

THINKING

GLOBAL

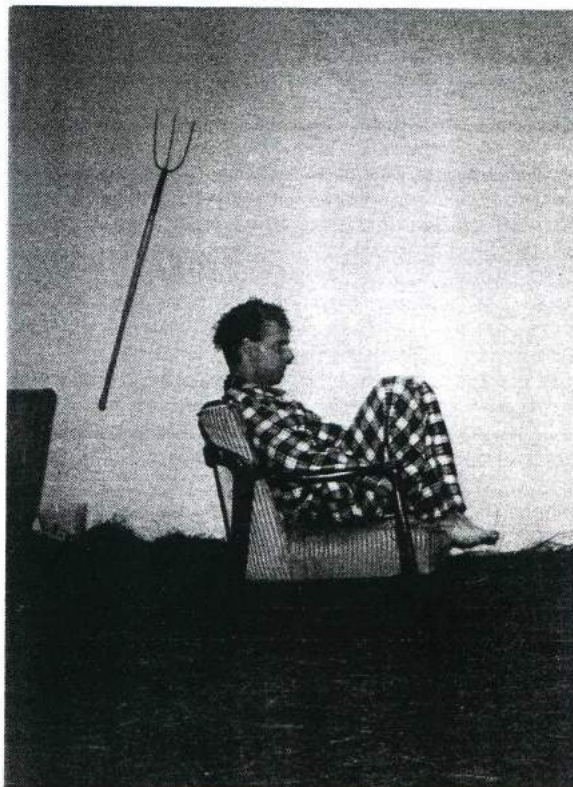
Stephen Noonan writes about life as an exchange student.

Asia, the Americas, and Europe are waiting for your arrival and that university you are thinking of applying to, can help get you there.

From the moment you decide you want to study acting or dance in a college or university, to the point of actually standing in the studio, you will have made many decisions, filled out countless forms, and no doubt impressed the auditioners with your ability. Once you have made it into the program why not utilise the opportunities provided by your university. Why not broaden your experience with an exchange study program overseas? This is exactly what I did. I grabbed my skateboard and headed for America to study acting and movement.

Half way through my degree, in July 1992, I decided I wanted to pursue studies overseas in a university exchange program. Just over a year later, August 1993, I was on the plane and heading for the University of California, Santa Barbara campus. I was at The University of Adelaide studying for a bachelor of arts in educational theatre. The course was going fine but I was aware of how fast time was passing at university and how soon I would complete my studies.

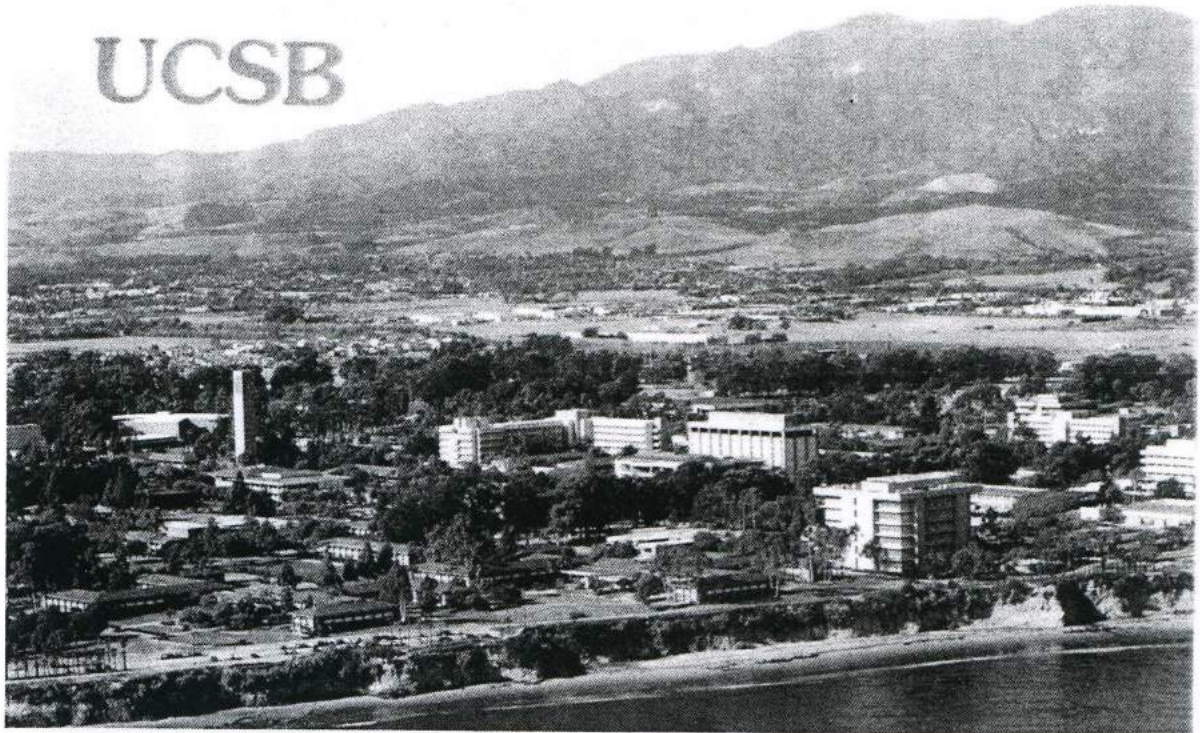
Wanting to experience diversity in my studies, encounter another country's theatre training program - and of course simultaneously see the world - I visited the international programs office at my home university. There I spoke to the student exchange program officer. I was the first student from the faculty of performing arts at the university to get involved in such a program. In the past the program had only been utilised by maths, science, and business students. After the first few meetings with the program officer, where costs and requirements were outlined, choices had to be made on



Stephen Noonan

the when and where of my overseas study. My choices were South Korea, Japan or America. I considered the possibility of studying in either South Korea or Japan, but this required a proficiency in the respective languages, consequently America was to be my choice.

UCSB



Santa Barbara, California

Hmm...America I had images of Beverly Hills, L.A. gangs, guys named Chuck and Biff, sororities and fraternities, and religious cult groups. In the area of performance I had images of Hollywood films, groups such as The San Francisco Mime Troupe, large dance festivals, and hundreds of Elvis impersonators. I began reading about American theatre and talking to as many Americans as I could track down. I wanted to know the best location for theatre studies? How dangerous was America really? And was Elvis really still alive?

The more I began reading in books and university catalogues about American theatre studies, the more I knew I wanted to study there. After receiving permission from my home university exchange programs office and drama department I had to make a decision on which American university I would apply to. Universities negotiate privately with other universities and create their own exchange programs. Consequently universities have exchange programs with some universities and not others. My home university had exchange programs with the University of California, Washington State University, Oregon State University, and Colorado State University.

The most important criteria for choosing a university was - and is - the same criteria one uses when they first decide on tertiary studies. The content and quality of the program. My particular area of interest was in physical theatre and dance drama. Two styles closely related which place as much, and often more, emphasis on the physicality of the performer as on the text.

After sorting through both countless university catalogues and my procrastinating mind, I decided on the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) campus. (Hmm... Santa Barbara. Now you remember,

that was the name of that high quality American T.V. soap opera). The University of California has nine campuses scattered around the state, some specialising in the arts and humanities and some in the maths and sciences. UCSB advertised a big arts program with focuses on separate acting, general theatre studies, dance, visual art and film programs. In the acting and dance programs they detailed exciting classes that convinced me to choose UCSB. Admittedly another big deciding factor was that accommodation costs at UCSB were considerably cheaper than a place such as the Los Angeles campus (UCLA). So with all this information I prepared myself for UCSB and the inevitable "What's up dude?" greetings.

I underestimated the financial expense of the five month experience. I had budgeted on a return flight - with required student visa - for about \$1800, campus accommodation costs - including food and utilities - \$2200, and another \$1000 on miscellaneous costs and spending money. In total this came to \$5000. The factor I didn't allow for was the weak Australian dollar. Weak is an under-statement, it was pathetic! Once I exchanged my colourful Australian bills for dull green American bills my savings quickly vanished.

So how did I finance this trip? Basically, in two ways; prior to my departure I had been working part-time so that paid for a lot of my expenses. The second source of income was through Austudy. To my surprise I was informed Austudy continued to pay those students who took part in such exchange programs.

Prior to my departure I had been sending off a lot of the required paper-work to the UCSB administration. The vital thing I failed to do was to write specifically to the drama department at UCSB, and inform them of my



The King lives...

proposed study program. This was a near fatal mistake. When I arrived I informed them of who I was and they said "...oh from Australia...yes very nice to meet you but we didn't hear anything about you." The department's initial reaction was that I wouldn't be able to pursue my proposed study program. However, after pleading with the department and demanding an audition for those classes I wanted to take, I was given the green light and was accepted into the subjects I applied for.

So what did I study? (After spending some time in America one might think the theatre of cars and shopping malls. A weird combination that both have huge roles in the American lifestyle.) I enrolled in seven subjects across the drama, dance, and film departments. The offered selection of subjects was extensive and all were appealing, subsequently I made the decision to overload on subjects in order to experience as much as possible. My subjects were: mime and commedia dell' arte, dance improvisation, performance art, acting laboratory, auditions, voice laboratory, and science fiction/ futuristic film. The work load and quality of teaching was similar to what I had experienced in Australia. Apart from the film subject all the classes were practical in nature, adopting a hands on approach. Some of the subjects appeared self-explanatory while others like the acting and voice laboratory classes sounded as if they belonged in the science classroom. Laboratory type classes consist of about six to eight students, who as an ensemble explore theories and techniques particular to the subject title. Basically it was a fancy name for an acting and voice class. It appears the main difference between an acting laboratory class and other acting classes is the small number of students in these laboratory classes, and this obviously is the attraction to these classes.

Performance art. The type of subject that sounds at home in a New York art gallery. This particular subject

was my favourite and most rewarding. It was taught by a dance professor who promoted interdisciplinary subjects. She actively encouraged acting, dancing, visual art, and literature students to enrol in her movement orientated subjects. The result was a diverse cross section of students weaving their own expertise into the ensembles projects. Class numbers again were small. We did not work from an established script or dance repertoire, rather from concepts and themes. The major concept that we dealt with was 'time'. There was always a lot of improvisation followed by discussion. The challenge was to work /perform in each other's, and our own, medium. We worked in a variety of locations from a

forest, to the university library, to an art gallery. The work was new and challenging because in performing art programs at university one does not often encounter many interdisciplinary subjects where it is possible to break away from pure acting or dance subjects. The cross fertilisation of our ideas and concepts in the classroom was revealing of the new direction we could take our own art.

Student work at UCSB was of a high level. The high level of performance, I found, in part, is attributed to the exposure of the students to prominent theatre theorists and practitioners. Theorists such as Jerzy Grotowski who has a teaching position at the University of California, Irvine campus, and practitioners such as The San Francisco Mime Troupe. The Troupe were artists in residence at UCSB during my time there. I acquired a great deal through their performances, workshops, and lectures. Most importantly from them I gained a sense of the direction I wanted my own work to go. This was one of those times I realised why I had undertaken this exchange program.

At what stage of your study is the best time to undertake an exchange program? I took off in the last semester of my third year. I chose this time for two main reasons; firstly, by this stage in my course I had sufficient experience to know the area I wanted to specialise in. And secondly, after finishing my studies in America I would have completed my degree and consequently there was no rush to return to Australia. This allowed me time to travel around to other parts of America and the world.

An option I had not considered at the time was an exchange program in post-graduate studies. In America post-graduate studies are very popular and almost necessary in many fields. It is a competitive place and therefore every student is trying to be academically better than the next. Post-graduate programs are extensive and reputable, and therefore may have been

another option.

Daily life on campus was very different to that which I had experienced in Australia. Impatient with their feet Californian students roller-skate, roller-blade, and skateboard all over campus. Pizza, mexican fast food and beer is the staple diet. And the mention of college football or basketball teams sends students into frenzied ritual type movements.

You may hear, as I did, that students involved in exchange programs risk losing too much by being away from their home program. This won't be an issue if students work through, with their home university course adviser, the proposed overseas study program. In that way subjects you miss out on in Australia you can cover in your study program abroad. With the extensive range of subjects offered in the American university system it will not be difficult to find appropriate subjects. My point is, getting permission to leave your home program and to enter another one overseas may initially be difficult and discouraged. However, with adequate planning and persistence it can be achieved.

UCSB has a large number of foreign exchange students. So it wasn't only American MTV college culture that I became submerged in. I lived in an eight person on campus college apartment with an Italian, a Swiss, a British, a Mexican, and three Americans. This was a uniquely unforgettable experience. Fortunately we enjoyed each other's company, mainly because we all had the same burning question on our minds. 'Was Elvis really alive?' These sorts of experiences are rare and one of the big social and cultural benefits of being involved in an exchange program.

Finally, my advice to anyone considering a similar adventure is this; plan ahead and communicate early. Commit yourself only if you want to go, not simply because it sounds good. Overseas adventures are a reasonable step and not cheap. And from a learning point of view know why you want to go and exactly what you want to learn. It proved to be one of the major highlights of my time at university, and fortunately it now provides greater work opportunities here and abroad.

STEPHEN NOONAN

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