

*Jacob Sampson, a student at the University of North Texas, won a two-week residency at the Theatre Academy in Prague based on the contest for the best play on the theme of Vaclav Havel's artificial language *Ptydepe* from his play *Memorandum*. The residency was prepared by the Vaclav Havel Library Foundation and DAMU - Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.*

PRAGUE PAPER

The experience that I was awarded for winning the Vaclav Havel Library Foundation playwriting competition was, hands down, the most eye-opening, fulfilling and inspiring opportunity that I have ever had the pleasure of enduring. I knew that a two-week trip to the Czech Republic was going to be a once in a lifetime experience for me, especially considering that I had never once flown across an ocean before, but I could never have expected how impactful this trip would be on my perception as a writer and my outlook as a human.

Months ago when I was presented with the idea of participating in this contest, I didn't know very much about the city of Prague and I had never even heard of Vaclav Havel, but with the encouragement of my professor, I decided to give the competition a shot. Upon reading the play "The Memorandum" and researching more about the life and career of Vaclav Havel, I found myself deeply moved by the impressive and ground-breaking work of such a motivational person. I couldn't believe that my peers and I could be so uneducated about a genius like Havel, especially considering how influential and relevant his written works still are to this day. I found myself enraptured and inspired by the tone and style of his plays, and soon I was writing my own interpretation of his concepts for me to use as a submission to the contest. The play that I wrote, entitled "The Essay", was the first full-length play that I've ever written, and although writing it was daunting and exhausting, it was also immensely rewarding and I owe all of my gratitude for the inspiration to Mr. Havel himself.

The trip itself was life-changing for me because not only did it help validate my own perception of myself as a writer, it provided countless unique theatrical experiences that I am never going to forget. I was offered tickets to attend about ten different performances around the city throughout my residency, and each and every one gave me valuable information as a writer. Most performances that I saw were entirely in Czech (besides one that was in German and an opera which was in Italian), and because I do not know any language other than English, I was presented with the rare privilege to view the shows from a fresh, new angle. Without any knowledge of what a character is saying, one is forced to analyze other aspects of the performance to interpret the story. I viewed actors as I never have before; such as their presence on stage, their energy and their connection with the other actors. I absorbed small details in the setting, lighting and sound design that I may have otherwise missed. I honestly feel that getting to be a spectator for so many foreign stage performances changed my entire perception of theatre. I was really given a chance to dissect what makes for a captivating performance and I will never watch any stage play the same way again.

Living for two weeks in the city, and getting to learn so much about the culture of such a traditional and historical place was eye-opening in itself. I was fortunate enough to get to be detached from America during our presidential election, so I was given a chance to learn about perceptions from the outside. Stepping out of my American bubble and being integrated with the students in Prague was a huge wake up call. The realization of how sheltered I have been as an American was like a refreshing slap in the face and is one of my biggest takeaways from this trip. I have always known that one of the best ways to grow as a writer is to listen to other people's opinions and to learn about different outlooks on life, but until this residency, I have never been exposed to so many beautiful, new and important ideas.