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Grand Theatre Internship: Final Report

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SASAH EL

9 April 2021

Grand Theatre Internship: Final Report

Introduction: What A *Grand* Opportunity!

It is April, the last month of the last full-time semester of my undergraduate degree, and as I reflect on my internship and my university experience in general, I have to admit that I am not exactly where I thought I would be come the spring of 2021. So much has changed over the past twelve months, not just personally but globally as well, of course. A year ago, I was set to begin my internship at London's Grand Theatre, on March 13th, as a writer contributing to the "Reno Book," a souvenir publication documenting the historic multimillion-dollar renovation and modernization of the theatre's many spaces. During the two weeks previous, to become familiar with the work going on at the theatre, I had been graciously given tickets to attend shows on both the McManus and Spriet Stages, including *Every Brilliant Thing*, *Honour Beat*, and *Between Breaths*, the latter being one of my favourite plays. On Monday, March 9th, I had listened to the Grand's season launch announcement at the Western Fairgrounds, rubbing elbows with board members, donors, staff, and excited members of the London community, all eager to see what wonders and delights the theatre would be bringing to the city next. It was my mother's birthday the Friday of that week, and I had been generously offered discounted tickets to the opening night show of Emma Donoghue's *Room*, which I was going to treat my mom and my sister to. That morning, I was going to be sitting in on a Grand staff meeting and breakfast to be introduced to the people I would be interviewing and hanging around with for the next eight

months; an administrative orientation and tour would follow. As well, I was going through a bit of a tough time personally involving a crisis of faith in my chosen field, and I was wildly happy to be excited for the first time in a long time, rather than consumed by stress, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed.

Then everything changed. On Thursday, March 12th, the day before everything was set to begin, I received an email from my internship organizer: the theatre was shutting down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was saddened, of course, but not yet knowing the full scope of what was to come, I was hopeful that this would just be a setback or a postponement rather than a full stoppage. Hindsight is 20/20, though, and obviously, this was wishful thinking. To quote from an email from one of my supervisors, the world was “changing hourly ... and not in a good way.” Eventually, the Grand’s 2020-21 slate of shows was cancelled, the renovation halted, and my internship ended before it even really began.

Over the summer, however, I learned that the theatre’s renovation and subsequent documentation was continuing through their social media channels and, with the assistance of Dr. Barbara Bruce, reached out to ask if there was any way I could still contribute to the process as originally proposed. Realizing my interest and passion, the theatre’s Executive Director, Deb Harvey—one of the people who had interviewed me for the position in the first place—suggested moving forward with a revised work plan that would suit the situation and times, and though it sounds a little corny, this was my first monumental takeaway from this internship, one that will stick with me for the rest of my career: good things come to those who *persist*. Having persisted, I am now writing this final report of my internship at London’s Grand Theatre over a year after the world at large ground to a halt and life as we knew it was altered forever. In that time, I have learned organization secrets, been told of ghostly encounters, laughed at behind-the-scenes

mishaps, gotten teary-eyed at heartwarming stories, discussed the importance of equity and anti-racism in theatre, forged bonds with a variety of people, heard a lot more about plumbing than I ever thought I would, and just thoroughly enjoyed myself. While the past thirteen months have been chaotic and unprecedented for everyone, and while where I am may not be where I expected to be, none of this is to say that where I am *now*, in the twilight of my redesigned internship at the Grand Theatre, is not someplace just as incredibly wonderful, enlightening, and enjoyable, and I am deeply delighted to share my experiences.

The Work Itself

Due to the limiting effects of COVID-19 and the shift in timeframe to coincide with my school semesters, my internship duties at the Grand were narrow in scope and carefully defined, as I was not permitted to be on the premises without special permission due to construction hazards and, partially, public health restrictions and lockdowns. To assist with the creation of the Reno Book souvenir publication, I was primarily tasked with remotely interviewing theatre staff, board members, and donors on their history and experiences with the Grand and their attitudes coming into this significant renovation. The following is a list of all the amazing people I spoke to, along with their job titles in chronological order of interview date to give some idea of my interviewing schedule, as well as an organizational table of the Grand's hierarchy to provide a sense of the organization's many branches and departments:

- *Oct. 7 — Dennis Garnhum (Artistic Director)
- *Oct. 8 — Paul Fujimoto-Pihl (Project Manager)
- *Nov. 2 — Megan Watson (Artistic Associate)
- *Nov. 4 — Natalie Kearns (Head of Props) and Natalie Tsang (Props Buyer and Builder)
- *Nov. 9 — Lyndee Hansen (Production Manager)

- *Nov. 12 — Deb Harvey (Executive Director)
- *Dec. 2 — Cheryl Willison (Box Office Manager)
- *Dec. 2 — Karen Killeen (Rentals Coordinator)
- *Dec. 16 — Daniel Bennett (Technical Director) and Lauren Rebelo (Assistant Technical Director)
- *Jan. 27 — Suzanne Lanthier (Director of Audience Development)
- *Feb. 3 — Steve West (Head Stage Carpenter)
- *Feb. 8 — Lisa Wright (Head of Wardrobe), Elaine Ball (Assistant Head of Wardrobe and Accessories Builder), Kathryn Sherwin (Wardrobe Cutter), and Lacie George (Sewer)
- *Mar. 4 — Jamie Crich (donor, head of Auburn Developments)

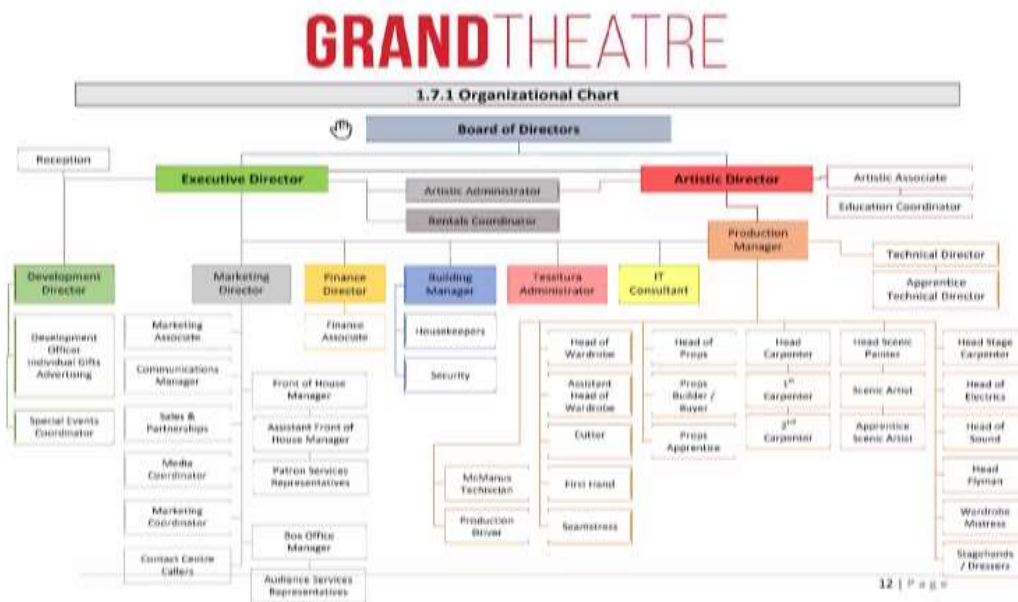


Figure 1: Grand Theatre Organizational Chart

The interviews were set up via email and could range anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour and a half, usually averaging about forty minutes. They were conducted mostly over Zoom and by phone, though before the provincial lockdown, I was able to meet in person with a few interviewees. To date, I have conducted thirteen interviews with eighteen people from all walks

of theatre life, including administrative personnel, production department staff (from props, wardrobe, carpentry, etc.), donors, and members of the box-office and audience-development teams. As well, even though my internship is technically over, my supervisor may be having me interview one last person in the coming weeks before I finish my time with the Grand: Jim Good, President of the Good Foundation.

After completing the interviews, which were audio recorded, I would transcribe the conversations with the help of online services Otter.ai and Temi for my supervisor to easily pull quotes and general content for inclusion in the publication. Additionally, prior to interviews, my supervisor and I would brainstorm questions together and tailor areas of interest to touch on in interviews depending on the background of the interviewee. Though my tasks was not necessarily onerous, it was still time-consuming work, and it was immensely satisfying to finish up a transcription that had potentially taken me upwards of three hours to do; as well, I really found myself enjoying the transcription work, which has made me consider a part-time job in transcription as an option, perhaps for accessibility and equity purposes.

In terms of tangible deliverables, overall, my internship has amounted to nearly six hundred minutes of interview time or nearly ten hours of content, and the transcripts themselves resulted in over eighty thousand words, which would be the length of an approximately three-hundred-page book. However, the experience was not just about these sorts of “hard” measures of achievement; during this period, I also took the time both consciously and unconsciously to work on myself as a student, an employee, and a person, the effects of which I will discuss next.

Building and Developing Skill Sets

The months I have spent at the Grand have been an invaluable opportunity to improve my so-called “soft” skills, abilities that are not as easily measured as, say, proficiency in a computer

program, language capabilities, etc. Though every occupation demands some of these “soft” qualities, in the arts and humanities particularly, these skill sets are essential to success, and my internship has proved to be abundant with occasions for me to use and develop abilities that will continue to benefit me in my future career. For example, my interviews with theatre staff and others have demonstrated to me the importance of clear and concise verbal communication. In the transcriptions, I have taken much more notice of the fact that people tend to repeat themselves, interrupt their own thoughts, restart sentences to rephrase what they have said, and of course, use filler words excessively; these habits can make it difficult to understand the speaker and their intended meaning. Interviewing and transcribing conversations has made me much more aware of my own speech patterns and how I can make my speech more effective, such as by speaking slower to give myself time to create sentence flow and pausing to regather my thoughts instead of using filler words or restarting sentences. As well, I would definitely say that the continuous exposure to new people and their unique ways of speaking has impacted the way that I think about dialogue in my creative writing, which has been an unforeseen bonus to my many hours spent transcribing: my dialogue feels more realistic to me now, more like something an actual person would say rather than the sometimes stilted sentences of an author putting words in a character’s mouth.

Another essential skill that this internship has been nurturing is my active/critical-listening capabilities. Because I was interviewing people for their unique viewpoints and stories, I realized that asking thoughtful follow-up questions, rather than just skipping to the next pre-designed question, was crucial to prod interviewees to expand on their answers and to assure them that I truly was interested in what they had to say. I have also had the opportunity to practice flexibility, critical and creative thinking, effective time management, interviewing

techniques, interpersonal connectivity, organization, and many other skills, not to mention my independent management, as I was often left to my own devices for large swathes of time and expected to have things done by the next check-in point. More so than any other experience I have had so far, I feel this internship has really strengthened the solid foundation of employability I have been developing over these past four years of university.

Lessons Learned

I may still have a little bit of my internship left to complete, but I know I will be coming away with so many lessons to apply to the rest of my academic journey and, eventually, my career path. That said, much of what will stick with me involves personal realizations I have come to over the course of my internship, individual truths that were finally apparent to me. I have discovered, for instance, that I am much more outgoing than I thought myself to be, and I am deeply proud of myself for that. At twenty-one years old, I seem to finally be able to shelve my shy self, even if only momentarily, when the occasion calls for it. Though speaking to strangers is always a little awkward, it no longer holds the same dread-inducing power over me that it did even a year ago. Awkward encounters are a part of life, as is talking to people you do not know, and though it might seem a little silly, I really have made a lot of progress in overcoming this personal obstacle of mine by interviewing strangers for my internship every other week.

As well, I am proud to say that, just this past semester, I think I have finally come to terms with my work ethic and its strengths and limitations—an ironic thing to have an epiphany about in my penultimate undergraduate semester, I know, but a necessary one all the same. I have always known that I routinely bite off more than I can chew, whether it be with perfectionist illusions of grandeur in my creative projects, shouldering more than I can bear in

group assignments, or double- and triple-booking myself socially and experiencing burnout. I put too much stock in trying to do everything perfectly rather than trying to do a few things to the best of my abilities and being satisfied with that. When I neared a breakdown at the beginning of the new semester, I realized that I did not have to offer more of my time to the internship, that I was already contributing what was required of me and my supervisor was pleased with things as they were. If I had had the ability to add more to my plate (and I also really needed to be sure of how much my plate could actually hold, not what I thought it should hold), that would be wonderful, and I could offer thoughts on other ways I might contribute to the project. But if my plate was full, I should not have been beating myself up about it—plates are only so big, after all. I was forced to do a reality check, an honest one, and I came out better on the other side. Since January, the practice has stuck with me, and I have honestly been more productive while being less stressed than I have been in a long, long time. I have my internship to thank for finally, somehow, helping me to implement this change.

Building Relationships

Because the main focus of my internship has been speaking with and getting to know people through interviewing them, I am lucky enough to say that I believe I have built several relationships over the course of my time at the Grand, though some are obviously stronger than others. The most essential part of interviewing someone is to build a connection with that person so that they are comfortable speaking about themselves and their stories, and one of the best ways for me to do this was to open up about personal experiences as well. With everyone that I spoke with, I tried to find common ground and make it evident that I really was interested in what they had to say. What would follow was usually a fascinating conversation about their time at the theatre, and after the interview, I would look them up and ask to add them on LinkedIn to

preserve the connection that we made. Though relationships are not necessarily something to be quantified numerically, my LinkedIn connections have greatly grown, and I know that, based on my conversations with these lovely people, I could shoot them a message with questions about their field of work and expect a kind, enthusiastic, and thoughtful answer. This is all in service to building a network of likeminded individuals whom I am curious about and who are hopefully curious about me as well, which SASAH has emphasized in particular these last two years.

That said, LinkedIn connections can be superficial, so I would also like to touch on the deeper relationships I forged with my direct supervisors. Deb Harvey was my first point of contact at the theatre for my internship, and while I found her a little intimidating and hard to read at first, over our several meetings together, I have come to understand just how passionate, driven, and accomplished she is as the incredible Executive Director of the Grand. During our in-person interview in November, she brought me to tears with a deeply personal story about her time at the theatre that I never would have expected to hear. When the renovation is complete and the space is eventually opened back up to the public, I will be extremely excited to shake her hand (provided it is safe to do so!) and thank her for taking me on in the first place over a year ago and providing me with such an incredible opportunity.

Finally, I could not write this reflection without mentioning Meghan O'Hara, the Grand's Education Coordinator, Reno Book project manager, and my internship supervisor and mentor. She is the person I have been reporting to over the last several months, and I honestly do not think I could have been paired with anyone better. From our very first interaction, I knew that I would enjoy working with her, and as my internship ends, I am saddened by the thought that so too does our time together. She was very flexible with scheduling and was always understanding when university got busy for me; she was organized and on top of things, setting out reasonable

timelines for when things needed to be done; she was constantly supportive and approachable; and she was someone I could laugh and joke with. While the nature of my internship and its straightforwardness made it unnecessary for mentor-like instruction, I would say that Meghan still mentored me in a meaningful way, not necessarily through skill improvement but through nurturing my confidence. I would not say that I am a naturally confident person—I tend to doubt my own abilities a lot—but Meghan was always encouraging, helpful, and caring. When I was particularly anxious about speaking with a highly regarded donor about his contributions to the renovation, she reassured me of my abilities and reiterated her own confidence in me, telling me to send her an email letting her know how it went once it was over. It truly was a pleasure to work with her, and I can only hope that my mentors in future internships or jobs will be as lovely to work with as her. I cannot wait to meet her in person once the pandemic has settled down and things can open up safely again.

The Value of Internships

Regarding the value I took from my internship, I would say that there are two main categories of significance: professional and personal. On the professional side of things, the internship has been deeply advantageous in giving me the chance to work in a non-academic, corporate-office environment. Even though I previously interned and worked for Western's student newspaper, the *Gazette* was a sheltered job experience because it was still a part of the university, which—as students are reminded over and over—is not really “real” life. In my time at the newspaper, I worked mainly with other students, not qualified professionals who had dedicated their lives to their careers. It was a stepping-stone I will be forever grateful for as my first paid job, but it did not paint an accurate picture of what it would be like to work for an independently funded organization. As well, though I got my first minimum-wage job over the

past summer, it was as a greenhouse retail associate, and it consisted almost entirely of physical labour, which did not provide many avenues for intellectual work or creative thinking. However, I view my intern position at the Grand as a “best-of-both-worlds” mixture of my past two job experiences, taking the non-academic, independent nature of the greenhouse and the intellectual, creative work of the newspaper and combining them to demonstrate a more accurate picture of what a communications role in the “real” world might look like. Additionally, learning to navigate this kind of corporate hierarchical space as a student intern before jumping into the job market headfirst after I finish university was another incredibly beneficial aspect.

On a personal level, my internship was valuable for a host of other reasons. Because I have lived in London for the majority of my life, the Grand Theatre has been an iconic arts institution that I have been curious about for as long as I can remember, especially when I started to get into drama and the theatre scene in high school. Before the pandemic shut everything down, I was given a tour of the building, walking across stages, through production department areas, and up and down its many flights of stairs. I am someone who really likes to see behind the scenes, and this opportunity to access areas not available to the public, areas I have always wondered about when sitting in the audience to view the theatre’s beautiful shows, was deeply valuable to me on a personal level. I feel the same way about the interviews that I have conducted with the theatre staff. The chance to speak with them about their specific positions was precious to me as a student of the arts, particularly because these kinds of professions were never advertised to me as possible career paths growing up; for instance, I had no clue I could have looked into technical design as an outlet for my creative tendencies. This internship is also important on a personal level to me as a storyteller because I got to act as a sort of miner of stories, discovering little gold nuggets from everyone I spoke with about their first memories of

the theatre, backstage mishaps, inside jokes, and even ghost stories. In short, there are so many beneficial reasons for a person to take a position as an intern, many of which will be unique to them as an individual, such as my connection to London and my passion for spooky stories, and especially for arts students, I really cannot recommend the internship experience enough for all it has to offer.

Applying SASAH-specific Knowledge

To be perfectly honest, the impact of my being a member of SASAH on my internship is difficult to measure. It is no exaggeration to say that the online 3380Y professional practices course I took in my third year of SASAH is the primary reason that I applied to the internship at the theatre in the first place, nor it is unreasonable to credit the course with assisting me in actually getting the internship. In that course, my classmates and I had to revise and tailor our resumés and write a mock cover letter for an assignment. When I found out that the Grand was accepting applications, I used the assignment to my advantage to improve my documents and then apply to the internship. The third-year course content on professionalization and successful job interviews was also advantageous in my initial interactions with Deb Harvey and Paul Fujimoto-Pihl as they decided whether to take me on as the project intern. However, once the actual content of the internship was underway, other than fostering the development of the soft skills I mentioned previously, I do not think there was any knowledge specific to SASAH that prepared me for the duties of the internship. This is not a fault of SASAH, though, as I had already developed the necessary fundamentals of interviewing, writing, and editing skills on my own time. As well, for an internship such as this, I am not sure that I would have wished for additional supports in place to “adequately” prepare me: part of the satisfaction I have taken in my internship is that it is so independent. For me, it has meant that I need to figure things out on

my own and reason through things at my own pace, another skill that I think is crucial for anyone entering the workforce. I am entirely satisfied with the amount of knowledge SASAH gave me for the pre-stages, but I am also quite happy to not have been *too* prepared for my internship duties, if that makes sense. While some direction is obviously appreciated, students and young adults do need to learn and grow on their own in some respects, and I feel proud to say that I think I have done exactly that in my internship at the Grand.

Looking to the Future

I am not the same person I was a year ago. I do not think any of us are, really, considering the difficulties of past months, but I feel even more changed because of my internship experience at the Grand. I have spoken extensively about the personal benefits I am already seeing, which will, I hope, continue into the future, and the impact the experience has had on my view of my value and employability as a young professional entering the workforce within the next couple years. As a timely example of the positive outcomes I have already seen, I recently applied to The Walrus magazine for their Editorial Fellowship Program. The Grand Theatre gave me an edge up in my cover letter right from the start because it is not only a prestigious, provincially known theatre but also the home of The Walrus Talks here in London. Additionally, Meghan was kind enough to write me a glowing letter of recommendation for the position, and while I have not yet heard back at the time of writing, I still have my fingers crossed.

Finally, I see my Grand internship in its entirety as having the most potential impact on my future as a notable entry on my resumé/CV when I am applying for an entry-level communications role or to graduate programs. I recently decided that I would like to pursue my passion for creative writing further, and I plan to apply to the MFA Creative Writing Program at

the University of British Columbia and, potentially, the MFA Program at Cornell University in New York. It is my hope that having a publication credit with such a prestigious arts institution in Southern Ontario, as well as having my name associated with it, will give me a leg up on paper in addition to all the other benefits I have already mentioned. As for after my schooling is finished, I do not have a definite idea of where I might like to search for employment other than I would prefer it to be creative in nature, such as with a publishing company. However, even though I do not know where I will end up, I know that my internship at the Grand Theatre will act as an interesting talking point and allow me to provide examples of my communications skills.

Giving the Presentation

As I reflect formally for a final time on my internship, particularly the presentation element of this eight-month journey many more months in the making, I really cannot describe how monumental an impact the entire experience has had on me, and one of the most noticeable ways that I saw its effects and changes in me was the Learning from Experience Presentation. I walked away from the presentation with a grin a mile wide and a spring in my step, knowing and feeling that I had, to put it simply, nailed it. I do not mean to blow my own horn, of course, but I rarely give myself credit (something that is perhaps also changing), and it is such a nice feeling to say to yourself (pardon the grammar!), “Hey, you did good, kid.” I believe I was able to answer the audience questions thoughtfully and critically without difficulty or even too much of a pause, which was a huge surprise for me because I really hate to be put on the spot. I was even able to bring the conversation around to an anecdote I had wanted to talk about during my presentation but didn’t find the right place for, about the value I received from the third-year

SASAH course's LinkedIn modules regarding interviewing and confidence. After the presentation, I joked with my family about being possessed by the ghost of a successful public speaker (or perhaps one Ambrose Small?), but the reality is that this is me in the midst of growing up. I have come such a long way even from just a year ago, and it is undeniable that my Grand Theatre internship and SASAH have been two of the greatest contributors to my personal and professional development. As I finish off this report, I just want to say an enormous, heartfelt thank you to everyone who has helped me to get where I am today and that I cannot wait for the Grand to open up again so I can see all of the hard work the renovation has accomplished. Even though we are amid sometimes terrible, sometimes depressing, sometimes ironic times, the show must go on, and it's only a matter of time until the curtain rises once again.



Figure 2: My meeting with Natalie Tsang (Props Buyer/Builder) and Natalie Kearns (Head of Props) in Victoria Park, one of only a few in-person interviews.

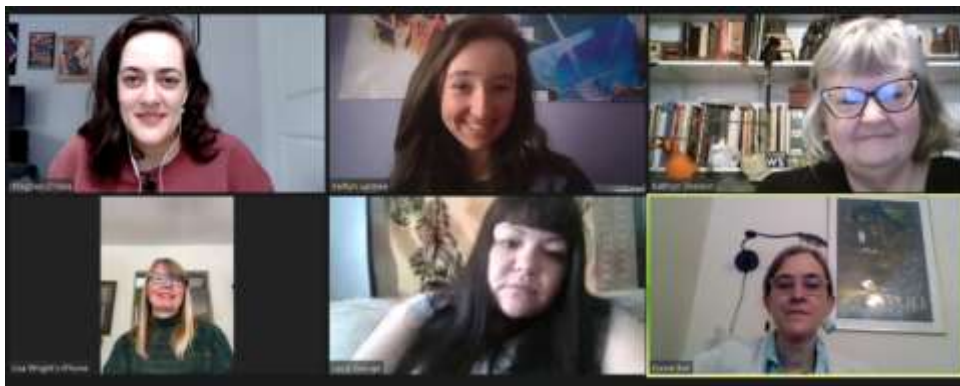


Figure 3: My meeting with my supervisor (Meghan O'Hara, Education Coordinator) and the wardrobe team (Lisa Wright, Head of Wardrobe; Elaine Ball, Assistant Head of Wardrobe and Accessories Builder; Kathryn Sherwin, Wardrobe Cutter; and Lacie George, Sewer) over Zoom.