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### **UCF Student Researchers travel the fabled East Coast Road of Tamil Nadu, India**

As part of the second phase of my Fulbright Research Fellowship, I organized a team of UCF Graduate and Undergraduate student researchers to travel to southern India for 4 weeks, arriving in Chennai on May 22nd and departing on June 22nd. The foundations of my research project is based on a style of collaborative film production development called, the Ensemble Production Method (EPM), established by Peter Brook, Bertolt Brecht, Konstantin Stanislavski, Jerzy Grotowski and most recently filmmaker Mike Leigh, among others. The objective of my research, *The Dialectics of Improvisation: Emergence of Story Through Cross-cultural Interaction*, is to focus on outlining a new process of inter-cultural improvisation performance techniques, which expands the existing methods used in EPM story development. The outcomes of the EPM research will be applied in the creation of a feature length narrative film project produced by the student researchers.

Together with my student researchers, we documented the qualities and characteristics of Indian culture and artistic processes that could influence the EPM of narrative film production. Film is viewed as a form of communication that can facilitate the universal exchange of information on a deeper, more humanistic way. The study of diverse cultures has shown to house unique thought processes and rituals that can aid in artistic development. India serves as the perfect location for continued research of EPM techniques, as India is known for its culture of artistic collaboration in connection to film.

Our research methodology was to travel as a group of filmmakers in a van south along the coast of the Bay of Bengal in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu gathering data. The research team arrived in Chennai, one of the centers of the New India and a thriving high-tech hub, where we spent the next 10 days immersing ourselves into the culture before heading south along the fabled and historic East Coast Road as it meandered south along the coast. As we traveled along the East Coast Road we stayed for several days at a time at important culturally locations, such as, the traditional fishing village of Kovalam, the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mamallapuram, and

many other locations before arriving at the picturesque former French colony of Pondicherry, where we stayed for 10 days. At each location we collected data by conducting improvisational scene development workshops using UCF actors, local resident actors and non-actors. We utilized cinematic and improvisational performance techniques to examine the cross-cultural, real and perceived boundaries. Together, the UCF filmmakers and Indian resident collaborators pushed the boundaries of traditional Western ideas of cinematic production methods. This created an opportunity to share in the exploration of India's theatrical techniques and its expressive filmmaking style, as well as, observational studies of Indian society.

The EPM approach to production required rigorous preparatory work by the student actors from UCF. Donald Johnston, UCF Undergraduate Theater Major explains, "The most rewarding experience was creating an in-depth character that really was layered and more complex than most students breaking into film get to portray. It really turned into an experience I got to have twice, once myself in India, and the second as the character". The communal aspect required by the research methodology is something not to be disregarded and played an equal part in the research process. I believe the type of EPM we were exploring will uncover new ways in which micro-or low-budget film productions can interact with communities, and offer in turn engaging and socially relevant narratives.

In addition to our research, the team cultivated professional alliances with the premier film training institutions in South India, M.G.R. Film and Television Institute and L.V. Prasad Film and Television Institute. Both of these institutions expressed their desire to collaborate with UCF on future joint film projects. One project that was discussed was one where each summer a group of 6 UCF Film students and 6 Indian Films students would partner in the making of a short film in India. This cross-cultural collaboration has tremendous artistic potential for both the UCF and Indian students.

When not filming, the students explored the numerous cities or villages we were traveling through and took the opportunity to make connections and interact with the local arts communities, for example, the Egmore Art Theatre, the Russian Cultural Center, the Chennai Film Festival, the Backyard Art Center and the US Consulate-Chennai. All of these organizations expressed the great value in meeting and interacting with the UCF students.

This research trip was a truly life-changing, transformative experience for all of the UCF students. I want to thank all the sponsors at UCF and the Fulbright Scholar Program for their generous support in making this opportunity possible.

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