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**Internship Report**

Internship as Directory Assistant at the Theater Company *Port in Air*

North American Studies

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## **The Theater Company *Port in Air***

Dr. Richard Aczel, who teaches English literature at the University of Cologne, established the theater company *Port in Air* in summer of 2003 as a student theater group. It started out as an experiment of a number of students, interested in performing the literature and concepts they have studied at University. Today *Port in Air*, besides being the official theater group of the English Seminar I at the University of Cologne, is also an inherent part of Cologne's theater scene.

*Port in Air* is constantly producing new plays. 19 plays and installations have been produced since its establishment 16 years ago. Thereby it combines text with music and movement. The experimentation with the visible and audible makes it possible to present the text to the audience in a new way, different from the perception of the text on the two-dimensional level, experienced while reading the text.

Furthermore, *Port in Air* combines English literature with philosophical concepts as taught in seminars at the English Seminar I. By performing the texts with specific concepts in mind (e.g. the concepts of the sublime in Immanuel Kant's and Edward Burke's sense), it points at questions the texts raise. Therefore, *Port in Air's* productions inspire further and sometimes even new interpretations of the often already well known texts.

Besides working with already existing texts, *Port in Air* also produces original plays. Thereby historical and contemporary events that influence our contemporary culture are worked into the plays and installations. *Port in Air* plays with pop culture, history and literature in order to create "miniature symphonies", as the Kölner Stadtanzeiger writes in a Review.

Finally, *Port in Air's* work is best reflected in its name. Taken from Wallace Stevens' poem 'Anecdote of the Jar' the company's name stands for the creation of art itself. Like one of the many possible interpretations of the poem, *Port in Air* reflects on artmaking (the imaginary) and syntax (the symbolic). Therefore it reflects on literature and the society literature is perceived in. At the same time it reflects on history and the present society.

## **Applying for the Position**

I applied for the position as directory assistant at *Port in Air* via e-mail. I heard about the possibility of taking part in the organizational and conceptual work at the theater group of the English Seminar I while taking Richard Aczel's seminar 'From Page to Stage', where we explored ways of performing texts. In this particular seminar we have focused on Patrick Marber's play *Closer*. After I came back from my year abroad in London, where I studied as an ERASMUS student at UCL, I took the initiative to apply for a position as directory assistant at *Port in Air* without knowing that the group was in need for another directory assistant. Shortly after applying Richard Aczel invited me for a coffee to talk about the position and the current project. It was a casual interview where, besides talking about the project, we have talked about the experiences I have made in the theater branch so far and about my expectations for the occupation as directory assistant. After the meeting I immediately started my work as directory assistant (This was back in 2013, when I joined the group in the middle of rehearsals for Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* – it was the Wagner year. I then got involved in the play *Hardly Still Walking, Not Yet Flying* (2015), on which I worked from its very beginning until its very end.)

## **Expectations Regarding the Company and the Work as Directory**

### **Assistant**

My motivation for doing an internship at a theater company was based on a strong affection to literature and theater productions as a way of performing literature. Back in school I attended plays and took part in theater workshop as, for instance, the theater youth club of the Stadttheater Freiburg. This interest grew during my bachelor studies at the University of Cologne and my year abroad at the University of London, where I got the chance to direct an amateur play with the German Society.

However, I wanted to find out more about the work of a professional theater group. When applying for the position of a directory assistant at *Port in Air*, I expected to learn all about the process of staging literature and culture. The internship should teach me every aspect of the production of a play.

My main interest was to learn how to put a text on stage. I wanted to learn all about the process of using the written two-dimensional language in order to perform a certain meaning gained from the text and at the same time by becoming the mediator between the text and the audience in the theater. Hence, I expected to learn a different way of dealing with fiction, than learned in the academic setting of the university.

Furthermore, I expected to learn performing techniques (I could even use outside the theater, for different purposes in different jobs). For me, the leadership of a group of actors and actresses was a skill I was hoping to learn during my internship at *Port in Air*. I was expecting to learn how to deal with a group of people in order for us as a team to achieve a certain goal (performing a play, getting good critiques, getting nominated for the Kölner Theaterpreis). Also I expected to gain better skills at solving conflicts within the group and to deal with difficulties that might occur during the process of staging a play.

Finally, I expected to learn about the organizational aspects of theater-making. I expected public relations to be a major aspect of my occupation at *Port in Air*. In accordance to that I expected to learn about the general work at public relations and marketing strategies in the cultural sector. I hoped to learn how to deal with media, in order for it to publish articles on the plays. Additionally, my expectations, regarding public relations, were to learn how to advertise the play so that we would sell out, thereby using marketing strategies and media presence.

## **Tasks as Directory Assistant**

This chapter, which describes my tasks during the production of *Port in Air's* play *Hardly Still Walking, Not Yet Flying* (2015)<sup>1</sup>, which started in October 2014 (with workshops wherein we have trained interested participants and selected some for the play) and ended with its last performance on June 5, 2016, is subdivided into five subchapters, since my tasks as a directory assistant changed at the various phases of the project. I will, therefore, begin with the description of my tasks before the

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen *Hardly Still Walking, Not Yet Flying* for my description, since this was the play I took part in from its very beginning and since it was a play that focused on a global contemporary culture (with a strong focus on US-History and Pop-Culture) through the lens of philosophical concepts of the sublime.

rehearsals phase. Afterwards I will lay out my tasks during the rehearsals, followed by a description of my tasks shortly before the premiere. Finally I will give insight into my work during the performances and after the production's end.

### **Pre-Rehearsals-Phase**

Before the rehearsals of a play could start, we had to write down a coherent description of the play, which we could use for our application for a financial substitution by the cultural office of the City of Cologne. For the same application we had to think about the money we would have to spend in order to stage the play. My task was to do the calculation and pitch the final draft to the cultural office.

Furthermore, we had to find actors and actresses for the play. This we did via a workshop which I advertised via flyers and social media. Sometimes I was in charge of the workshop, where we experimented with parts of the text and did theater exercises using popular techniques (e.g. Meyerholdian exercises).

As soon as the actors and actresses to take part in the new production were found, we split up the text and worked through the text. Thereby we talked about the meaning of the several scenes and the possible ways of performing them. The play *Hardly Still Walking, Not Yet Flying* contains a range of philosophical questions, regarding the sublime, and many references to pop-culture and historical events. One of the questions was the depiction of 9/11 in the play, which was implied in movement and sound, but was not explicitly mentioned. We discussed whether or not our depiction of this historical event was appropriate. After long discussions we decided that it was appropriate (in the end there were no outrageous reactions from the audience). The implied depiction of 9/11 as a non-event was inspired by the non-description of the event in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and the idea that trauma in itself is not possible to depict.

In order to spend time wisely and to have productive rehearsals for all of the 10 actors and actresses, I had the task of making a rehearsal schedule. I had to fit the availability of the actors with their scenes and with the availability of the rehearsal space(s). This was not an easy task, since most of the scenes required all actors (especially for the choreographies).

## Rehearsal-Phase

During the rehearsal-phase we had a daily routine. This routine varied depending on whether the rehearsals took place on a weekday or during the weekends (nearly all weekends were rehearsal weekends). This roots in the actors and actresses being students in the first place, which requires them to take part in seminars and lectures.

The daily routines were as follows:

### Weekends/Whole-Day Rehearsals

Time	Tasks
10.00-10.30	Talking about the day's aim
10.30-11.00	Warm-up
11.00-13.00	Working on text/scene
13.00-13.30	Lunch Break
13.30-17.00	Working on text/scene
17.00-18.00	Talking about organizational tasks

### Weekday/Half-Day Rehearsals

Time	Tasks
16.00-16.30	Talking about the day's aim & discussing problems with text/scene
16.30-17.00	Warm-up
17.00-19.00	Working on text/scene
19.00-19.30	Dinner Break
19.30-22.00	Working on text/scene

During rehearsals I took notes on changes in the text and took part in discussions on possible changes. Moreover, I was responsible for the distribution of the rehearsal schedule and the latest versions of the text. I also had to make sure that every actor and every actress prepared the right scenes and that the actors and actresses were on time. Therefore, I was responsible for the communication within the group and had to talk to the actor or actress if he or she did not do the assigned work properly.

## Shortly before the Premiere

A month before the premiere (which was on December 11, 2015) the latest, a range of organizational work had to be done to promote the play. A major task was public relations. I was responsible to invite press to the play and to make sure a journalist would come to see and write about the play. It was not enough to write an invitation to the major newspapers in Cologne (e.g. *choices*, *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*), since as a general rule they would not get back to you on their own, although they have regularly written about *Port in Air's* plays in the past. Therefore, I had to call each one of them to make sure they would send a journalist to one of our performances.

Furthermore, I had to invite important and influential people from Cologne's theater scene to see our play. They were directors of theaters, working at the cultural office of the City of Cologne and jury members of the *Kölner Theaterpreis* (the last was especially successful, since *Hardly Still Walking, Not Yet Flying* got nominated for the *Kölner Theaterpreis*, which was *Port in Air's* third nomination).

Another important task before the premiere, was advertising the play. We designed posters and flyers, distributed them and started a social media campaign. This was also the time we created an official facebook page for *Port in Air*. Hence, we had three channels through which we received reservations: via telephone at the artheater (I had to inform myself regularly about the amount of reservations they have received), via e-mail and via facebook. I had to keep track of the reservations and make sure that, on the one hand, every performance was sold out, and on the other hand, that no performance would be overbooked. For full performances I had to keep a waiting list. Additionally we offered tickets and took reservations at a table at the *Philosophikum* at the University of Cologne. I had to make sure that there was always someone at this table. Furthermore, I have created programs with information on the play for the audience to take on the performance day.

Besides doing the organizational work I still took part in rehearsals and discussions on scenes and performances. I also built props and bought costumes (e.g. painting IKEA chairs white). A couple of weeks before the premiere rehearsals consisted mainly of run-throughs and very tense work on specific scenes that needed intense rehearsals. In those weeks it was possible that rehearsals would not end before midnight, since run-throughs were very long because scenes had to be

repeated if text, music or movement (or even all of them at once) did not work out the way they were intended.

The final task, which would become very important for the public relations after the performances, was the final dress rehearsal for which I invited a photographer. The pictures he took at the dress rehearsal would become the pictures the press would use for their critiques of the play.

### **During the Performances**

Before each performance I had to make sure that all the costumes and props were in position for the performance. For everything broken we found ways to repair, so that it could be used in the next performances (some things could not be bought and rebuilt in such a short time – between the performances usually lay one day).

During the performances I was responsible for selling tickets and keeping track of reservations. I organized a second person (most of the times it was a former *Port in Air* actor or actress) to help me with selling the tickets and keeping track of tickets available for people from the waiting list. I also had to inform Richard about the presence of the press and anyone we have invited.

Before the show could start I had to be in touch with the group so that everyone would be in position before the entrance of the audience. While the audience entered the hall, we have checked their tickets. Sometimes I then had to give a short introduction to the play and ask the audience to turn off their phones.

The day after each performance we sat together to talk about problems during the performance and everything that could be improved for the next performance.

### **Post-Production**

During the time shortly after the performances, which I call post-production here, I was responsible for the final bookkeeping. This was important for handing it in to the cultural office of the City of Cologne. I had to collect all the receipts and calculate all the money we have spent. Furthermore, I was responsible for writing the receipts for the actors' and actresses' expense allowances.

Moreover, after the productions the play's critiques had to be read and added to the web presence. Since after the performances is at the same time before the next performances, the play had to be reevaluated and new discussions on how to change the play (while considering the audience's reactions to the play) for the next performances in summer (and the performances at the Brighton Fringe Festival in Spring 2016). *Hardly Still Walking, Not Yet Flying* has been rewritten for the second time it has been performed. This time the performances took place at studiobühne. It was the first time a student theater group was allowed to perform at the university's theater (back then it was part of their series 'Unibühne', while today studiobühne accepts *Port in Air* as a professional theater group). This was the result of negotiations with studiobühne's director that went on for several years. For those negotiations I prepared Richard Aczel by doing research on the theater and finding arguments for student groups getting space for performances at the studiobühne. Furthermore, I created a booklet with information on the group to hand to faculty members of the faculty of humanities at the University of Cologne.

### **Skills I Have Gained During the Internship**

During my occupation as directory assistant at *Port in Air* I have gained a number of skills. For me, as a literary studies student, the most important skill I have learned during the internship was the intense and varied work with a text. Working with the two-dimensional text on a level, where theory, art and history are being combined in order to perform the text on a three-dimensional level was an important skill I have acquired during my time at *Port in Air*. Thereby I have learned to see the greater context the text has been written in and the connections between any text and other texts and aspects of the culture it emerged from and is perceived in nowadays. Furthermore, I have developed the ability to see a text from several different perspectives and that there is not only one way of interpretation. Instead there are endless ways of interpreting one and the same text.

Another skill I have gained from the internship is the organization and leadership of a team. I have learned how to write a schedule which takes into consideration the availability of every member of the team (including technicians,

musicians and directors) and the work that can be done by the available team members so that time is used in the most productive manner. This included dealing with problems, as well as with team members being late on a regular basis, or actors and actresses who did not learn their lines on time. I had to address those problems in a sensitive manner, so that no one would have to feel like he or she was being treated badly. At the same time those problems had to be addressed, in order for the team to function, since the delay in rehearsals because of someone being constantly late or someone not learning their lines would lead to conflicts within the group.

Furthermore, I have learned to work with the media. I have learned how to invite press and how to make them show up at the play. This is an important skill when working in the cultural sector. Cultural events have to be written about to gain attention from the public. They have to be presented interestingly enough to convince people to go and see a play (which costs money), instead of staying at home and watching something on TV or via a streaming channel. In times when there are countless possibilities to be entertained, cultural events have to make more effort to advertise themselves. Therefore, working with press and advertising the play in newspapers and via social media, taught me an important skill when working in the cultural sector. Events have to be advertised with interesting pictures and slogans in order for the audience to show up at the event.

Finally, I have learned how to work with several organizations, as the cultural office of the City of Cologne, the University of Cologne and the theaters we were performing in. I have learned how to write e-mails to the several different offices, in order to get fast and helpful answers to my questions. Furthermore, I have learned how to deal with several forms we had to fill in, in order to get financial support by the cultural office and by a donator (which had to go through the university's office of finances). All this helped me to see, how much administrative work there is when working with and in culture. In order to put up one cultural event, a range of bureaucratic and organizational work has to be done. Hence, I have learned a range of important skills I can use at any work I will be doing in the future, since the work with and in a team, the work with (social) media and the administrative work with several other organizations will always be part of work as a post-graduate in humanities, in one way or the other.

## Conclusion

As a conclusion my internship with *Port in Air* taught me a range of skills and gave me a great insight into the work with and in culture. It was a great opportunity to get to know the work in theater from the beginning of a project to its end as a play, while still being able to study (although there is not very much time left to study). This is often not possible in other internships at theaters where one only gets insight for a limited number of weeks and can only grasp limited insight into the work at a theater.

My occupation as directory assistant taught me many skills I can use in the future at any kind of job I will be doing. Besides working with literature on a different level than at university, I have gained many organizational skills that will be helpful while working in academia or a cultural organization (which I can imagine to do in the future).

Working in a team and leading a team is an important skill I will always be able to use at work, since I want to do a job where I am working with other people. This is something I have learned during my time at *Port in Air*. I have learned about myself that, although sometimes working with other people can be a challenge, since all people are different and often people are not doing what they are told to do, it is always a pleasure to achieve goals together with others. Often it takes away pressure to share problems and tasks with other team members.

My task as a financial accountant of the group taught me the ability to fill in several forms and make financial plans. This skill will also be very helpful for any kind of job I will be doing in the future. It is part of the work in academia and of any kind of work in culture. Academia and culture always need sponsors and substitutions. Hence, one always needs to pitch ones project to a certain sponsor. Pitching and selling a project I have learned at *Port in Air*. I have learned to sell culture via social media and while applying for the substitution by the cultural office of the City of Cologne.

Being part of *Port in Air* also helped me networking. Besides still being an adviser for future directory assistants and still being in touch with Richard Aczel for advice (I give feedback to his plays when occasionally visiting rehearsals and he is giving me advice on academic questions and theories). Moreover, after one of the Colloquia at the department of North American History I had a talk with Dr. Benjamin Becker from the Amerika Haus e.V. in Cologne. Since he studied at the University of

Cologne, as well, (and was a student assistant at the English Seminar I), we immediately had a topic to talk about. Therefore, my work at *Port in Air* helped me with networking for future projects (e.g. me helping with the English translation of the webpage of the Amerika Haus e.V.).

Finally, although working at and with a theater company was very interesting and helped me to gain a number of skills helpful for future jobs I also had insight into the reality of working for a theater group. I realized that working in the theater branch, not only requires a lot of time and flexibility, but also a lot of patience. Working for theater companies is connected with a lot of uncertainty (especially when it comes to theater groups that are not part of the city theater). One can never be certain for how long one can work for a certain project or group. Contracts are more often than not limited to a certain amount of time. Therefore directors, directory assistants, actors/actresses and other staff often work on a project to project basis. Finding a safe and paying job in the theater branch is not easy and requires patience and endurance. It is often impossible for employees of theater groups to make a living by solely working at the theater group. Often they have at least another job besides working at the theater. As much as work in the cultural sector is fun and interesting, one has to keep in mind its uncertainty and the very fact that one, as employee, always has to sell oneself and one's skills and abilities for the next projects, over and over again.