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Class of 2006  
Columbus, Ohio

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I never expected to spend my first morning in London stranded and crying in the Burger King of the Clapham Junction train station. But then again, I never expected to win a Burch Fellowship either. As C.S. Lewis remarked, “Reality, in fact, is always something you couldn’t have guessed.”

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Thus it was on the morning of July 7, 2005, when, jet-lagged and alone, I was unceremoniously booted off of the London-bound Gatwick Express due to “security alerts.” When I asked the ticket saleswoman if the trains would resume their services soon, she replied, “Haven’t you heard? London’s been bombed!” No, I hadn’t heard: I had spent the morning obliviously airborne while, in London, four suicide bombers wreaked havoc on the city’s public transport. These terrorists detonated explosives on three tube trains and one bus, killing more than fifty innocent civilians and wounding countless others.

Friends and family urged me to change my plans and leave London, particularly after four more bombs were discovered on July 21, two weeks after the July 7 incident. I did not heed their advice: Although tormented with constant reminders of the fragility of life, threats of violence, personal powerlessness, and my own overly cautious nature, I decided to complete my Burch program in physical theatre methods, vocal training, and Shakespeare as intended. It was perhaps the best decision that I have ever made.

Until July 22, I studied at L’ecole de mime corporel dramatique, a modest movement studio without air



conditioning on the third floor of a warehouse in Islington, North London. Under the critical gaze, poking, and prodding of two unapologetic Dramatic Corporal Mime experts, Corinne Soum and Steve Wasson,—protégés of Etienne Decroux, the father of the physical art form—I, along with students from such diverse nations as Austria, Portugal, Brazil, and China, learned quickly that mime is not easy. To wordlessly express the physical, social, and emotional experiences of mankind, we practiced exercises demanding balance, strength, and focus, bending and contorting our bodies in ways previously unexplored. Mime is a rigid art form with subtleties that would take years of training to perfect. Thus, the most critical lesson that I garnered from my experience at L’ecole came not from specific studies of technique but from

one of many off-hand comments made by my teachers: we were practicing a lateral *annelé*, a physical scale in which the subject progressively curves her body from its erect form into something out of a Salvador Dalí painting. Corinne chided us for collapsing onto ourselves in the curve, saying, “Who is curving your body? You are! Don’t forfeit control of the physical to the force of gravity. Own your body.”

It might seem a novel concept, but the revelation that I am not stuck in my body, that I and I alone have the power to change my experience, was revolutionary.

For two weeks following my study of mime, I underwent sixty hours of intensive training in unarmed fighting and rapier and dagger with the British Academy of Stage and Screen Combat. Grappling, dance-like, with my combat partners, I acquired ghastly bruises from repeated falls, botched disarming choreography, and the abuse demanded by self-striking “knaps,” the sound effects of violent contact. Personal, physical taxation was augmented when, attempting to avoid the public transport, I frequently walked the 3.5 miles between Connaught Hall and the BASSC’s summer location near Finsbury Park. Thus, between the eight daily hours of combat and the grueling commute, whenever I wasn’t fighting my entire body ached. I have never known a more satisfying and welcome exhaustion.

The dangers and solitude in which I spent much my Burch Adventure forced some serious growing up in me. They taught me that I can survive without the immediate protection of loved ones. Even in a realm of the unknown, the sun sets and rises and I don’t have to be afraid. Dying is not within our power, but, as Corinne Soum and the lateral *annelé* reminded me, living is—how precious! What a gift! Death will come, unexpected and uncontrollable, like



it came to the people on July 7 when my journey began. How vital it is, then, to do as the tube platform Nike ads insisted and “defeat the lazy you”; to become, as Etienne Decroux championed, a “militant of movement in a world sitting down”; to awaken ourselves, viscerally as well as mentally and spiritually, to all the blessings and downfalls of this marvelously diverse planet. When a bomb was discovered in their tube station on July 21, the people of Shepherd’s Bush in West London

refused to feed terrorism with fear or to perpetuate the violence with their own violent acts. Instead, they threw a block party. If only all the nations and peoples of the world would behave in such a proactive way.

I was struck by a Latin motto printed in a Stratford-upon-Avon display: *Facet spera*, “do and hope.” I can happily report that I did with my Burch Fellowship all that I had hoped to do and more—I awakened my body to the possibilities of physical expression; I learned to be a more complete and grounded individual, on stage and off; I challenged my physical capabilities and triumphed; and I returned to Chapel Hill a certified “Actor Combatant,” subsequently teaching a workshop in unarmed combat and acting as fight choreographer/movement coach for five UNC dramatic productions this year.

Although my initial Burch proposal insisted upon the importance of physical training, it was not until my time in the UK that I truly understood the import of the physical within my own life, as performer and person. Thanks to my Burch Fellowship program, I now strive daily to foster a balance between pursuits of the mind, body, and spirit. But most importantly, my travels abroad and the unfortunate circumstances in which I

arrived and lived in London taught me to live each moment and each day as though they are my first, last, and only—because, in fact, they are. I cannot thank Mr. Burch and the Fellowship program enough for making this priceless experience possible.

