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## Unpaid Arts Internships: A Personal Account on Gaining Experience with Arts Organizations, and Observations of Systemic Inequalities within the Structure of Unpaid Internships

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## **Unpaid Arts Internships:**

### **A Personal Account on Gaining Experience with Arts Organizations, and Observations of Systemic Inequalities within the Structure of Unpaid Internships**

*By Grace Heller*

The summer before my freshman year of college I had a lot of time on my hands. Western Washington University didn't start until late September, my parents were at work, my sister was back in school, and most of my friends had already left for their colleges that began in mid-August. Seeing that I was becoming restless my mom suggested I take a trip to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, a place I had only vaguely heard of before. With nothing better to do I rolled my eyes, booked some tickets and drove down to Ashland with a friend. The first show we saw was *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare; I can still remember everything about that production. We got out of the show and immediately I went back to the hotel, got on the wifi, and put the deadline for the OSF internship application into my calendar.

I arrived at Western still reeling from the productions I had seen at OSF. Starting school I wasn't sure I even wanted to be a theatre major, but I still attended the theatre department's fall kick-off event. During faculty introductions Rachel Anderson got up and talked about her position as head of the school's costume shop, and the fact that every year Western has the opportunity to send two interns to OSF. Honestly, it seemed a little too good to be true. It is truly incredible that Western was able to form this kind of a relationship with an organization with the size and reputation of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and I was firmly aware of how lucky I was to have had access to that kind of opportunity. Nearly 4 years later I left the internship still feeling lucky, but also disillusioned towards a theatre company that I deeply admired, and the field of theatre in general.

My application process involved me submitting what was essentially the OSF intern application to a board of theatre faculty. They then selected two interns from the pool of student applicants to pass along to OSF. After I was notified that I was selected to represent Western the following year as an OSF intern Rachel worked tirelessly with me to improve my application and make sure I was ready to take this step. Throughout the entire application process I felt completely supported by the WWU theatre faculty. I found out I was selected to be the Company Management intern for the 2018 season at OSF in May of 2017, when most OSF interns didn't learn whether or not they'd been accepted until at least November 2017. Because of this I was able to start of my internship already in a different position than most other people in the FAIR (Fellows, Assistants, Interns, Residents) program. Those extra 7 months gave me the time I needed to build my schedule in a way that would still allow me to graduate on time, find a subletter for my room in Bellingham, and mentally prepare for this next step.

The Company Management department at OSF oversees all the housing and travel, as well as the care of every guest who comes to the festival. A former employee did the math and in 2017 on any given day of the year 15 people were either coming or going from OSF; so you can imagine it's a fairly busy department. OSF maintains over 100 housing units in Ashland, most within half a mile of the OSF campus, and it's about a 60-40% split between places they rent and places they own. The department books flights and sends itineraries to anyone traveling to and from the festival. They make sure everyone has housing and take care of any concerns or issues. They provide actors food when they have to work through their Actor's Equity mandated meal breaks. Company Management pretty much does a little bit of everything for everyone at the festival. There is even a 24/7 on-call phone line that our staff would take turns with week by week where anyone can call at any time and get an answer.

Anything from being locked out of their apartment to missed flights to trips to the hospital; I only ever got a few 3am calls, but they definitely do happen.

I also had a few daily and weekly tasks within my department. I was in charge of maintaining the coffee station in the green room of the Bowmer and Elizabethan Theatres. My boss initially apologized for the cliché of making me, the intern, in charge of coffee, but I actually enjoyed that part of the job because it regularly put me backstage which was very exciting, and everyone got to know me very quickly as “the girl who brings the coffee.” And the thing about that is in theatre, and probably everywhere, everyone loves “the girl who brings the coffee.” I was also in charge of inputting all the data from our evening shuttle service into a tracking spreadsheet. Company Management runs an evening shuttle on every night when there is a show that picks people up in front of the theatre and drops them off wherever they need to go in Ashland. It runs from 9:00pm to 12:30am. I was in charge of managing the car share program, putting in work requests, updating the budget spreadsheet, delivering things to people and much more. I believe I gained a thorough understanding of what it takes to run a customer service department, and how those sorts of departments fit into the larger organization.

I also completed several data tracking spreadsheets for the General Manager of OSF. All of these involved tracking various spending that had to do with our housing units. I built one that tracked every cost incurred by every apartment individually which involved many hours in the Accounts Payable office pouring over old gas, electric, etc. bills from prior years. I also built one that predicted housing cost increases over the next 14 years based on previous lease agreements and overall Ashland rent increase trends. These projects involved first meeting to go over them with my boss, and then 1-on-1 meetings with Ted, our General Manager to discuss the results.

Working in an administrative department my job required me to interact with many more people in the company than the other intern's did. For one thing it was my job to communicate with many members of the acting company frequently about various needs they may have. I was also invited to the opening of every show because Company Management is in charge of the toasts that happen afterwards. In addition to this, we host receptions every time a show begins rehearsal and invite the director, designers, actors, and board members to eat and drink together before the first read through. Through the many events and responsibilities of Company Management I became a familiar face to most people within the organization. When smoke from the forest fires in Northern California began invading Ashland and we had to move our outdoor Elizabethan productions to Ashland High School I drove actors to and from the new theatre, I brought ice and provided snacks, and did anything else that needed to be done. As much as it may have felt like it sometimes, this did not go unnoticed by members of upper management, and a few of them even stopped me to personally say thank you. I really did feel like I was a part of the company during my time at OSF, and believe I made valuable friends and connections that could be beneficial in the future.

The most important thing I learned during my time as the Company Management Intern at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival was that I definitely don't want to work in Company Management. I was working at a theatre but I was nowhere near the art being created. I missed being in rehearsal rooms and seeing how a show comes together, I missed watching the opening of a production and knowing that I helped create it with a team of peers. This wasn't a bad thing to learn, and I certainly don't regret my choice to accept that position or my time spent at OSF at all. I'm glad I was able to gain this insight about Company Management positions before I began actually applying for them. Now I have my

entire senior year to focus my attention on areas of theatre I might be more interested in and spend time working on projects related to those. I am not unhappy I chose Company Management, I learned a lot and had access to the entire company in a way I would not have had I been working for a different department.

Another wonderful part of Western's relationship with OSF is that it ensures WWU interns get company housing. I paid rent, but I lived about a 3 minute walk from my office and all the theatres, and I didn't have to go through the stress of finding housing, dealing with a new landlord, or any fees that come with signing a 4 month lease. Additionally, when my internship was extended I didn't have to worry about housing at all, because I worked in the department that managed the place I lived. Ashland is not a large town, it has virtually no bus system and very high rent prices. I watched other interns who did not receive housing commute from two miles away (in a town with virtually no bus system), pay ridiculous rental prices, and live without full kitchens for months at a time. Many people are shocked and appalled when they hear that interns do not receive housing or even a housing stipend from OSF. This is a slightly complicated part of the internship program. It used to be that interns were exclusively students from Southern Oregon University, so they were already residents of Ashland with places to live. They would just come over for a few hours a week to work and learn from professionals at OSF. But then people outside of Ashland began wanting to apply, and as long as they were willing to move without receiving housing stipends the festival didn't see a reason to turn them away. Eventually the internship program grew into what it is today, people from all over the country moving to Ashland for a few months out of the year to work at OSF.

While it is true that every member of the internship program understands what they are signing up for (no housing and no stipend) I think that with accepting people from outside

of Ashland came different expectations for the interns. Now that none of us have classes or other jobs to go to (in fact it is explicitly written into our contracts that we cannot have other jobs while working at OSF) we are more available to the festival. Interns are “required to work 20-25 hours a week” with the opportunity to work more hours if we so choose. I knew almost no interns who weren’t working at least 40 hours a week with next to no control over their own schedules. Oregon has specific internship laws and many of them were being broken at OSF, for example *“To make sure that the intern is not being utilized as an unpaid worker, use of an intern must not result in an employee being laid off, or in the business not hiring an employee it would otherwise hire, or in an employee working fewer hours than the employee would otherwise work.”*<sup>1</sup> I was explicitly told many times that my department wanted me to stay on as long as possible, because after I left they would have to hire a Company Management Assistant (that I would have to train to do my job). Basically they wanted to continue paying me nothing for as long as possible until they hired an employee they would pay to do my same job.

I spoke to multiple interns who shared my OSF experience, and one of them told me, “I was one of 3 people in an office where I was told multiple times that the same person wasn’t coming in due to appointments or sickness so I needed to fill in and do her job, (and then I would see her at the park with friends). Doing the work that someone else was getting paid for was one of the most demeaning experiences, at the end of long days I often left feeling depressed and exhausted and extremely taken advantage of.” Two other interns mentioned that they originally applied for assistantships (a position with housing, travel, and a stipend), but were offered unpaid internships instead. One of them was a Design Assistant intern, and while at OSF she encountered someone who had held that same position a few

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<sup>1</sup>Delogu

years before, but her title was an assistant. Apparently it was not in the costume shop budget to pay any FAIR participants for the 2018 season, but they didn't reject any candidates. Instead they just had them work for free. So yes, while it is true that all of the interns knew what they were signing up for in terms of not getting housing or a paycheck, I think that the anger all of the interns felt in the unfairness of their situation was justified.

So why does a 42 million dollar company need to exploit college students in order to continue functioning? Possibly because OSF has a financial model based on projections and credit as opposed to actual numbers. After the season for the next year is announced the financial team analyzes box office numbers and create projections for next season based on how they think all the shows are going to sell. And it's very easy to be wrong about how popular a show will be. They projected *Great Expectations* in 2016 would be a high selling production and it wasn't, which meant the second largest theatre (the Angus Bowmer) was fairly empty for most of the shows, and not nearly enough money was made. They also project how much money the development department will bring in from donors which again, is far from an exact science. This leaves OSF in a precarious situation should anything ever go wrong. And things always go wrong.

This year the Rouge Valley was hit with a ton of smoke from Northern California wildfires that forced OSF to cancel over 20 of it's outdoor performances. Every time an outdoor show is cancelled the organization loses a minimum of \$54,000, or approximately one person's yearly salary. Before the smoke hit, OSF was already 1.6 million dollars in debt, so when shows started being cancelled the festival went into full crisis mode. The entire company was in a spending freeze, events started being called off, and we even stopped paying invoices. The Accounts Payable department told Company Management that they weren't going to pay the garbage bill for all our company housing. We have over 100 units in



Ashland that are occupied by actors, designers, FAIR participants and other guests, all producing trash. Of course we weren't allowed to tell anyone the garbage bill hadn't been paid. If anyone contacted me (because I became the person people talked to about things like this) about their trash not being picked up I was supposed to feign ignorance and tell them "I'd look into it."

Another reality about being an unpaid intern is your time is, literally, worthless. Because all of my other co-workers were paid hourly and risked going into overtime constantly because our department was short staffed I was always given the tedious, mind-numbing, but time consuming tasks because they didn't want to "waste" my other co-workers hours on such things. For example, I once was expected to sit in a hotel lobby for hours until midnight simply to greet people coming in, and it had been stated (without my agreement) that if necessary I would be able to to drive to Eugene (3 hours away) to pick things up for people. Whenever a tedious, time consuming task would present itself I would become incredibly stressed out waiting for it to get assigned to me. And your own literal worthlessness begins to weigh on you mentally and emotionally too.

Unpaid internships are also complicated because they are a way of ensuring the workforce stays the same as it always has. I am aware of the fact that my privilege and social position allowed me to apply for and participate in this internship. I could afford to do this because I come from an upper middle class family with parents who are willing and able to support me through college and this internship. While the FAIR program was a mix of people of all genders, races, sexualities, and people from various socioeconomic backgrounds, every single intern this season was a middle to upper class white woman. This is because fellows, residents and apprentices get free housing as well as a small living stipend, interns do not. Yes, OSF looks amazing on a resume, and yes, I will hopefully get many jobs because of this,

but is it possible I could have gotten them anyway? I will have a college degree, volunteer experience, and other additions to my resume that my wealth and various other privileges gave me easy access to. Unpaid internships are a way of keeping people from lower socioeconomic groups out of a workforce that is already difficult for them to enter. Over the course of writing this paper I have read many op-eds debating back and forth about the acceptability of unpaid internships. Many good points are made on both sides but I believe that the issue above is checkmate for those arguing in defense of them. Unpaid internships may provide education, networking, life experience, and countless other positive opportunities *for those able to participate in them*. But if we do not find a way to open up these unpaid positions to those not supported by family or a trust fund, then we will simply continue to perpetuate a workforce where those in leadership are primarily white, straight, cis-gender, and already wealthy.

Internships have gone from a nice resume boost to practically a requirement before entering the job market in only the past couple of years. In 2010 there were more than triple the number of unpaid internship positions posted to Stanford's job board than there were in 2008. Also in 2008 the National Association of Colleges and Employers found 50% of graduating students had held internships, in 1992 that number was only 17%<sup>2</sup>. Something to consider is that the students of 2008 were graduating into a recession, and many were unable to find jobs. Because of this many students went directly to grad school or did unpaid internships. This trend continued even as the economy improved, as new graduates looked to the students before them as models. About half of the 1.5 million internships offered in the United States in 2016 were unpaid<sup>3</sup>. And those are just the ones that were completely unpaid like my own. That number does not include internships that offer "benefits" like "a weekly

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<sup>2</sup> Greenhouse

<sup>3</sup> Kasperkevic

stipend of \$50.” It is impossible to participate in a majority of internships in the United States, especially in the arts, without some form of financial support, be that familial or in the form of loans. This system is ensuring that those who already have access to money, are going to be the ones making more of it once they enter the job market.

In January of 2018 the US Department of Labor rolled out some new regulations relating to internships, regulations that end up protecting companies much more than their unpaid interns. The old standard included a rule which prohibited employers from deriving “immediate advantage from the activities of the intern<sup>4</sup>.” I can understand how this is a bit difficult, it does seem to prevent the intern from being able to gain any hands on experience. However doing away with it completely seems very dangerous. Now interns can be forced to do menial, low level, administrative tasks for no pay, and companies can justify it by saying they are receiving “real world experience in their field.” This sounds like an experience many interns I know had at OSF. A costume intern from my cohort commented, “I learned that they had accepted everyone who applied to be a costume intern. We were often asked to do busy work, which turned into us sewing for days on end, while not getting paid to do so. One intern had to eventually wear a wrist brace because she was sewing so much.” Obviously unpaid internships are a complicated issue from both a legal and moral standpoint, and more work needs to be done on the subject. I think a company like OSF needs to more carefully examine how *all* of their workers are being treated, including the unpaid ones.

Eventually many of the interns in my cohort, especially the ones in the costume department, felt that they couldn’t remain silent any more. They brought up some of their concerns to our FAIR program coordinator, and she in turn sent out an email to department heads in the costume shop. Even after this very little changed for the costume interns.

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<sup>4</sup> Greenfield

Another intern I worked with said, “Something that always deeply confused me was how my supervisors seemed shocked when the young people, who they specifically hired because they were passionate about creating equity in the arts, inevitably began question the sustainability of a program that deems unpaid labor essential to function. A moment that drove this home the hardest was when I was working on a graphic design project for a show in a sweltering back office, of a hammer and sickle, to be printed on t-shirts that would without my knowledge or consent be sold to patrons. The irony of this still makes my head spin.” We were brought together as a cohort because of our vision of equity and change for the future of theatre, and instead we found ourselves at the bottom of an incredibly inequitable and inaccessible system.

Despite everything I said above, there were many high points during my time at OSF. One of which being the friendships I made with the other participants in the FAIR program. There were people from all over the world in FAIR, and we represented a wide range of departments. There were costume designers, assistant directors, lighting designers, people in the literary department, and many more. There were people who had already run their own successful theatre companies, there were people who toured to different countries with shows they personally directed. We ranged in age from 18-41 and all came from different backgrounds and experiences. We would stay up late and talk about the role of theatre in terms of social justice and why each one of us had chosen to create art with our lives. I now have a network of people in Chicago, in New York, and even in China that I know I can look to if I ever need work, or if I ever want to relocate. We often joked that we should all just leave OSF and start our own theatre company, and I honestly think we could have. Even if my time at OSF was not always a great experience I would do all of it over again in a heartbeat because of FAIR. Being around so many driven, like-minded artists inspired me to

do so much more with the work I was producing, and to branch out in terms of what I believed myself to be capable of. I have become a more aware, capable, and better individual through meeting the other members of my FAIR cohort.

I learned an immeasurable amount during my time as an intern at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. I got to see the inner workings of one of the most prominent theatres in the country, I made valuable and lasting connections, and I even learned a bit about myself and my own priorities when it comes to theatre for social change. For example, I want that social change to extend beyond what we see onstage into the greater organization and community itself. I will forever be grateful for this experience, and I can't wait to see where my education and this internship take me in the future. Some words I heard over and over when discussing my experience with other interns who were at OSF at the same time I was were "overworked," "isolated," "valueless," "depressed," and "lucky." After everything mentioned above it is perhaps strange to end this paper feeling lucky. But we were, everyone in our cohort of young white women had the financial freedom and privilege to have this experience. We may have been exploited, and asked to work long hours, but we came out the other end with OSF on our resumes and plenty of connections. All things that will benefit our careers and futures because we were able to afford it, a situation that many young Americans do not find themselves in. As I go on I will remember that it is my privilege and social location (a term I learned while at OSF) that have put me in the very promising spot I am in. And it is up to me to use that power to enact and create the change I want to see in the world.

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