

Palmetto High alumna lands Fulbright scholarship

By Adrienne Richardson
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Sarah Rose Graber

Sarah Rose Graber, 30, a Palmetto High graduate, has parlayed years of theater work into a coveted Fulbright Scholarship to study theater in London.

Mama Rose, make way for Sarah Rose Graber.

Grabber has known that theatre is where she wanted to be and what she wanted to study since she was a high school student at Palmetto High School in Pinecrest in 2001. After many accomplishments and experiences, she has earned what theater students consider “the opportunity of a lifetime” — a chance to study theater in the United Kingdom through a Fulbright Student Program and Lusk Memorial Fellowship Program scholarship.

There are only 35 U.S. grantees to the United Kingdom for the 2013-14 season, said Josue Barrera, a Fulbright representative.

Grabber’s rise through the footlights began after high school, when she moved to Chicago to attend Northwestern University, where she earned her bachelor’s degree in theater, along with a minor in art history and a thesis in performance studies. She received an acting certificate from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London which spiked her interest in international theatre.

“I started looking for opportunities to connect with companies that were doing this type of theatre,” said Grabber, 30. “After I researched these companies, I realized that I wouldn’t have enough money. ... I started researching grant opportunities but I saw most of them were for younger people.”

Eventually, Grabber came across the Circumnavigator Grant in 2004, which allowed her to travel the world studying theatre for social change in England, South Africa, Kenya, Western Australia, New South Wales, New Zealand, Argentina and Mauritius. When she returned, she was asked about her interest in applying for a Fulbright scholarship, but she wasn’t yet certain of her direction or ideology. She knew, however, that she wanted to create theatre.

Grabber began working as a professional teaching artist for young people and also directed plays in Chicago at numerous venues and festivals, including Northlight Theatre, Adventure Stage Chicago, Metropolis Performing Arts Center, and Chicago Academy for the Arts and Actor’s Training Center. She has performed with many arts associations, including the Pavement Group, Metropolis Performing Arts Center, Chemically Imbalanced Comedy and Factory Theatre and

worked with horses as a horseback rider and dancer at the Noble Horse Theatre. She recently became a cofounder of Knife and Fork, a company that uses food as a storytelling vehicle, whether it's through body language, cultural connections, eating disorders, or detailing how prisoners on death row eat their last meal. She also teaches private lessons for students with special needs.

That love of theater — the hot stage lights, the energy from a live audience, the creation of a character nightly — led to her decision to apply for a Fulbright Scholarship.

“Sarah is so dedicated to her own craft and development as an artist, she is involved in so many projects here in Chicago and has already traveled the world,” said Tom Arvetis, artistic director of Adventure Stage Chicago and one of the individuals who recommended Graber for a scholarship.

“It is an incredible honor that she was selected above so many candidates, it is amazing but not unexpected. If anybody can do it, it's Sarah,” he said.

Graber is currently working with the National Theatre of Scotland and will soon begin work in Manchester with the Quarantine Theatre, a company that does devising theatre and focuses on the social practice of theatre like community engagement, research and performance. After Manchester, she plans to attend a workshop in London with the Frantic Assembly company to focus on theatre. Frantic trains actors to avoid reliance solely on the scripted word and to develop gestures, movement sequences and to find their way on stage amid video projection and images.

Finally, Graber will work with David Rosenberg, from Shunt Collective in London, on several new pieces including one on rooftops.

In a field that would seem to favor ingénues fresh out of college, Graber's age was not an impediment.

“Fulbright scholars are highly regarded as the best and brightest because it is such a competitive program,” said Barrera. “Age is not really a factor, the program is so broad that people come in as young as a junior in college and some are well into their 50s, depending on where they are in their career.”

After one year in England, Graber plans to return to the states to apply what she has learned overseas.

“One of the things Fulbright prides itself on is creating global exchange. Hopefully I will come back to Chicago and have a tool belt,” Graber said.

But Graber's adventures in London are bittersweet for some in her adopted Chicago, said Arvetis.

“Her life has taken her on so many adventures, spending a year in one place, her life can take her anywhere from here. But, selfishly, I just hope she comes back,” he said. “We'll all miss her.”
