would be amended to allow for some more community engagement.

Working in the SASAH offices had its pros and cons for me. A major advantage was having it so conveniently located for me to go to whenever I was free. I was able to go in and get some archiving done between or before classes, without having to worry about getting back to campus by a certain time. It was nice to be able to go any time I was available – as long as those times were weekdays between the hours of nine in the morning and four in the afternoon. Herein lies one of the disadvantages of working in the SASAH offices. I was extremely limited and only able to work during office hours. Unfortunately for me, the hours that the doors were unlocked also coincided with my class schedule first semester. As such, it was difficult for me to complete the number of hours that was expected of me, especially with my four other classes and

assignments for them. Had I been able to get archiving done in the evenings or weekends, it might have been different.

And, as I mentioned previously, working in the SASAH offices limited my community interaction. This, I feel, was the biggest disadvantage to the location of my project. I was very isolated and had no engagement with my community partner. I never even met anyone from the Grand Theatre. The only people I saw were the members of the SASAH administration and the occasional random students coming in to speak to a professor. Very little of my interactions in the SASAH offices had anything to do with my actual archiving work. That, in and of itself, was one of the most upsetting and worst aspects of working there instead of at the Grand.

Ultimately, all of the work I did throughout the year culminated in a final presentation that I was to do in front of my classmates, professors, and other members of the university and community. This was a very stressful moment for me because presentations and public speaking make me nervous beyond belief. They usually cause me major anxiety, and this was no exception to that rule. I was also nervous because I was worried that what I had to say would not compare to everybody else's experiences. I did not know how to impress people with the work I had done, considering it was really not that impressive.

Right before the class began, I was running through my script over and over, panicking and freaking myself out more and more. I was a bit of a disaster internally. I hope I hid it well. As delicious as the food looked, I was too nervous to eat before I presented. I am very grateful that my presentation happened before the break, so at least I could snack after my turn ended.

I also encountered a lot of stress in the days leading up to the actual presentation. When it came time to the making of the PowerPoint itself, I was struck with a dilemma: I needed to make my presentation enjoyable and engaging, despite my project being the complete opposite.

The solution I came up with was to make what I was saying as funny as I possibly could. I like to think I am a fairly funny person, especially when it comes to dry humour or sarcasm. I utilized these strengths while writing the scripts. I threw in joke after joke, made sarcastic comments about the boring nature of the job. Basically, I spent seven minutes making fun of the work I did.

It worked. People laughed quite a bit during my presentation. I felt like I had achieved my goals. My project goals might not be inspiring or things I feel a strong need to accomplish, but I successfully made my classmates laugh during my presentation. It was really all that I wanted out of it. I got compliments following the presentation as well. I had started my time by warning everyone that my project and presentation were boring, but that hopefully as a class we could survive it. By the end of the presentation, however, I had come to realize that I had managed to make it not boring. People were engaged – and laughing. I even noticed Patrick laughing, which made me feel a lot better.

I also got comments from other people who had similar experience working with archives. They seconded my thoughts, making me feel less alone in the boredom I had experienced. It is always nice to know that others feel the same as you – no matter what situation it is that you are talking about. Having people come up and tell me they thought I did a good job or that I articulated my experience well or that I was funny was really comforting. Despite all my fear and anxiety before the presentation, I finally felt that my work had paid off and I had done a good job.

It was not over there, however. There was another stressful aspect of that day. Before the presentations began, those of us presenting had decided to save some time and compile all our PowerPoint presentations into one master PowerPoint. This would theoretically save time

between presentations, since we would be able to start the next person's project right away instead of waiting for them to pull it up. It may seem minimal in actual time saved, but the intention was there, and it was a good plan.

However, there was a glitch. As I was presenting, I noticed some slides were missing information. There were images and quotes that were missing – things I had been relying on to make this presentation a good one. It was a moment of panic; I was stressed. Luckily, I handled it well and made a joke of it, adding to the overall humour of the presentation as a whole. The almost terrible situation turned out alright in the end. Though I do wish those pictures had been present so that my peers could have seen them, I managed to recover and continue on without too much pause.

I feel the need to say that archiving is important. As much as I found it to be tedious and boring, I recognize that it needs to be done. Without the work of archivists, theatres and many other companies would be lacking an important resource. In a world where everything is digital, it is so important to change our record-keeping habits and adjust with the times. The Grand has so many boxes of hardcopies of documents that only exist in those boxes. Most of them are not digitized and do not exist anywhere else. These hardcopies are good, but without a system of knowing what documents they have and in what box they are located, they are doing no good to anyone right now. As a result, this project that I have been working on is going to be extremely beneficial to the Grand Theatre – whenever it is finally complete.

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