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International Research and Training Grant for Incoming Graduate Students

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IRIS's International Research and Training Grant for Incoming Graduate Students enabled me to spend two months abroad this summer at several locations that have expanded and ignited my work. First, I attended and presented a paper at this year's ASSITEJ world congress and theatre festival in Cape Town, South Africa. The ten-day congress introduced me to theatre makers from around the globe committed to creating and advancing TYA (Theatre for Young Audiences). During the conference I met several theatre makers, both from the US and internationally, with whom I hope to continue a relationship. The performances I attended vastly expanded my perception of what TYA can be and do, and I am eager to bring this widened understanding to my work in Madison.

From Cape Town, I travelled to Pune, India, and returned to Maher- an NGO with whom I have worked since 2014. Maher's core mission is to identify and address the root causes of violence and despair experienced by women and children in India. Their most visible project is the thirty-two centers that provide homes for, at present, roughly eight-hundred children, three-hundred women, and one-hundred men; other projects include micro-loan financing for village self-help groups, skills and educational training, preschools and daycare centers, medical care and counseling, awareness programming, and more. I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to return. From the States, I can maintain my relationship with the staff via email communications, but the chance to return and be present and continue building relationships with the children was such a gift.

My work at Maher was three-fold: first, to research the ways in which Maher uses drama as an educational vehicle. High school and college students at Maher comprise a vibrant street theatre team. They perform relevant, topic-specific plays in villages, at local schools, and in urban spaces around Pune. Through observing rehearsals, attending performances, and interviewing Sr. Lucy (Maher's founder and director) and the actors, I learned a great deal about their highly effective use of street theatre. Second, I traveled to Maher's home for girls in Ratnagiri. Sr. Lucy specifically asked that I spend time teaching drama at this house; they are isolated from the main centers around Pune. Teaching those daily drama classes, and seeing the joy and confidence ignited in my students, rekindled my passion for my graduate work, and my belief in the pedagogical and developmental vitality of theater. My experiences teaching in Ratnagiri will influence the direction of my thesis. Third, this in-person visit at Maher set the groundwork for my plan to host the Maher drama team here in Madison. Having set the foundation with the directors in India, I am now working with professors and contacts in Madison to find a way to bring these young people to our city to speak and perform. My hope is that Madison will host these remarkable students next fall.

Finally, I traveled south to the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam in Tamil Nadu. I taught at this residential drama school during the 2015-16 school year, and their unique pedagogy of equally weighted arts and academic training was the topic of the paper I presented in Cape Town at the ASSITEJ conference. Returning to the school enabled me to greatly expand and specify the research in that paper. Moreover, it was a joyful reunion with my students! Thank you for personal and professional opportunities made possible by this grant.