

Erasmus Report for internship abroad, summer semester 2015

In my 4th semester I went to an event organised by the International Office of the HfK, where students talked about their stays abroad.

It has been a big wish of mine for a long time to do an internship in London. In my 5th semester I started to find out more about internships.

Finally, I decided to take my 6th semester as a vacation semester and undertake an internship during this time.

I'm interested in screen printing, so I researched print studios and publishers in London online.

At the same time, I asked around among friends, colleagues and family to see whether anyone had connections to London. I also asked the HfK International Office about the conditions for an internship in London in the coming semester. By chance, a friend from the US went to London in June. I took this as an opportunity to also travel there, visit my girlfriend and look around the city for internships and shared apartments. Over the course of three days, I personally brought my application to several screen printing studios and got an idea of the size of the city.

After this first attempt I was very discouraged, none of the studios responded and there was no shared apartment in sight. I realised I needed to put a lot more work into preparing for London.

In July I looked for an AirBnB accommodation for a week and traveled to London a second time. It turned out that my AirBnB landlady XXX would be a huge help. She gave me important tips for looking for an apartment, such as the website gumtree.co.uk, and helped me get an overview of the best neighbourhoods that are still relatively central (Zone 3) but are not very hip and trendy and therefore have relatively low rents. Such districts include Walthamstow, Croydon, Barnet and Ealing. Another helpful internet address is the Facebook group "London Student Flat Share".

Back in Bremen, I sent another batch of applications to London, this time to a wide variety of organisations, theatres and companies. Among other things, to a theatre called "You Me Bum Bum Train".

A few days later I received an email from them. The email only contained the cell phone number of a lady at the troupe and a request to contact her as soon as possible. I called and was told on the phone that an internship position for production assistance had become available. It's best that I come to London as soon as possible to start at YMBBT as production has already started. She sounded very stressed, was curt and I got the impression that this wasn't a job interview but an ultimatum. I asked her to give myself three days to pack my things, rent out my room in Bremen and sort everything out.

Without knowing what exactly the production was about and what YMBBT really is, I agreed. I tried to be smart and googled "You Me Bum Bum Train". However, I found nothing except the description "immersive theatre" and "an interactive theatre experience in which the viewer becomes the main actor." Secrecy, as I later found out, is a key element of YMBBT.

I packed my things, wrote to the HfK International Office that I had found an internship in London and received the documents to be filled out by email. I also highly recommend acquiring an international student ID card from STA Travel in Bremen.

I started my internship at YMBBT on July 27, 2015. I rented an AirBnB room as accommodation for the first week. That very week I received the good news that a friend of mine had taken a job in London and would be moving there. We decided to look for cheap accommodations together. As soon as she arrived in London, we started looking at apartments and shared apartments together that we found on the website gumtree.co.uk. We limited our search to the neighbourhoods recommended to me. We also made sure to look for apartments/shared apartments near good transportation options.

After a few days we found a small apartment in Walthamstow that was partially furnished and had good bus and train connections nearby. We really liked the apartment, but the rent was too high. It was a two room apartment with a third room that was a kind of dining room that you had to go through if you wanted to go to the kitchen.

The landladies were two young women who had recently purchased the property and with whom we got along well from the start. We explained our situation and asked whether it would be possible to rent the walk-through room to a third person and thus make the rent affordable for us. The landladies agreed to this and the monthly rent, including additional costs and internet, came to 380 pounds per person. That was the best offer we had gotten up to that point. We moved to Walthamstow and quickly found a third roommate. To get used household goods, furniture, clothes or other things for free, I highly recommend the site Freecycle.org.

My internship location was in Soho, central London. To get from my apartment to my internship I had to take the subway for 40 minutes. I bought a weekly ticket every week for 38 pounds on my Oyster card. This was possible thanks to the financial support of Erasmus. If I were to do an internship in London again, I would invest in a bicycle. Although London is not really a cycling city and there are many cycling accidents every year, work is being done to make the city bike-friendly and create more cycle paths. Aside from the money you save by cycling, you get to know the city so much better.

You Me Bum Bum Train is a non-profit theatre that was founded 11 years ago by two art school graduates. The idea was to give people the chance to have a range of different experiences, not all of which could be experienced in one lifetime. Unfortunately, I can't reveal what exactly happens at YMBBT. Every employee has to sign a non-disclosure agreement, because the theatre thrives on the audience not knowing what to expect. If they had any idea about the different scenes the whole experience would be ruined. Unfortunately, I wasn't allowed to take photos at the site of the performances either.

The best description of what is happening is this: "Audience members enter into the experience alone; they are catapulted into a series of unimaginable situations that play with their every sense – sight, sound, smell, temperature, feel and taste. Within detailed realistic sets hundreds of performers help recreate a diverse range of 'real-life' experiences that would be impossible to have in just one lifetime." (YMBBT Information Pack, 2015, p.5) Except for a few members, everyone works free of charge and on a voluntary basis at YMBBT. A production is put on every year. The productions have become increasingly larger and more elaborate and over the years have won several awards and received countless five-star reviews from theatre critics.

For every production a new building has to be found in London, usually vacant department stores or office buildings. In the year I was there YMBBT acquired a huge building complex that consisted of two large, 5-level buildings. The premises were in a rough, neglected condition and in certain areas of the building it was only permitted to work with metal-toed boots, a helmet and gloves.

In the first month of my internship I basically worked on a construction site. 30 rooms had to be built for 30 scenes and furnished in detail. I put up walls, sealed rooms with fibreglass wool, distributed large deliveries of lumber to the various floors, laid out carpet and painted walls. I made phone calls to companies to procure materials, although I initially had difficulties with the English technical language.

I was fed lunch every day and coffee and tea were always available. My required attendance time was 40 hours per week.

Every morning at 9 a.m. all volunteers gathered for a “production meeting” in which they discussed everything that was scheduled for that day and the most important things that needed to be done with particular urgency. Jobs and assignments were distributed and pieces of paper with the tasks were stuck on a large wall. XXX was my supervisor and was always there for me when I had questions or needed help.

After a while I became a floor manager and had to assign jobs to the volunteers and keep an overview of the construction and the entire building. I communicated with other floor managers and the main office using a walkie-talkie. This meant I was always available and knew what needed to be done and where help was needed. During this time, people worked on the set late into the night and many craftsmen even spent the night in the building. The work never seemed to end; I sometimes worked 11 hours a day. XXX explained to me that in London (West End) the theatre, musical and show culture is very respected and taken seriously, that there are rarely regular working hours and in certain phases it is normal to work through the night. During my internship I learned where my limits are, how resilient I am and how important it is not to let myself get burned out.

After four weeks of most strenuous construction work, I was at the limit of my physical strength and therefore asked XXX to transfer me to another department. I was quickly handed over to the costume department. Initially I did a wide variety of sewing work. After a week, I was given a scene in the play for which I was allowed to design the costumes and took responsibility for the implementation and creation. This meant that I worked closely with the two founders of YMBBT during the creation phase, which was a very inspiring experience.

It was also my job to use Indesign to create realistic ID cards and name tags for the various actors in the show, including IDs for police, BBC reporters and veterinarians. For a while I even worked in a screen printing workshop, printing costumes. I was appointed second in command by the costume designer and given my own desk in their office. My tasks also included researching the internet for suitable costumes that we could acquire for free.

Before the shows started, I was trained by the fire department in several workshops to become one of ten “Fire Marshalls”. In the event of a fire, my job was to give instructions.

The premiere of the show was scheduled for September 4th, but construction was far from finished and so it didn't start until the end of September. There were four shows a week, each from 6 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. Seventy spectators went through 30 different rooms one after the other. Each room served as a stage for a particular scene. Each scene was accordingly performed seventy times per night. Before the show, my job was to put 400 actors and extras in the right costumes and not forget the relevant accessories.

After the show, all the costumes had to be collected and washed and ironed the next day so that everything was in place again for the next show.

Before each evening performance there was a meeting to discuss important things. And we were enthusiastic feedback from previous audience members to reminded us why we all worked so hard for this show.

At the beginning of December I was asked whether I could imagine taking on the role of “head of costume” for the rest of the month because the previous head of the department was travelling. I agreed and was allowed to lead my own team. This experience is very valuable to me today; I have learned that it is very helpful for me to be thrown into the deep end and that I am capable of taking on a lot of responsibility.

I had a wonderful time in my internship! I grew as a person, found friends for life, took on responsibilities that I would never have dared to take on before and gained courage for my future as a designer.

Through YMBBT I learned what you can create when you work together, I learned how important attention to detail is and what incredible worlds can be created with that approach.

I learned how a vision can move thousands (20,000 per production) of people and what a great satisfaction it is when that vision becomes reality. I've seen how hard people are willing to work even without pay if they do something out of passion. I learned that not having money is no reason not to implement an idea and that there are always ways to get people and resources to realise a vision, even without capital.

I learned that everyone is willing to help if you can get them excited about something. And I have experienced that it gives people meaning and makes them happy when they give other people an experience that may change their lives positively.

I would like to go to London again and I will be there for the next YMBBT production as best I can. Just the fact that something like YMBBT exists makes me curious about everything else there is to discover in London.