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A DIFFERENT KIND OF INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP BY NATASHA LORCA YANNACAÑEDO

The idea behind the apexart International Fellowship is to break artists out of our comfortable little bubbles of work and expose us to new ideas and cultures. Every fellowship recipient is sent somewhere they have never been before, where they are not familiar with the culture or the language. I definitely felt out of my comfort zone! Most fellowships grant you a scholarship to further research your area of expertise. The purpose of my apexart International Fellowship was in direct opposition to this idea and included cultural immersion and even a form of alienation. I am an actress and was not allowed to engage in my art. Even seeing my art was forbidden, so I did not see any theater in Jerusalem. This fellowship was definitely one of the hardest things I have ever done. First of all, it was brutally lonely for an extrovert like me. I am a true Myers-Briggs Type Indicator extrovert in that I get my energy from other people. So, being alone in a strange country for a month and having to eat most meals alone was hard.

Being separated from my five-month-old baby and husband was also quite difficult. I am an organized person who likes to plan ahead, and a young man in his 20s had complete control over my itinerary for the entire month that I was in Jerusalem. Three to four different activities were required daily, and there were only two days off the entire month. Some activities were quite interesting, and some were downright miserable.

I am a typical New Yorker so the rigorous schedule didn't bother me. However, often I was not given clear instructions on exactly where to be and had no contact number, which was exasperating. There were times where I literally had to wait two hours in a random, uncomfortable location for clearer instructions. My contact person in New York was pro-active and constantly advocated for clearer itineraries; however I often felt a lot of my time was wasted.

Not only did I struggle with unclear instructions, I also was sent to events that made no sense for me. For example, I saw a film in German with Hebrew subtitles! (I don't speak either language.) I attended a final lecture in a series so I was lost regarding the content. I struggled with navigation and got lost many times. The transportation system in Jerusalem makes the MTA look like heaven on earth. The police there usually can't give directions because they are often from other places and don't consider it their job to do so. Since I do not speak Hebrew or Arabic, I often felt like the "ugly American." I usually travel to countries where I speak the language or have some familiarity because I have studied it before I departed. As a new mom, there was no time for this preparation. I felt incredibly frustrated when I could not communicate, especially when I needed to find my way. The claim that "everyone speaks English" was definitely not my experience. Although, it surprised me is that people there often assumed I spoke their language and would frequently approach me for directions.

The first two weeks of my travel blog is filled with me venting about my daily challenges. Posting a daily travel blog was required and I actually loved practicing the discipline of daily writing. It was also quite cathartic when I was frustrated by my "handler." In addition, it enhanced my photo-editing skills as I was only allowed to post 4 pictures daily on the official blog. (I did, however, post all my photos on Facebook.)

In some of my photos I am almost unrecognizable as I am conservatively dressed or have an expression of ambivalence. In some ways, I feel that Jerusalem was wasted on a non-religious person like me because it is such an important place worship for monotheistic religions. In the hot climate of Jerusalem, the issue of modesty was frustrating for me. I lived in a quiet neighborhood with many devoted religious people. I could not wear many of the sundresses I brought because I would get comments



or looks. In order to be left alone, I needed to cover my arms with short or long sleeves and wear dresses that went at least past my knees. When I toured an ultra-conservative neighborhood, a friend there warned me to cover well or I would be spit on. Without getting too controversial, I have issues with women being told what to wear and what roles to play. One of my most interesting meetings was with a deeply religious woman whom shared how conflicted she was about sexism in her religion, especially because she had a daughter.

Naturally, meeting with different people was the best part of the fellowship for me. Jerusalemites have the best hospitality I have ever encountered. I attended a Shabbat dinner and an Iftar dinner (to break the fast during Ramadan), and both families had made everything vegetarian for me! They had never met me before and sacrificed meat for these important religious meals. One family even made everything gluten-free for me since I have Celiac Disease. Trying to find gluten-free food in restaurants was often challenging, especially food that was affordable. I was shocked by how expensive restaurants were. (My fellowship did not cover the cost of meals.) That said, I was blown away by the generosity of time these strangers bestowed upon me. A photographer took me around Palestine, taking me to art shows, The Palestinian Museum, and even gained us access to an exhibit before it opened. One man spent an entire morning taking me on a tour of his neighborhood and telling me stories about his activism and how it impacted his neighborhood. It was inspiring and heartening.

I had incredible access to fascinating people, including museum directors and Holocaust survivors. I cried throughout my time at Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center. I thought it very strange that I did not see one other person cry. At first I felt very nauseous and then faint and then just very sad. I kept remembering every book, poem, and film I had ever experienced about the Holocaust. The pictures of the emaciated people reminded me of the Ethiopian famine. The belongings of the murdered were too much to take in. The Children's Memorial overwhelmed me. I had to leave quickly before really breaking down. I spent about five minutes in a bathroom stall really crying. Interestingly enough, I did not "learn" much that was new. I did not know about the death vans, but most of the other information I had gleaned over my lifetime. I

was reminded that my parents were born during World War II and it was not so very long ago. The atrocities that human beings commit against one another stuns me. I think of Trump and how ugly America has become. Or, revealed its true self to be. I fear for my daughter's future. A mixed-race girl growing up in Trump's intolerant America. While I was there, I struggled with the fact that so many Jerusalemites support Trump and even more so now, considering the recent Tree of Life Massacre.

Thus far, I have not been cognizant of this fellowship directly impacting my acting and directing. However, I am quite a shy person when around people I don't know, and this experience forced me to engage with many strangers. I now find myself being more outgoing with new people. I felt a sense of fulfillment when I volunteered on a farm and two hospitals; I love that volunteering is incorporated into this fellowship experience. The incredible amount of interrogation, scrutiny, and security that I had to go through at both airports gave me new depths of empathy for people that get profiled all the time. In the world of theatrical improv, there is a rule that you must say "yes" to what your partner is offering you, I feel like this fellowship took that concept to an entirely new level. I literally gave my entire life over to an arts organization for an entire month. Letting go is an important concept in the craft of acting, and, while I was in Jerusalem, I had to give myself over to many uncomfortable things, including getting lost and letting someone else dictate my entire itinerary. I do feel a great sense of accomplishment and empowerment for committing to this challenging fellowship and am deeply grateful for the educational experiences it provided.

Link to my travel blog:

<http://apexart-journal.tumblr.com/tagged/natasha-yannacanedo/chrono>





About the Author

As an actress, writer, casting director and director, Natasha Lorca Yannacañedo's work spans independent film, radio, primetime television, and infinite plays. She has a Master of Fine Arts in Acting from the American Conservatory Theater. Professor Yannacañedo is passionate about the craft of acting and public speaking and is an Assistant Professor at Hostos Community College. She is a company member of Harlem Shakespeare Festival and a proud member of AEA and SAG-AFTRA. Professor Yannacañedo is thrilled to be serving as Vice-Chair for the National Playwriting Program for the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival.