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Two Sides to Every Story
A Profile of Lee Alexander
by Brittany Wallace

Everyone loves a good story—of success, of failure, of romance, of heartbreak. We're hardwired to listen carefully for the interesting, the uncanny, and the inspiring. But to do so, first we must listen to the stories of others; only then can we weave their narratives into our own, to be shared.

FSU alumnus Lee Alexander has always loved storytelling, so when he went to FSU to study theater, he was most interested in how to best share a great tale.

In 2000, Alexander found himself abroad, studying in the London theater program. Now seventeen years later, he has found a way to share others' stories as a producer at CNN.

In a phone call interview, he, shares his story of learning the value of traveling, sharing a good narrative, and asking, "Why not?"

A native Georgia boy, Alexander grew up in a family from two different worlds. His father's family preferred to stay close to home, avoiding travel outside of a few states. His mother's family, however, were more adventurous: according to Alexander, they were "willing to drive four or five hours to meet for lunch somewhere" with family members who had found roots elsewhere.

While traveling throughout the United States with his mother, brother, and grandmother, Alexander learned that things he had heard from other family members weren't necessarily true, that he could spot the similarities between himself and people

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from different backgrounds. And so, when given the opportunity to experience people of another *country*, he jumped at the chance.

He chose the Florida State University study-abroad program in London, the very heart of theater and playwriting—the perfect set-up for a theater student like Alexander. In fact, one of his favorite things to do in London was to visit the local theater, pay 10£, and enjoy a play.

Despite the price, “it was super high-quality,” Alexander says. “Even if it was a bad performance, there was still something that you could learn from it.”

And, as any study abroad student learns quickly about most countries in Europe, “[London] was a great hub to get to the rest of Europe. I was able to do a lot of travel to different countries on long weekends,” he adds. In all, he visited nine countries during his time with FSU London, including Sweden, Italy, Spain, Greece, and France.

Though Alexander enjoyed exploring these new places, he explains that not every weekend excursion went well.

“I traveled with another student [Helen] to Italy for a week, and we arrived in Venice with nowhere to stay and walked hours before my friend Helen found a bed in a convent and I found [one] in a male dorm.... We were exhausted from drudging through the flooded narrow canals, and she had packed a ridiculously large suitcase. Neither one of us spoke Italian. By Rome, I had gotten sick and had to stay in bed for a day, and then we ended our trip in Florence.”

Even still, Alexander didn’t let difficult trips get in the way of a learning opportunity or of strengthening the bonds of friendships.

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“Every trip is going to have its pitfalls, but it teaches you lessons for the next trip. And it teaches you a lot about yourself, as well as the person you’re traveling with. I spent three months with Helen and a very intense week with her in Italy, and even though I haven’t seen her since, we are still in touch.”

On the weekdays, Alexander focused on his theater studies, and the London program allowed him to explore his interests in playwriting and storytelling. At the time, the humanities community was engaged in a heated cultural debate over whether film was killing theater, so people questioned his pursuit of an arts degree in college.

“London proved that theater is super relevant still. ... There was always something that was really worthwhile in just seeing a performance, and for me, it just reaffirmed that storytelling, no matter what sort of form or vehicle the story is in, is something that people always want to consume,” Alexander says.

He also credits his professors – one in particular – for validating the significance of theater as a form of storytelling.

“[I had] an excellent teacher, John Degen, who was amazing,” Alexander says. “Theater can [often] be seen as light and fluffy, and [people ask], ‘Do you really need an academic, rigorous analysis of [theater] to conceptualize why people are going to see entertainment?’ And [Degen] proved that we do need that framework [to understand that we] can learn about the playwright, historical context, themes, and genres that can define what a play is about and why someone like Shakespeare is still relevant today.”

Alexander’s study abroad experience in London also taught him that theater is a living thing.

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“People *want* to see stories,” he says, “They want entertainment; they want to be challenged. [Theater] doesn’t just have to be musical or comedies. If you just invest in creating [a] great story and telling [that] story, there’s going to be an audience for it.”

Alexander’s experience as a student with FSU London inspired him to return as a program assistant. In this capacity, he connected with Mary Balthrop, then the London Program Director, who he had formerly only known when he was a student.

He says her life philosophy became his: “If you get the opportunity to have an experience, you should embrace it and do it. Whether it’s good or bad, you’re going to learn from it. And why not?” He worked as a PA for six months, guiding students’ experiences in London, until he landed a spot as a participant on an Australian reality television show. When he talked with Balthrop about leaving his PA jobs, she encouraged him to take advantage of the opportunity. The change also meant that he would embrace this new challenge. Alexander cites Balthrop’s support and her “Why not?” motto as key to helping him realize the importance of accepting the opportunities life has to offer.

In 2003, he returned to London for graduate school, where he furthered his passion for storytelling and pursued a master’s degree in Text and Performance Studies at Kings College London. After graduation, Alexander moved to Washington, D.C., where he was a substitute teacher briefly, and then he moved to New York City.

At the time, a friend who worked for Larry King at CNN connected Alexander with an interviewer for *Nancy Grace*, then airing on Headline News (HLN). He landed the position as a production assistant, and when he left almost seven years later, he had

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become a writer producer for the show. On the Nancy Grace show, Alexander blended his love for storytelling, honed while earning his college degrees, with the factual aspects of crime reporting. He explains that Nancy Grace is an excellent storyteller. “The stories [she told] really are captivating,” Alexander says. “All the inherent ingredients of storytelling are there, [just] ramped up, because people are grieving their missing loved one or their murdered loved one, and it’s compelling TV.”

After leaving Nancy Grace and striking out when searching for a job opportunity with CNN, Alexander decided to travel South America for six months, backpacking from Colombia to Argentina. The trip, he says, “reaffirmed that travel is a really important experience. It’s a gift.” When he returned to the U.S. with a fresh set of eyes, he did some freelance work with ABC News and eventually shifted into digital news to produce web videos.

And then, in October 2014, an opportunity arose for a production position on CNN’s “Reliable Sources,” a weekly media critique show hosted by Brian Stelter. The job is the perfect combination of Alexander’s skills.

“It’s really great for me because it uses my experiences of being an avid media consumer and analyzing other media, and just putting [that analysis] in [the] context of the big stories of the day,” Alexander says.

These days, “Reliable Sources” is perhaps more relevant than ever. Stelter and his team research and report on major happenings from various partisan perspectives. Alexander acknowledges that trust in the media is low and that there is need for media literacy. He believes that is exactly what “Reliable Sources” provides: “We try to parse

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[the context of where you're getting your news from] so that you know what is a reliable source and what isn't a reliable source."

The hope is that the viewer, through watching Stelter's analysis of media coverage, will have a better understanding of the nuances of the news and be able have moments of informed reflection.

"It's good to, at least for one hour a week, have a moment where you [the viewer] can say, 'Okay, so what did we get right this week, and what did we get wrong? And what lessons can we learn from what's happened?'"

Alexander believes those moments of reflection are crucial at a time when partisan media can spin a news story to fit their platform or their target demographic.

"This is an environment where people want to go to their media safe places and have their views reinforced," Alexander says. "The media's job isn't to reinforce or insulate people's ideas; it's to expose them to different viewpoints and different ideas."

For him, that's one of the most exciting aspects of his job: that he can make an impact on real people, regarding real stories that matter to them, and stories that matter to him. "It's nice to feel like you have a role in shaping how we talk about or frame and communicate stories that matter to you."

Part of what you learn from studying abroad is that stories that matter to you often matter to many other people, and that those people have interesting, thoughtful perspectives on important subjects. Given the variety of stories being told in the news today, Alexander says that "this is a time to hear more voices, not less," a time for people

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of differing backgrounds to be open rather than resistant to others' ideas and takes on events.

However, this openness can only be developed through experience—of new people, of new places, of new ways of life. Studying abroad provides the opportunity to cultivate these new connections.

While abroad, students can follow Alexander's adopted "Why not?" motto to develop a greater understanding of the world around them.

In doing so, they can create stories to last a lifetime. Stories that matter. Stories that should be told.