

Noles Abroad Podcast

Season 5 Episode 1

Theatre Academy London

Hannah: Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs. I'm Hannah.

Zoe: And I'm Zoe and we're your hosts! On this podcast, we'll talk about study abroad from the perspective of the students, faculty, staff and alumni who make it an experience worth sharing. We'll also bring you travel tips and fun facts from around the globe.

Hannah: On today's episode we talked with Mark Wheatley, director of FSU's Theater Academy London or TAL program. Mark shares how he got his start in the world of theater, what led him to FSU, and discusses diversity in theater and why it is a useful medium for discussing social and political issues.

Hannah: Hey, how are you doing today?

Mark: Good I'm very well, thank you.

Hannah: Great, can you start us off by introducing yourself to our listeners?

Mark: Sure. I'm Mark Wheatly and I am the director of Theatre Academy London, which is FSU's theatre training program here in London and I teach playwriting and screen writing.

Zoe: Wonderful! To start us off, can you talk a little bit about your background and how you became involved in theater?

Mark: Sure. It was, as with a lot of people I think it was a bit by accident and a bit by design. I was writing I've always written I say I've always written. I was too busy playing football as a child to write very much but by the time I was out of university and that university I was writing and I think I suggested a documentary idea to the BBC I actually gone to the BBC for something, for an interview which I needn't go into here it was a terrible interview and I failed on all counts. I had a discussion about this documentary idea and the idea, in case you're interested in you might be interested, was about music which I love and it was about music in church, it was about gospel music. It was about the Salvation Army here, the churches here and of course mostly Black music and crossover music. Gospel, soul, and R&B and I suggested this said a lot about religion about music. Any case, they thought it was a lovely idea but they didn't make the documentary as often happens. But they did offer me a job so I got a job researching documentaries instead of my wonderful idea I think I did a documentary on boxing of all things and the National Health Service and Northern Ireland's political issues but it was it was great and it's the kind of story telling of its own of course. Then at that time wanted to do drama for TV. They let me do some drama and I had an interview with the drama people and they let me switch from documentaries to drama and I wrote my own short pieces and plays. And then through all that I hooked up with complicated company working and then I started working for complicit.

Hannah: And after all that, how did that lead you to working for FSU?

Mark: I think what happened is that at the Dean of FSU at the time, saw a show that I had had a part in that I had written and a faculty member of FSU school of theatre pointed him in my direction and we had a meeting and I came to talk to students and he asked me to teach a class and we had a lovely time. I taught a devising class at the time because that's largely how complicit work and it that was great fun lots of games lots of exercises lots of laughter and I remember the Dean coming to watch the class. He said that's a really great class he said that he wanted a different one. He wanted something more along the lines of introduction to London theater. I argued that this was a better class and we had fun with that idea but we did both classes so that's how we began doing introduction to London theater and devised theater as well.

Zoe: Can you talk a little bit about how the theater Academy London program was developed and how it how it serves FSU and other universities today?

Mark: Sure, I should probably say to begin with the thing I love about teaching for FSU is the energy and drive that the students have. Watching them enjoy their work watching the majority of faculty we've got for them and as I said the drive, I mean they are different from British students it seems to me. They're more on the front foot and their delighted to be engaged and that's every faculty member's dream. It's partly why I'm being able to get such good faculty. They are boasting a little bit but they are excellent faculty and they're all professionals in the theater. They are all actors, they're all writers, they're all directors. One of those things, not all of those things at once. And it's because of the students because we have that wonderful bond between students and faculty. What we had here was the London theatre experience through school of theatre and the Dean of the school of theatre asked me to coordinate it all and we had that running for many years with great success and we had pretty much maxed out the number of students that could come on that program. I suggested that we open the program to other theater schools in the United States. I had no idea how we would do that but I spoke to Dr. Jim Pitts, the director of international programs and FSU and I pointed out that we had a wonderful faculty resource here, these professional people did makers, that we had wonderful students and above all we had this wonderful building which is unique because we don't have to rent any space we have our own building. Anyway, Jim said yes and I'm delighted that he did. He was willing to give it a go, he was willing to see what we could do and so we went from there and we now have developed a program which has regular returning students most of them on BFA programs and some BA programs from wonderful universities like Elon university in California, Penn State and many many others. I had not mentioned more because I will miss people out. That's how we got where we've got and it's delightful.

Hannah: That sounds super wonderful that FSU is able to support not only our own students but also students from other universities and the other universities entrust their students and their training and their education to Florida State. I think that's such a testament to the program that y'all have built and the faculty that are in London ready to engage with those students I just think it's really cool that our university welcomes those other students to participate in our programs.

Mark: Absolutely and if I may say so one of the things that students always say they love whether their FSU students or students from elsewhere, is the fact that they are working with other students. Not only FSU students, not only Elon students, and they're making contacts for the future, and I know for a fact that many of them have made little groups of mixed groups of different universities, and they all meet

up in New York or Chicago or wherever they've ended up in the theatre. So that's really great to be part of that.

Hannah: Absolutely, great networking opportunity I'm sure. I'm sure it's also a good place to exchange ideas and techniques they've learned from their universities and faculty and everything so it is really wonderful. You've mentioned in previous conversations how diverse theater can be can you discuss that a little bit more and how theater is important for discussing social and political issues?

Mark: Sure, the theater always prides itself on this and I think one of the reasons it does pride itself on this is because it's able to be very responsive and able to be quite quickly responsive to the latest social and political events. You can if you work hard enough at it getting a play written and rehearsed and in front of an audience in about a year it depends how much funding you've got and the kind of project it is and how big it is or how small it is smaller projects you can get up even quicker and that's a good turn around. So, you can then address things that people or people already have on their minds and of course that's true also if you're doing Shakespeare. Shakespeare can be read through many different lenses and show us many different things because he was such a fantastic writer. But of course, there are nowadays many different competing stories and we want to hear new stories from places we hadn't perhaps heard them, particularly here in London in the south of the United Kingdom we have very multicultural society and that is very exciting. So, we have a variety of voices and identities and this leads to a variety of plays. I know that coming on in London in there are some fascinating plays dealing with current social and political issues. I'll mention two perhaps there is a play about race called *White Noise*, written by Susan Lorie Parks, who is an American author, and she says this is about race from both the Black and the white perspective and that's a very interesting thing. I'm looking forward to that. There's also a play here's one for you *Sundown Kiki*: I'll read what it says here, it says this is a celebration of queer South London – marvelous! So that's coming on that's going to be at the Young Vic and you know there are many others there's a play called *Overflow the Bush* which is a play believe it or not which is going to be set in the lady's room because - the ladies' bathroom that is - because that is the site of the controversy that has access to this space. So there's three examples of how responsive the theater can be. Of course there are now questions about who has the right to write or perform particular parts so we have questions about you know should only trans actors play trans characters and gay actors play gay characters, this is very interesting and I think it's a very worthwhile conversation to have. There's a lot to be said for this I won't go over all of it now although I was interested to see there was a very famous play done recently called *The Inheritance* by Steven not by Steven Dodery again by a young American writer and its cast was predominantly gay characters. Stephen Dodery himself is a gay man, he would describe himself as such, but I knew one of the actors in that show and he very interestingly told me that Steven had insisted that the actors need not be gay to play the gay roles in the play. And I thought that was very interesting and in the end I think about half the characters were played by gay men, it was mostly men, and half by straight men, interesting point, I'm not quite sure what it means, but there you are, I'll throw it out there as a thought. The only other thing I think worth saying on this is very interesting all these questions are fascinating and they're coming out in everything we do in the theatre at the moment, but the theatre is about empathy crucially it is about empathy it is about can we understand another's position. We have to keep an open mind about writers being able to write from another's point of view I think that's very important and I always - although we must engage in the debate I always give to my writing students my favorite example of this I'll give it to you very quickly there is a writer, Frank McGuinness. And he wrote a play, by the way my top ten plays just for its

title, and its title is this it is Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme. That is its title a rather lovely title. It is about Northern Irish soldiers I'm going to describe to you as unionist they want to remain in Great Britain, they are avowedly heterosexual, that becomes important in a minute, they are conservative, with a small "c." Frank McGinnis though who I met 'cause he worked with *Complicite*, I know the Frank would describe himself as from the South of Ireland, a republican, a nationalist, a socialist, a Catholic, who is gay. And Frank wrote about those people who could not be more different from him and it was a glorious play and nobody said he didn't have the right to write it or he did it badly and I think you have to be open if the writer is good enough. I think they can do it. And if they know that they've done their research and they know the world that they're writing about. So, it's all controversial it's all exciting I'm talking too much about that you've got me going now so I'll stop.

Hannah: No, I think that's wonderful commentary and great things to think about and I'm curious from someone who's not within the theater world I'm not a writer I'm not a performer, maybe in my former days but not anymore certainly, but what does this mean for audience members like how is the theater able to convey these ideas and have these discussions in a way that is received or that it's like interesting and compelling to the audience member? Like why do you think that theater has the sense of empathy and is able to share these stories and how people engage with the shows?

Mark: I mean that is a huge question and a really, really interesting question. First of all we have to develop our audience more than we've done already. I mean there's some theatres in the United Kingdom and in London particularly that have a really good diverse audience, we need that. Secondly I think we need to prepare our audience for controversy I think audiences need to know that not everything they see will be comfortable not everything they see that they will agree with, but we are all trying to understand each other that's the whole point. An actor friend of mine described theater in a way I'll never forget he said it's a place of darkness into which we shine a light. And I thought that was a beautiful description you know it's literally and metaphorically true that's what we're trying to do so audiences have to be prepared. And actors have to be prepared. And when I was working for *Complicite*, we had to concern ourselves with those things, preparing an audience, learning from an audience bringing them up to speed and them bringing us up to speed. And we had lots of conversations with our audiences. That's the exciting thing about theatre too, its live and you can meet the players, and you can meet the audience and its unique.

Zoe: I love that. I love that you talked about empathy and the audience and the interaction and the whole experience of theatre is what makes it so magical. So that's really wonderful. So, our last question for you we want to just ask is what advice do you have for students who are considering studying abroad?

Mark: So my only advice is to do it, you have to do it. I was 17 nearly 18 and I had never left the UK and I'm sure that's true of some Americans too they have never left the US. Well you have to do it. Especially if its going to be in a safe environment like the London study center or any of FSU's other centers. It's a fantastic opportunity and what you learn of course is that people are all the same, but they're different. We all have the same needs but we're all incredibly different. You know there's that Netflix show, *Emily in Paris*, and my daughters don't like it they don't think its any good, but I think its quite funny. Any case, you probably know it, Emily is a young American business person and she's trying to French people to follow her ideas. Well its fun its hilarious, people are different. And I went to Paris that's why I was thinking of *Emily in Paris* when I was nearly 18. I lived there, I was a nanny or a maid, not a maid, but I

lived in the maid's room, I was a nanny to two small boys. Any case, you don't have to do that you just have to come to FSU London or FSU and its other centers. That's the first thing, and the other thing is that you can get all your theatre training, all your academic training that you need with the most wonderful classes, and the most professional exciting faculty. And that's why you should come.

Zoe: Wonderful. Thank you so much for talking with us today, for your great advice for students, and just telling us all about theatre.

Hannah: Thanks, Mark.

Mark: It's my pleasure, thank you for having me.

Hannah: Before we disembark, we want to talk about FSU London's 50th Anniversary celebration! This year marks the 50th anniversary of the first cohort of students FSU hosted in London and we think that is a golden anniversary worth celebrating. There will be a variety of virtual events throughout the year highlighting the history of FSU London, sharing the voices and experiences of faculty and alumni, lectures on prominent London locations and more.

Zoe: You can find a full schedule and list of events on our website by visiting international.fsu.edu and clicking the "Alumni" button. From here, select "FSU London's 50th Anniversary." This will take you to a page where you can read event descriptions and RSVP to the various events. There is a lot of history to celebrate and a bright future to look forward to so we hope you'll join us in the celebrations!

Hannah: Thanks to Mark for speaking with us today and thank you for joining us for season five of the Noles Abroad podcast!

Zoe: This podcast is a production of FSU International Programs. The music for this podcast was composed by John Bartmann. Our logo was designed by Vanessa Guirey, who also does our sound engineering. Editing, transcription, and research is done by us, Zoë Crook and Hannah Meister.