

PERFORMING TRADITION

Last June, Professor Anita Gonzalez led a group of GIEU students across the pond to Liverpool, where they put together and performed an original stage show.

In 2015, she'll be taking students across the border to explore historical and modern art forms with Mexican artists in Oaxaca.

“How are we going to do a show? We don’t know how to do theatre!”

Could you tell me about the GIEU Liverpool program that just returned?

Students worked with six different charity organizations in the Liverpool area for about two and a half weeks. Because it’s an international exchange program, they were also learning about themselves and how they felt as Americans in a different culture.

At the end of the internship and residency in Liverpool, the students did a show called ‘Framing Liverpool Through Michigan Eyes’ where they were able to talk about their experiences, thank the institutions responsible, and reflect upon what it was like to try live in a different country and with a different set of goals. Of course, a lot of their reflections were on their own background here in the States and whether or not they came from places of privilege.

At first, they were scared to death! They were like—“How are we going to do a show? We don’t know how to do theatre!” But during the process of writing it, they came to understand that this show was going to be about them more than about Liverpool. After one month, you can’t reflect upon a whole town and its cultural history and communities. They got really excited about it, and by the time they came to do the show, they really owned the material.

The Liberal Arts students have to learn that theatre’s not hard; it’s just telling a story. All the Liverpool students did that admirably, and now many of them are saying, “Oh, I could take a theatre course.”

It was a really different way of doing a reflection activity. My student fellow kept asking over and over if we were going to have a reflection, and I kept saying that the reflection would be through the performance! As a part of the performance, they had to write their own responses to what they had seen, perform them, and then talk about what to include and what not to

include. In sharing with other students about what they had learned, they were really able to reflect upon what the experience meant to them up to that point.

You’ll be leading another GIEU group to Oaxaca, Mexico next year, focusing on how cultural histories are expressed and promoted through the arts—what prompted you to choose that topic?

What’s amazing about the Oaxaca region and about Mexican folklore in general is that it’s a way of telling stories. Dancing doesn’t mean you’re just doing a cute dance, you’re telling the history of a community and working on a dialogue between different ethnic groups. And there are many different ethnic communities in Oaxaca, so people speak their own languages, the market is an amazing place there...they’re big on traditions in Oaxaca.

There’s a space in Oaxaca, a church that a friend of mine runs. She has kids learn about eggshell tempera painting and they use that to paint the façade of a church, but they also sell mirrors as a way to raise money to paint the façade. There’s a music group that does jarocho, which is a music and dance tradition from the east coast of Mexico. There’s an African dancer I know named Lamine Thiam who teaches African dance workshops there in Oaxaca, and then of course the weaving tradition is huge in Oaxaca as well as visual arts, like painting. There’s a Oaxaca group that’s doing a Oaxaca jarocho version that they

promote and I would like to see the students work with that group.

It’s those kinds of projects that I’m interested in interacting with. I’ve written a couple books about Black and indigenous communities in the Oaxaca region, and right now I’m thinking that the students will work with local artists—fabric artists, like weavers, visual artists, music artists with jarocho or one of the local music forms, and dance artists. I would like to have the students sit side by side with an artist and learn about their work. and what the folklore means.

I’m hoping that that’s the kind of art form that will reach a larger audience, because ultimately I was thinking: why should the people in Oaxaca want to work with us? They have to find a way of generating income. I mean, we can pay them to do workshops,

but then after that, then what? Where does that take them?

I keep trying to think about ongoing and sustainable linkages to programs, and making sure that the projects are not just exploitative, they’re not just taking away. I think that the thing that Michigan students can give back to the communities would be a wider exposure of their work.

Instead of doing a show, what I would like them to do is to work with each art group on promoting their work in the United States.

Web pages, obviously, but some of them may want to have a marketing plan where they sell goods or some of them may want to have a brochure about a particular event or some of them may want to develop a CD.



THE ‘SUPER LAMB BANANA’ IS A LIVERPOOL ICON, REPRESENTING THE CITY’S HISTORY OF EXPORTING SHEEP AND IMPORTING BANANAS.

How would you describe the role of performance in creating community?

It's really important! All of my work is based on this idea of working-class people having art forms that are not necessarily what you would call high art. But even though they're not described as high art, the art form is used as a way of creating a dialogue between people who may speak different languages or have different cultural practices.

What defines folk art is that it represents the people of a particular region and their ongoing heritage traditions, their ongoing way of making art. For some of the indigenous people like the Mixtecs it might be pottery, for others it could be a particular dance form—in one region, the 'Devil Dance' is passed down from generation to generation as a way of telling cultural history and cementing community.

I once taught a course called Latin America Through the Arts where students went to Costa Rica and experienced the different folk traditions of the area. They studied everything from the Catholic Church to how to make tortillas, because all of those have artistry in them. It's so funny how things that we once thought were just everyday things are now high art, like making books by hand.

Oaxaca is pretty well steeped in that consciousness. The tourism business is huge in Oaxaca because they have a lot of student learning programs, and then they have the Guelaguetza which is this huge international festival which brings in thousands of people just



PRACTICING THE DEVIL DANCE (LA DANZA DE LOS DIABLOS) IN GUERRERO

Professors Lucas and Shier are offering their courses through the Global Course Connections program. To find out more, go to <http://mcompass.umich.edu> and search for GCC Brazil or GCC Germany.

to see Mexican dance from the different regions of Oaxaca. There's a huge amount of money pumped into the Guelaguetza, so they're already very aware of an international audience for folk arts.

Mexico is a place where they have a lot of festivals. These festivals provide an opportunity for all the local communities to come together and perform things or demonstrate things. They may create flower garlands, they may put sawdust patterns in the street, they may create crèches during Christmastime, but each time it's done in a particular way of a particular community, and dances especially, so they bring out a dance for a festival, meaning that they arrange to have it performed; they find a dance maestro to re-teach the dance to people from the community who are going to perform it and represent a particular borough or community.

The Theatre department has a new minor called Global Theatre and Ethnic Studies, which you're in charge of. Can you tell me how that came about?

I was hired by the university to transform what was once a minor in African American theatre into something broader. I have an ongoing interest in global performance traditions, and I changed the seven courses that are required for the African American Theatre minor into a Global Theatre and Ethnic Studies minor.

Everyone in the minor is required to have an intercultural experience, either domestic or foreign; they have to be involved in some kind of performance work that's done in a multicultural community. Anyone who went to Liverpool would already have fulfilled that requirement.

The intercultural experience can be fed by many different parts of the university. Ashley Lucas—from the Prison Creative Arts Project—is taking people to Brazil, and Janet Shier in the Residential College is taking people to Germany, and Emily Wilcox will take people to China. Students just need to do something with performance overseas.

It's important to me that the students who take the minor are able to make up work. I know that in Liverpool that the students were really surprised that it was so easy to make up a show, because it's just based on them, and they did some brilliant work. They really did.

Both the previous minor and existing minor do studio practice, so students actually learn how to create shows and make work. In other

words, they involve performance training as well as an understanding of the literature that underscores the field.

Performance is about embodied practice on the stage, and then the literature is to provide a context and history for why people do that. But I don't just want people to read about it. I want people to make work. I'm committed to performance practice.

All my scholarship comes from performance. When I want to write a book, I have to do a play first in order to explore the subject matter, and then I can write the book. After I've made enough shows, then I have enough information to be able to write a scholarly tome.

Theatre used to be in the English departments, where people just read the plays and studied them as literature. But the literature is only written to be performed. It's what you call an allographic art form: even when you have the text on the page, it doesn't live until it's been combined with the actor's body and the director, and the sound. A piece of painting exists

A theatre text is not complete until it's performed.

as it is, complete. A theatre text is not complete until it's performed.

But I also don't like performers who don't understand the context. I come from the Northeast, where everyone understands theatre as an intellectual inquiry. I find that here in Michigan, it's not readily clear that theatre is a way of doing intellectual work.

Students here need to read about histories. They need to know what the Japanese concentration camps were and why people would write a play about that, or they need to know that the Latinos have been in

America since the 1500s, and that there's a whole series of art forms that come out of that tradition.

If you look at the history of ethnic performance, the reason we don't know a lot about it is because people didn't write it down. If it's not a literary tradition—as most ethnic traditions are not, they're oral traditions—then you really have to perform them.

I've found that the actual text for ethnic performance is really in the words or the cadence or the vocables of a song. In Native American performance or African performance, it's the song itself that tells you what to do.

Theatre is my cultural exchange, because theatre is just the reenactment of histories and experiences, some imagined and some real. And people from ethnic communities who have language barriers or aren't trained in literary traditions have performance forms that are just as valid.

I have a passion for it not being marginalized. Too often you hear, "Oh great, you do Chinese theatre? Let's do it outside on the lawn." I think that those art forms deserve main stage venues and they deserve audiences that understand what they're about.

People think of diverse audiences as separate communities. I guess my feeling on that is: you have to do a show that someone wants to see. They're always



OAXACA MUSICIANS

saying, "Why don't they come to see the shows, where are all the ethnic communities?" And they're doing Shakespeare or something.

In a way, it's hard here because there's no professional Black theatre or even student Black theatre. I have not yet seen a lot of diverse theatre, which is amazing to me, because every place I've been there's something, even if it's a student group.

I'm very excited that there's a Chinese drama club here, and the Lebanese students have something, and the East Indians have a dance troupe...but none of that is ever brought into the theatre curriculum.

To me, all of that is theatre. ●

A MIX OF CULTURES

Kashira participated in the 2014 Contemporary London program led by Dr. Freida Ekotto and Dr. Emily Nicklett.



by Kashira Patterson

My understanding of multiculturalism in Britain has been an ever-changing one. Every time I found myself comfortable with the definition I had created, it was challenged, forcing me to re-explore and revise.

After visiting Rich Mix, an organization offering live music, film, dance, theatre, spoken word,

and other creative activities in London, I decided to treat multiculturalism like a word that has multiple definitions. I kept my definition that centered around identity, balance, and resistance, and I added a new definition that spoke to the significance of space.

Rich Mix catered to their community without being a center labeled after the makeup of their community. They were able to foster a sense of community

for all ethnicities while catering to art in its many forms. Multiculturalism requires spaces like this one: somewhere that people can fully embrace the diversity of their cultures in a safe space. With that point, my understanding of multiculturalism had two intersecting definitions, a discussion of identity, balance and resistance and the spaces that allowed that discussion to happen comfortably. ●