

European Voluntary Service Program (EVS) report

May 2018 - August 2018

Introduction

The aim of this report is to provide you with an overview of my experience as a European Voluntary Service (EVS) exchange participant at the Brouhaha International Festival, Liverpool, United Kingdom.

In 2017 The Artscape Theatre Centre in partnership with Brouhaha International recruited two emerging artists from Cape Town to represent Artscape and South Africa as ambassadors. Chenal Kock, a mixed but not fixed creative artist from Mitchells Plain was recruited. And myself, an actor, director, writer, and photographer from Wellington in the Western Cape Winelands.

During my time I received some of my first opportunities to showcase work at The Artscape Theatre Centre. It has been a privilege to be able to use the space over the last few years. They have allowed me to build and develop work which transcends conventional boundaries. The facility also serves as a hub which provides the space to explore and develop work. Over time I have developed good-standing relationships with the staff and technical crew. I was naturally excited and eager to be selected to represent the Artscape and South Africa within the program.

My objective was to enter with an open mind and a willingness to contribute my skills to any project or venture undertaken. I was eager to use it as an opportunity to learn from others and improve on my ability to network and collaborate so that I could return with a greater perspective. It was, after all, my first time going abroad.

The European Voluntary Service Program

The European Voluntary Service (EVS) is a program funded by the European Commission. It enables young people from the ages 17-30 to live in another country for a period of 3-12 months, working for non-profit organizations. The aim of the EVS is to improve the social and cultural skills of volunteers whilst interacting and encountering different cultures.

This year there were 13 EVS participants hailing from countries such as Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, United States of America, Turtle Island, Zambia and South Africa. We were responsible for hosting and conducting workshops in our respective art forms and assisting with the repair and maintenance of the amazing carnival costumes. We also had to perform in the carnival(s), assist social media and marketing management, logistics and almost anything else arising.

It was established very early on working at Brouhaha International that each day comes with its own challenges. As an EVS volunteer, you had to be ready, willing and flexible enough to work on practically anything. At times It was a crazy, creative environment where almost everyone comes from a different country, with a different cultural background, each operating on their own time. Needless to say, I was bound to experience and learn new things about people, life, and even myself.

Brouhaha International

The organization led the three-month program with a range of emerging artists including dancers, musicians, street performers, theatre-makers, acrobats and digital artists to carry out workshops throughout schools and community programs in the city of Liverpool. We focused on celebrating diversity and widening participation within the arts by exploring the concept of cultural identity, heritage and diversity.

I started the program in mid-May 2018. As soon as I arrived I was introduced to Uma Ramanathan; the Carnival director and the 'Wonder Woman' who would often juggle multiple roles, including being a mother-figure and role model to us all. We could rely on Uma for almost anything. She full-heartedly supported everyone involved in the program and would always find a way to resolve any matters arising. It was admirable and inspiring to see her at work over the three-month period.

The Liverpool international Carnival

I was informed that this time of year is usually the busiest three months for the organization. Every year their work builds to the main festival which includes a street carnival in central Liverpool where they partner with drumming groups from across the globe to bring forth a musical vibe that can't be rivalled with. Some of the groups include; Kalentura Drums from the Netherlands, Bombrando from Portugal and Gwanaval from the French island, Martinique.

In addition to the EVS participants, Brouhaha also extended an invitation to fellow arts organizations from around the world. It was expressed early on that the two weeks of the festival would be manic, and that the Brouhaha team would rely on the thirteen EVS volunteers to become group leaders responsible for guiding the international artists arriving in the coming weeks.

The theme of this year's festival was titled '**Roots**'. It brought together a certain cohesion amongst each participant involved with the festival festivities. This turned out to be the perfect precursor to kick off the Liverpool Carnival Celebration at The Unity Theatre to commence with a program filled with culturally diverse pieces of art and performances from artists across the globe. A program highlight would also be a workshopped production devised equally by the thirteen EVS volunteers. It quickly became apparent that a lot of work was awaiting us and that each of us would be responsible for a variety of things to ensure a successful outcome of the carnival festival this year.

My Roles and Responsibilities

Within our first week, we were given the opportunity to present our art-form(s) to the group. This allowed the Brouhaha and EVS teams to see and decide how best to utilize our individual skills, talent and experience to showcase ourselves, whilst marketing the upcoming festival.

I presented the following: 'My Vulture Photography Project', a project aimed at showcasing the work of South African theatre practitioners to put emphasis on my work as a photographer and designer. My latest showreel showcases my experience as a film and TV actor and a snippet from my latest theatre production, including audience feedback, to focus on my experience as a theatre-maker and stage performer. In the coming weeks, all of my tasks and responsibilities would in some way incorporate what I presented.

Photography and Social Media Management

I unsurprisingly joined the Social Media management team utilizing my photography and design experience. The team was tasked with maintaining the website and all of the Brouhaha social platforms. This included taking and editing photographs, writing press releases, designing posters & brochures, shooting and editing videos, uploading content consistently to promote the coming festival and corresponding with the press.

Being part of this team also provided me with the opportunity to assist and learn from Katherine Garcia, a Mexican American photographer from Charlotte, North Carolina and also a recipient of the EVS Programme. We frequently collaborated on photographic projects to produce great content for the Brouhaha social media networks and some of the EVS participants' personal social media networks.

Carnival Performances

Over the period of three months, we frequently had to perform in street carnivals to promote the festival. Our first street carnival was held in St Helens at the Westfield Street Music Festival. Each of us was assigned a different costume for each carnival throughout the three-month period, although some of us suited their initial costume so well that it stuck.

Thanks to Brouhaha we performed in over a dozen carnivals in towns throughout the United Kingdom, including, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Mirfield and Liverpool, where I have experienced a mixture of different cultures all brought together by drumming, breath-taking costumes and the spirit of community & carnival.

Production Management

During Festival/Carnival week I was appointed as the production manager for all of the performances presented at the Unity Theatre. The position tapped into my production experience and required me to familiarise myself with over a dozen performances by international artists where I was responsible for liaising

with arts organizations from around the world to ensure that the venue could accommodate their performances and technical requirements.

I also assisted with the lighting design and along with my fellow South African Chenal Kock, the two of us became the set of stagehands who ensured that all logistics for the team-up with The Unity Theatre run smoothly. This position also provided me with the opportunity to gain international experience and improve on my ability to network. This allowed me to build and further develop connections with other artists, some of whom have extended an open invitation to visit and collaborate abroad.

A Theatre Production

As part of the EVS program and the Brouhaha festival line-up, all thirteen participants were tasked with staging a production as a collective. We had four weeks to conceptualise and create an equally produce a piece of work that would be the highlight performance at the Brouhaha team-up with the Unity Theatre.

This experience allowed me to create and develop work. I had the opportunity to contribute my skills and ideas as intended, and in doing so I gained new experiences with artists from different walks of life. Each represented their culture, art form and country in their own way. It opened a gateway within myself and allowed me to reflect on my own culture; the Cape coloured culture, and determine the best way to represent my background whilst playing to my strengths and being true to who I am as an artist.

At times it was difficult to navigate through so many different and individual personalities and possible material, especially with language barriers. This reminded us of the value of open communication. It was important to the group that everyone felt included and had their ideas and opinions acknowledged. We made use of translators and translation Applications and made a consistent effort to learn new words and phrases from each other each day.

It also helped that we had weekly sessions with Uma Ramanathan to ensure that we consistently think about, and evaluate our own learning process. Through these sessions, we learnt to respect one another and our different backgrounds, check on our wellbeing and resolve any conflict. It became a safe space for everyone to express themselves and it laid the foundation for the full-length collaborative production titled '**Roots, everything is mud**', created and produced equally by this year's EVS 2018 volunteers. The Performance celebrates the various traditional art forms and cultures from each country, as well as breaking stereotypes and challenging the mind-sets to display that we are all one in this multicultural society we call earth.

Representing South Africa.

Chenal Kock and I were proud to find ourselves in a position to teach others about our Cape Coloured culture. We cleverly incorporated our own South African flair into group scenes of our production, drawing inspiration

from Nelson Mandela, a tune from Alen the singing car-guard, an Afrikaans saying “Lekker Jy” and the “Gwarra Gwarra”.

Apart from group scenes, the recipients from each country were given a five-minute solo in which to perform a new piece that represents their culture and country. This allowed myself and Chenal to merge our skills and to take responsibility for all aspects of our solo performance. We drew from her experience as a poet and physical performer and my experience as a theatre-maker and director to create and shape a piece titled, ‘Mama’; a character-piece showcased through the language of puppetry and physical theatre, accompanied by musical performance poetry and spoken word.

‘Mama’ is an innovative and relevant concept which tells the story of a character who discovers an opening for her self-expression. The piece incorporated different styles, genres and pre-recorded multimedia visuals. Chenal and I remain committed to developing this concept further. It’s our goal to shape this performance into a full production to be staged at any of the South African Theatres and Theatre festivals. We have already submitted proposals to Woordfees, KKNK and Suidoosterfees for 2019.

Collective Encounters

I also engaged in interactive discussions with Collective Encounters, a professional arts organisation specialising in theatre for social change through collaborative practice. The Organization use theatre to engage those on the margins of society, telling untold stories and tackling the local, national and international concerns of our time. They also focus on researching theatre for social change, practice nationally and internationally with a view to spearheading best practice in the UK.

Toberin Meyer, Raylin Robertson, Nkosentsha Nkosi Tamana and myself attended a panel discussion to provide some insight on The Artscape Theatre Centre, South Africa, and each our respective artistic journeys and challenges as arts practitioners. In turn, we were exposed to representatives from other organisations, like the Barefeet Theatre and Dream Warriors who also shared their stories.

Living in Liverpool

Thanks to Brouhaha International we stayed in a comfortable and central student residence with a stable Wi-Fi connection. Almost everything was within walking distance and each week we were given a stipend for personal expenses. It didn’t take long to soak up and appreciate the Liverpool Culture, which in essence is made up of a mixture of many different cultures. What stood out to me was how free and open the locals were to individuality. Everyone seemed to be living towards being the truest expression of themselves.

I admired how people supported the local performers busking on the streets; the buskers would often draw a crowd and their efforts would be well rewarded. One could perceive it as something that has the potential to keep their artists above the breadline.

We, of course, had the freedom to explore and learn about the city's history. and the role slavery played in Liverpool communities and how it still influences racism within the city today.

Plenty of opportunities arose:

I attended free workshops at the Apple store in Liverpool. One focused on framing architecture and details, and the other focused on editing photos on iPhone. This became quite useful in maintaining good quality images for posts on the Brouhaha social media.

I collaborated with a Liverpool based photographer, Stephon Joseph, on a portrait photoshoot with Chenal Kock in the streets of Liverpool, incorporating our different skills and equipment for a social media spread. We had the opportunity to see and perform in street carnivals in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Mirfield and Liverpool Pride. A standout for me was visiting the Slavery Museum, where I learnt about history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It was an emotional journey which sparked revelations within myself.

The festival staff and participants hosted an international dinner. This required each group from their respective countries to prepare a dish that represents their culture. The South African Group presented Chicken Curry and rice, Homemade Vetkoek and beef and kudu biltong. The end result was a remarkable cultural exchange where everyone got to know each other and learn from our various different backgrounds.

We were invited to visit the South African Embassy in London and have supper with Natasha Downe, a proud South African from Wellington who manages Guardians for South-Africa. We frequently signed up for open-mic-nights where we presented poetry and spoken word material. This heavily contributed to the concept-outline and style for 'Mama' and led to more networking opportunities

I also celebrated my 30th Birthday in July 2018 and thanks to the Brouhaha, Artscape and EVS participants, it was a birthday that I will unlikely forget. My day was spent engaging in fun activities all around the city before returning to a surprise gathering of people celebrating and appreciating my talent and my being. I will remain forever grateful.

Conclusion

Many tasks mentioned above would not have been possible if my stay in Liverpool wasn't made possible and comfortable. Never have I felt so privileged, free, and inspired to focus on the work. We had all the tools and support to complete any task with countless resources within our reach. In time, it gave me the boost in confidence I needed to believe and see the value in the work I produce.

Overall, I had an incredible experience. The time spent learning and collaborating with the individuals in this program was time well spent on bettering myself as an artist and human being. I feel like I have met my goals and exceeded them. I have lived my best life; living up to my true potential and not yet scratching the surface.

There were some trying moments but that is to be expected when working in any industry. I am very thankful for all the valuable lessons and flexibility I have received from the Brouhaha family throughout this residency.

I look forward to seeing what the future has in store for me,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jeremeo Le Cordeur", written over a horizontal line.

Jeremeo Le Cordeur