

Salem Zelalem – 2018

At first, I was hesitant about studying abroad to London. Three weeks seemed like an exorbitant amount of time to spend travelling with a group of strangers; I applied for the trip convinced it would be “good for me”, but had no idea how fundamentally life-changing the experience would become. The London: Culture Past and Present program, spearheaded by Professors Michael Levinson and Claire Kinney, was one of the most rewarding times I have yet to have as a student at this University.

It was immediately evident how important the city of London was to those running the program. From scaling St. Paul’s Cathedral, to punting across a river in Cambridge, to just visiting a local Pizza Hut, every moment was met with a real and genuine joyful optimism. This energy was infectious, and buoyed the group forward. Although we spent time in the classroom, the format was heavily discussion-based. Levenson and Kinney made it clear that they valued our input, and in such a small group they dispensed valuable insights often on a one-on-one basis. It was immensely valuable to have discussions with Professors over a meal, or while gripping the same pole on the Tube.

Regents University, where we stayed for the three weeks, is right in the middle of Regent’s Park. Although we spent our days hurriedly running from one fantastical event to the next, there was enough time to spend just walking around the Queen’s rose garden, or admiring the view at Primrose Hill, or simply taking a peddle boat out on the pond. There were also so many museums to explore, and I will definitely have to revisit the Tate Modern or National Gallery again.

Theatre is something that has been important to me all throughout high school, and an extracurricular I have pursued while at UVa. In travelling to London, I had not realized that the culture around theatre was completely different. Shows were more frequent and far more affordable, allowing us to see a play most nights on a whim. It was completely surreal to have the opportunity to see *As You Like It*, a play put on my high school three years ago, at the historic Globe theatre. The performance was phenomenal and still managed innovative spins on the classic, despite working with material that is centuries old. I also saw *The Strange Death of John Doe* and *Leave Taking*, both of which discussed immigration in England. After leaving London, these inspired my research paper on the Windrush scandal. This tragedy is currently occurring to the immigrants of Caribbean descent in England, and I would not have been aware of the crisis without this opportunity.

A few weeks ago, when I returned to Grounds and began attending classes again, I walked into a small discussion believing I would not know any of the other students. It sounds cliché, but when I saw two other London travellers seated, the euphoria was unmatched. It had only been a few months since we had last met, but it was immediately as though we were still watching the sunrise on Westminster Bridge together. In those few weeks, I made friends that I am certain will carry me through a lifetime.



