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PEDAGOGY IN VIETNAMESE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Robert Matthew Wilson, BFA Theatre Performance 2004

Dr. Noreen C. Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, Theatre

Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, Virginia

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ABSTRACT

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Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, Theatre

This thesis is a look at the evolutionary journey of applying dramatic pedagogy in a foreign land. It does not by any means specifically pertain to theatrical elements, but everything herein is a direct reflection on the training I received as a theatre practitioner. The last four years have also molded and defined what it means to be an American theatre student living, experiencing, and working in a land that is in many senses in infancy as a nation.

Chapter 1: Arrival

The clearest memory in my mind was stepping out of the glass doors and into the heat. It was a kind of heat that I had never really experienced. It was a swampy, all encompassing humidity that was somehow alien even to the experience of an August afternoon by the river in Virginia. The feelings I had were unexplainable as well. I knew then and there that I would never forget the way the sweat felt dripping down my brow, and the heavy feeling of lugging a small travel guitar around a damp strap tied to my now useless winter vest.

My first moments in Vietnam were a rush of emotions, bodily reactions, and an utter confusion that could never be recreated in a thousand airport exits. It wasn't as much the weather but the year that had led up to the culmination of this long journey and the start of a new one that is still yet to end. To understand how I felt when I arrived, you would really have to understand the way that I lived and breathed up to that point. Vietnam was not something that happened on a whim, but something that had been building inside of me for a lifetime.

The biggest changes in life often seem like sudden decisions, when in reality we all know that we were preparing for them since the day that we first crawled out of the womb. I don't really like to think of this as conceding to a belief in destiny, because I don't believe in that kind of thing, but for whatever reason things usually happen one

certain way and inevitably there was no way around it in the first place...no matter what we may tell ourselves to meet the end of some good or ill aligned non-destiny.

In a breath, I ended up in Saigon, Vietnam...where I was supposed to have been all along. Honestly, I never even considered going somewhere else. I came close to accepting a position in Guangzhou before and even picked up a Cantonese phrasebook to torture my roommates with. I told people I was considering Ecuador and looked up small anecdotes about hidden mountain towns where foreign teachers are hardly ever placed. But in my heart of hearts it was always Vietnam. I think the other places were more or a less a result of my desperate desire to urgently flee from Richmond, Virginia.

Richmond was the hole that I had fallen to the bottom of nearly a decade before. I had made one feeble attempt at leaving the Tormentor in the spring of 2005. I packed all my bags and threw away everything else that wouldn't fit inside. With everything I owned I tore across Interstate's 80 and 84 on my way to a better situation and a life full of promise. Portland was breathtaking. It was a part of my country that I had never seen but it felt strangely inviting. There were waterfalls, waterways, and watering holes, all surrounded or inhabited by individuals brimming with positive energy and anticipation for the future.

I applied at the local theatre (I don't know what I expected to do, but I wanted to use my degree somehow) and Portland State University. The theatre told me that I was overqualified for any position that they might have. This seemed flattering but in retrospect the applications they took were most likely for janitors, not actors or directors. The university also said that they had no open positions that could match my experience,

which to be completely honest was nil. Standing on a stage a few times in a podunk town and possessing an ambiguous undergraduate degree does not scream “I am ready to work at your reputable university!”

Unscathed, I went through the process of filling out applications for every vacant or not so vacant restaurant position in town. My funds were dwindling but that didn't stop me from pouring countless gallons of PBR and Bush Mills into my often empty stomach. I had some friends that had moved out there earlier and we would meet from time to time and talk about how much better things were out West. It was hard to argue against this sentiment when staring up at a perfect black sky dotted with millions of tiny bright stars. Where else on Earth would someone possibly want to be? A large deal of the romanticism came from the fact that I showed up in late spring and the weather was absolutely golden. Portland is without a doubt one of the most beautiful places in the world, and it takes time to come to the realization that the problem wasn't location all along but the shadow that was following me from one coast to the other.

I took a memorable job in an organic vegetarian restaurant. As a foodie and committed vegan this seemed a bit like utopia. I enjoyed learning the various styles of cooking from the Sikh owners and mastered a mouthwatering dal. I also befriended a Mexican chef and an Idaho native named Crystal. Again, life seemed less complicated.

The good times didn't last long and I eventually lost my job. It was through no fault of my own, but that didn't really change the situation. I slowly found out the nice Sikh owner with two wonderfully pious parents was actually addicted to crack and a bit

of an alcoholic. He was prone to confusion and fits of rage and apparently had developed a strong distrust of...well, everybody.

On the final night when I was washing dishes he commented on what a good job I had done. He stared far off into space and said he honestly couldn't remember why he had fired me. I half smiled and felt a little vindication, but it was fleeting as the doom of pending unemployment welled up in my gut. I slept with the windows open and the cool air helped me heavily slumber despite the suffocating cloud coming down on me.

When I awoke, everything was different. I met Crystal in her coffee shop and ordered lunch. She helped other people and came around to find me picking at my hummus bagel. I ordered another coffee just to buy myself some time and mount the courage to tell her I was moving back to Virginia and couldn't possible move in with her.

I bypassed going to Northern Virginia because I couldn't bear the embarrassment of going home. Even though my family longed for me to return to Virginia the whole time I was gone, I couldn't look at their faces without feeling like I had failed. When I parked the Toyota on Floyd Avenue I could see Stuart and Roy sitting on our porch. Our friend Will was there also. It was as if a single day hadn't passed in the last six months.

I settled back into life in no time. I found a new job and responsibility to keep me focused. It was also around this time that I decided to go back to school. I had talked with my old university mentor recently and it inspired me to consider higher education. Within no time I was at VCU filling out the necessary paperwork to get started in graduate school. I had always been a bit of a word junkie and I decided to delve into

Literature. Still, I stayed true to my roots and opted to work in the Dramatic Literature program offered by Theatre VCU.

I struggled off and on that first year back and at times felt like I wouldn't be able to maintain a normal existence. It didn't help when in the summer of that year I was in a life-changing bike accident. I was t-boned by an oncoming car that ran a stop sign one rainy August night. As I propelled in the air all I could think was that my last thoughts were about not thinking again. Perhaps the strange irony of my pondering is what kept me from dying in the end. I landed head first with a thud. It was difficult for me to walk but the adrenaline left me free of pain and unfortunately reason. I trusted the driver and this came back to haunt me for the next half year as I battled him through the legal system for payment of my astronomical hospital bills.

The greatest toll the accident took on me was not in a physical form but in total mental devastation. I had to endure months of therapy. I could no longer go to work or leave the house for long periods of time. It was as if the world was closing in around me. It didn't help that the days were shortening and the weather was getting colder. My behavior was erratic and I was becoming detached from those around me. It was no longer possible to pretend that everything was alright and those closest to me began to worry a great deal. I lost nearly ten pounds and had to eat handfuls of xanax to make it through a full work day.

The therapy did help and eventually I started to rebound. I spent a lot of that time writing songs and playing music with my cousin. This was the first time in years that creativity came to me out of an honest place, and to this day I still believe those are the

best songs I ever wrote. If I could go back in time and be a few minutes ahead of that drunk driver I still wouldn't do it. That accident had a profound effect on me; it shaped me and hardened me in a way that would have been impossible without the pain and hurt that I went through for those six months. In a lot of ways that accident was the best thing that ever happened to me.

That year I also took some of the best classes that I had had in years. I was thrust into the world of Asian Theatre and saw performances from Japan, Vietnam, and India. I discovered Shadow, Noh, Kabuki, and more. We read histories and philosophies on these art forms and it began to fill me with the wanderlust again and it was then that I first seriously considered going abroad.

I started working on an online TEFL degree almost immediately. I did this in the evenings when the shop was slow and few customers wanted anything to eat. I would go in the back and use the company computer to study lessons and take the adjoining quizzes that followed. From time to time, the owner's punk nephew would come in the back to interrupt me and suck up huge lines of narcotics. I did my best to ignore him and stay centered on the possibilities. That dirty plate he hid away in the space between the air duct and the ceiling was the epitome of everything I had come to hate about Richmond. The plate represented cynicism, narcissism, and unapologetic apathy...I hated that plate with every ounce of my being. I punched the keys frantically, as if that would somehow physically put me further away from the dingy back room of that soon to be forgotten coffee house in the middle of nowhere USA.

Later that year I was enrolled in Experimental Theatre. It would end up being one of the two or three most rewarding courses I have ever taken in my life (the other big standouts were Joe Sampson's Directing course, Marvin Simms Acting Sophomore Year, and Noreen Barnes' Theatre History class). The class had such an eclectic and wonderful mix of artists both young and old. Everyone in the class was there by choice, and absolutely excited to be a part of it...how rare is that? The topics before us were abstract and vast. My mind was opened up to endless ideas and viewpoints and I waited with great anticipation to see what my classmates were working on. The last two pieces that I worked on with John Moss were two of my favorite classroom performances. We were very different people, but for whatever reason we could play off of each other quite well. He had a very good vision of the stage and how things would look before they were even created. I on the other hand always had a knack for improvisation and embodying the spirit of the piece...the end results were to say the least: memorable.

I finished the course and decided that it was time to set up a trip to Vietnam. I hadn't been offered a job, but I knew that if I waited any longer to buy a plane ticket I might actually, physically explode. I was telling people things about the country on an almost daily basis and was probably driving everyone around me to exhaustion. It had become my obsession.

I still don't full know why I had fixated on Vietnam but I am sure that a lot it had to do with the folklore of the country presented in the stories that my Army veteran father had been spouting since my earliest memories. I had committed many of his stories to heart and could retell them with ease. Unlike many people afflicted with guilt and unimaginable scarring from the war, my father was able to describe things without so

much as a wince. He had seen things and experienced things that most people could not bear to read about, but he preferred to talk about the landscapes, culture, sights, smells, and sounds of the enchanting little Asian country that remained tattooed in his brain since the early 70's.

Ironically, right after I bought the ticket I received an email that said "Kindy Job." I had heard a lot of bad stories about people that were tricked into working for illegitimate companies and became stuck in some weird neo-indentured servitude. Even if I was skeptic, I am at heart an optimist, so I gave them the benefit of the doubt. After a few correspondences I landed the job and was all set to work upon arrival in Vietnam (not counting the month of travel time that I factored in ahead of my start date). It was a tremendous relief knowing that I wouldn't have to frantically search for a job. The other thing that excited me was that I was hired not as an English teacher, but as a Music & Movement/Visual Arts teacher for preschool age children.

I had a lot of questions about the job and the living situation in Vietnam, but the company answered most of them and I was able to breathe easy. The biggest thing I worried about was location and if I was going to be removed from society as I knew it. I saw that the job was not in the city center, but actually in a "new town" of sorts at the back end of District 7. I had no idea at the time that this area is arguably the most developed and richest sector in the entire country. I also imagined that I would be teaching all Vietnamese children and that their situation would inevitably fall under "less fortunate." I couldn't have been further from wrong. It would become apparent very quickly that international schools are actual home to some of the wealthiest people I have ever known. The middle and high school tuitions can be more expensive than private

college tuition in the United States. The students are also a mixed bag of expat kids, world travelers, and extremely fortunate locals.

I arrived at the end of January 2008, shortly before Tết holiday. I had made friends with a family in Bình Thạnh District and they offered to put me up until I found a place to stay. I spent the first night in a hotel, but my new friend Dy picked me up the next day and took me to their house. The house was a four story villa down a quiet alley way next to an internet cafe and a smokey coffee shop. My new home was immaculately well kept and there were always hot meals of snacks being served. I was really taken aback by the Vietnamese hospitality. They also gave me my own room and plenty of privacy. The father took a special liking to me because he had always wanted a boy, but ended up with two brainy daughters instead. At the time the language barrier was enormous and I relied on Dy for nearly everything. She would take me out to eat sometimes or help me find little things I needed like electrical adapters or headphones. Even when I wanted to go places in the city when she was busy I would have to call her to talk to my taxi driver.

After a few weeks I moved out on my own. My adopted family was sad to see me go but they were also quite helpful in the transition. The company actually helped me very little and I had to secure a new place to stay on my own. I lived out of a hotel for two weeks while I prepared for my first day of work. The day approached and I started to get quite nervous. I had never taught little kids before in my life and I had no idea how I would do when I was actually thrown in front of them.

Dy took me by the school a few days before I started and I met the Malaysian lady that had hired me. She said that the principal was still away for Chinese New Year, but would return a couple days after I started. She showed me around the school campus, which at the time consisted of two very large villa houses and surrounding gardens. I was thoroughly impressed with facility and surprisingly shy when I met my soon to be co-workers. There were a few teachers from the Philippines and an old expat from Sweden working in the one building where the kids were napping. After that she took me next door and introduced me to the Vietnamese teachers (including my future wife). They stood in a row very politely and smiled while the lady introduced them. As we were leaving someone said something in Vietnamese and they all laughed a lot. I felt like I was in a totally new world and I could hardly wait to start my new job. After nearly a decade in food service it was quite a treat to be going into something more professional.

I savored my final day of freedom by ordering Indian food at Urvashi and watching movies in the hotel. After a hot shower and a few hours of staring at Star TV I decided to turn in. I barely slept that night. People love to use the “first day of school” metaphor, but this took that popular saying to a whole new level for me. Just saying that I was excited would have been a gross understatement.

I was now familiar enough with the area that I could walk to school without a problem. The mornings were always sunny and clear and the ten minute walk was quite refreshing. I came into the school not really knowing what to expect or what was expected of me...it was to be a true trial by fire.

Chapter 2: Teacher Rob

“Two men, one bucket! Two men, one bucket!” “Dig in!” Kellian and Kai Chen, tiny arms pulsing, dragged the heaping bucket of warm water through the open black metal gate that divided the two houses. They were gritting their teeth, sweat on their brows...”I can’t do it!” Kai Chen moaned. “Someone give a hand!” I barked. Quickly, two others ran and grabbed either side of the tub.

“The fire is moving higher, we are going to have to bring in the hoses.” “I need a line of people to bring the main hose through.” Everybody began dashing back and forth, in circles, two and fro...it was a chaotic scene. The urgency was almost overwhelming for the crew. “Just three should do,” I suggested. The crew stopped in their tracks and waited to see who the three would be. Sometimes you have to just tell the little guys exactly what to do. “Phuong, Hung, and Joshua...get the hose.” Phuong drooled and smiled at the glaring sun. He stamped his feet and hopped in place saying his own name over and over again. His brother quickly grabbed his shirt and pulled him across the yard to the hose.

“This is it. We have to do it now or the fire will be too big to stop.” The children were shouting remarks about the fire’s strength and size. We could see it engulfing our preschool wing and beginning to move up to the second story. “NOW!” With all their might they seized the bucket and meekly tipped it onto the side of the building. Though the pour was soft, the energy was strong enough to force the water to rise from the bucket and cover the building from top to bottom. Just then the three boys came crashing

through the gate with the hose. Hung was in front, a look of determination on his face. “I have it, I have it.” Suddenly his movement was halted and he fell back on his butt. Phuong stood in place looking at a dirt patch in the grass...distracted by ants. He was laughing and reaching down to touch them. Hung yelled his brother’s name and he looked up...”oooooooooooooooooh noooooooooooooo!” Classic response for Phuong.

Finally they made it to the house. They pointed the nozzle at the building and waited, but nothing happened. Just a drip, drip, drip. “You forgot to turn it on. Someone run back and turn it on. Hurry, we are making ground,” I commanded. Nearly half the class immediately turned and ran towards the spigot. I don’t know who got their little paw on it first, but somebody grabbed hold and the house gave a gurgle. Within a few seconds water was gushing out of the opening. A small gray piece of electrical tape gave way to the strong flow of water and it sprayed frantically in the air from the middle of the hose’s long green length. It was splashing some of the children and for a minute they forgot the fire and danced in the water. “Quickly...no time to waste!” They snapped back to reality (well sort of) and came to my side. Hung held the hose and was now soaking wet from the waist down. I grabbed the end of the nozzle and stuffed my thumb inside. The blockage caused the water to spray in every direction. The kids were going wild. “We almost...have...it!!!!” Whoosh. With that the fire came to a crackling halt. “We did it men!” The children all cheered and hugged each other. Some of the more manly dudes started high fiving each other. “Job well done everybody, job well done.” I smiled as I looked over their drenched CK uniforms, wet mops, and beaming faces.

As I said, I was hired to be a Music & Movement/Visual Arts teacher. However, it wasn't long before I had morphed the Music & Movement class into a full on Dramatic Arts program. It doesn't take a genius to realize that preschool students are in fact the easiest group to do role play and improvisation with. They eat it up and their imaginations really make everything come to life. We could feel the warmth of the fire that we were fighting, feel the tips of the flames kissing our hands as we tossed the buckets of water. Honestly, these sessions with the kids were the first time I really ever felt anything like that. It may have been my lesson but they were teaching me something too. I was learning how to really feel the energy around me and get totally absorbed in something imaginary.

In the past I have done some roles that I really felt, and I will always remember the feeling they left me with. I once did a bizarre in-class acting performance as the eccentric Antonin Artaud. The research and time I put into it really helped me connect with my character, and it was a genuine experience. It was the closest I ever came to truly being someone else in the moment. Living his voice, gestures, and mannerisms allowed me to feel the physical pain that he suffered on a daily basis. The performance left me shocked and feeling sick to my stomach. I spent the rest of the day trying to recover from it.

There was also the "Portals" series that I worked on with the sculptor Brendan Coyle. Brendan had created this amazing fictional world that we were all transported into and left to be observed by those aware and unaware of the performance. It was 100% improv and 100% surreal. The first performance was crashed by an uninvited actor...he was actually just a student observing, but he soon became the focus of the

piece. The actor was actually a friend of ours that was left out of Brendan's project. He was of course hurt by this, but instead of moping he simply decided to force himself into the presentation. His intrusion caused so many strange turn of events. He was a frightening presence to a tall winged creature, baffling to a lost professor, an annoyance to a wandering futuristic musician, and an enraging entity to myself, the Ghoul. I ended up wrestling him to the ground and we shouted at each other in a nonsensical language.

I knew I was actually angry at Ryan, but for some reason I didn't feel it at all once the performance came to an end. We all sat around and had trouble speaking to one another. The class gave a critique, but I don't remember anything they talked about. The performance moved me; and my friends that participated and I would talk about it for years to come.

The second performance didn't have as profound an effect, but it was fun. It is nearly impossible to recreate something so genuine. That is why in my acting career I have only felt these emotions a very small number of times.

What was the point? Oh, yes. I was feeling something new and exceptional, but not as an actor...as a teacher. This was an incredible moment in time for me. I always wondered what in the world I would do with my background, but finally I felt like it was worth the while. As an actor, I was always hard to categorize. I think that maybe the things I am capable of are better suited for children. Somehow these small people and I can connect on the stage together, and really find some truth in what we are doing.

I went on to do all kinds of different classes with the preschool: Barbershop, Hospital, Olympic Trials...anything fun, you name it, we did it. These classes were held

three times a week with each age group and lasted about 45 minutes. I always introduced the concept ahead of time by reading stories or talking with the older ones. We would look at pictures and they would ask me questions. Once they got the idea of what we were doing, we were really able to create some excellent pieces. In retrospect I really wish I had taped them, but like I said...it's really hard to capture things that seem so perfect. There is no way for us to tape an emotion or a feeling, to record what it was like in your chest, lungs, and heart. Fortunately, we have this wonderful recording device called "a mind" that keeps track of all things of this nature.

The work didn't stop there. We had to do bigger things. I was gaining notoriety within the school as a leader and the higher-ups began to ask me to do the planning for special events and even the summer camp. I helped arrange some smaller programs for "National Costume Day," "Children's Day," and "Halloween." The events went well and I was even nominated to be the Santa Claus at our Christmas celebration.

Though you would think that Saint Nick might trump all other roles, it could not overshadow the ultimate challenge..."Teacher Rob, the Illusionist." During a weekly meeting we had brainstorm for the upcoming Spring Event. I had mentioned that kid's love magic and can be easily amazed. Unbeknownst to me this was my way of volunteering to be the magician in the upcoming show. It was also decided that the teachers would arrange a kind of talent showcase for the kids as well. Each class would work on something special to present and we would make it a kind of variety show. My magic act was to be the big grand finale.

I didn't have many great tricks up my sleeve per se. I had never done a magic trick in my life or at least not intentionally. I am usually the one that is being easily amazed, not the one doing the amazing. I looked up some simple stuff online, and started to practice. I worked out some silly small gags like taking my thumb off (in a quick snap, not the traditional way of removing from one hand to the other), rubber pencil, floating pencil, coin tricks, etc. I could pull all of these off with very little trouble. Sleight of hand is not too difficult when the large majority of your audience hasn't graduated to solid foods yet. But I needed a crowd pleaser, something to send everybody home thinking, some kind of shock and awe. Then, Eureka! It came to me quite suddenly, as most of my ideas often do...take the most despised student in the school and make him disappear!

Selecting the student was a no-brainer. Every school has the one kid that all the teachers talk about, all the students fear, and all the parents know by name...a legend of sorts. In our school it was Kellian Sisovic. Kellian was a five year old hell raiser that found himself in trouble on a daily basis. Honestly, most of his antics were hilarious and the teachers were often put in the difficult position of trying to discipline him while not laughing out loud. He was tall for his age and handsome to a fault. He had dark curly hair, a western face, but distinctly brilliant Asian eyes...a result of interracial marriage between a babyfaced Frenchman and his petit but breathtaking Cambodian wife.

My most distinct memory of his mischief came from my public humiliation in front of his beautiful mother. I took Kellian out to put on his shoes and prepare him to go home, as was the duty of the late shift teacher. Normally I would just smile shyly at his parents and say goodbye without many further formalities, but this day Kellian decided to

engage me by prompting a ridiculous question. “Teacher Rob, look at my mom’s breasts. Aren’t they nice?” She responded quickly to this by murmuring something to him in French. I was so ashamed by even hearing this that I couldn’t even look her in the face. “Go on, touch them.” This was followed by her yanking him up by his arm and forcing on his second shoe in one rapid motion. This fortunately spared me of having to respond. I smiled politely and opened the gate for them to exit.

This should give a pretty good idea of the type of guy I was dealing with. Despite being a bit of a troublemaker, Kellian was also one of the smartest in the school and could deal with logic on a more grown up level. Explaining the scheme to him was quite easy. When I first told him he flashed a mischievous smile and said “you mean...we’re going to trick them??” This seemed to please him a great deal. Well, however you get your kicks...right?

We only practiced once or twice before the day of the big event. The classes all did their so-called talent performances before an unimpressed body of their peers. The talents were mainly choreographed dance numbers to highly inappropriate hip-hop songs (something that takes some getting used to, but is distinctly present in most school performances in Vietnam). Kellian’s group was doing a tambourine dance along to “Smack That” right before the grand finale magic act. This meant that he was wearing hip hop dance attire and a red bandana...it couldn’t have been more perfect for our show.

I started out wowing the crowd with my small numbers and had kids running up trying to take a closer look. Whenever someone would get to close, I would simply hide whatever prop I was using and loudly say “PLEASE!!! STAND BACK!!!” I pulled out

the long burgundy sheet that I had stashed away next to the stone stage that protruded out into the room and acted as a makeshift wall in the play room. We also stored many toys on top of this stage and its presence was virtually unnoticeable, as it had always been there silently playing a part in the design of the Funhouse. I used this corner to my advantage as the offstage area for Kellian to run and hide. I asked one of the Vietnamese teachers to come up and assist me for the trick. I looked into the audience and gave them the question that needed no answering..."who do we want to make disappear???" Without any prompting the answer inevitably came back "KELLIAN!"

Kellian looked like a nervous wreck. It was his first big performance, but he was a brave little guy and I knew he would be fine. He trudged up to the stage and I kept the crowd going with some taunting and general stage banter. I asked for a drum roll and one of the teachers obliged. I pulled my side of the sheet up and asked the assistant to do the same, Kellian ran off to the chosen place while I shouted some magic words. I ripped the sheet back with as much passion and enthusiasm as one can possibly muster at a tot's magic show, and the crowd gasped. It was a great moment. The looks on their little faces were so unforgettable. Everyone started mumbling, and more than a few "wows" were heard. "Who wants to see me bring him back?" I shouted. To my surprise many of them said "not me." This response aroused some laughter amongst the staff and I even saw Kellian grin a little himself.

"Nonetheless, he shall return." This time my assistant and I pulled the sheet taut in unison as I spouted some different magical mumbojumbo. Kellian took his cue and ran back behind the sheet. We simultaneously let the sheet drop as he bowed to the crowd. We were again met by a strong round of applause.

After the event, many of the parents and teachers came up to congratulate me on the magic show. This little magic act demonstrated to me the possibilities in all kinds of performance. It doesn't matter how many people are watching, what the event may be, or even what the goal of the performance is...what really matters is if you can feel some truth in what you are doing. Do you believe what you did was worthy of the space of time that it filled, and do you think it will have some lasting effect on the universe? The answer I arrived at with this magic show was yes, it did matter. This event was something I would surely always remember, and I bet it is something that some of the kids will actually keep in that weird little vault of little kid-dom that we can reach into and pull a flashback from when the time suits us. I also learned that if you put your voice into something, your heart into something, and if you believe in what you are doing, you can give it meaning.

I went on to MC and help plan the graduation ceremony as well. My first year it didn't mean much, but it was all part of building character and learning the ropes. I was performing on a somewhat regular basis and that really sank in by the end of my first school year. I felt like I should have been documenting it in a more clear way, but when I reach for the memories they are all there anyway, so I guess there was no need.

I knew that the second year would bring new challenges, but I didn't realize at the time that it would bring major life changes as well. The following year I would travel the country in its near entirety, learn Vietnamese, get married, and ascend to the principal's chair. When I sum it up like that it all seems unreal. My first year in Vietnam will always hold an incredibly special place in my heart. There will be no way to ever

replicate that time and how I felt back then. I was growing as a performer, strengthening as a speaker, and becoming a real teacher...not just one in name.

No matter how unforgettable the first year may have been, it couldn't hold a candle to year number two...

Chapter 3: Journey

Two themed summer camp blocks were behind me and a third one was fast approaching...this seemed like the best opportunity to take some time for rest and relaxation before the start of the fall term. I had only planned the first two blocks, so the school was happy to oblige my two week vacation request. I had been in Vietnam for six months but had barely seen any area outside of Sài Gòn...though I did have a short venture into Cambodia and Thailand back in the spring.

I made my arrangements and set up a departure date. Besides the work request, I also needed to clear things with my Vietnamese tutor. My tutor was a 22 year old HCM native that worked as an assistant in the childcare group at my school. Her parents were divorced and she lived in a small house with her mom, aunt, sister, and best friend.

Her house was nearby the school, so every day I would drive Trang home and then she would teach me Vietnamese for about two hours a night. She had to teach me while simultaneously tutoring young children in literature, math, and science. After I finished studying her aunt would prepare special vegetarian food for me and we would all eat together. I had really come to enjoy the lessons and also the time I got to spend with the family. It definitely helped to fill the void I felt being away from home.

Aside from the companionship, I was actually learning quite a lot too. I could speak conversational, day to day Vietnamese after only a few months. The new language ability was no small feat, seeing that many foreigners who had been there more than a decade could only say the standard *trời ơi*. At this time there weren't all that many

westerners in District 7 anyway, and it would always impress people if you were able to communicate. In retrospect my language was below elementary, but it was nice to at least be able to ask for some things when I went out and to understand pricing.

So, where was I? Ah, yes...I was preparing for my big trip around Vietnam. Trang was excited for me and gave me information about the various places that I could visit. Like Dy before, it was tremendously helpful to have a local friend to advise me and give useful tips.

I mapped things out and had my trip planned well in advance. In my naive mind it would be quite feasible to travel from Sài Gòn to Hà Nội and back in a matter of two weeks. I had been on some rough roads in Central America and thought I had a pretty good idea of how long travel takes in the third world. Besides, I thought the roads in Vietnam really didn't look that bad. The apparently inviting appearance of the Vietnamese highway system from Sài Gòn in no way prepared me for the Vietnamese traffic conundrum. I forgot to factor in the actual design of the roadways, the drastically different conditions in the highlands, and the ever looming threat of police that doesn't seem to exist on the Pacific-Caribbean Highway in Costa Rica. I also forgot to explore the idea that I may want to actually slow down and enjoy some of the places that I was traveling through.

When the day finally came I boarded the bus in District 1 and cracked open my Rough Guide to Vietnam. I flipped the pages to the Central Highlands chapter...yes, "Đà Lạt and Around." The bus crept slowly out of the city, but once we reached the open road our speed began to increase. I had on my IPOD, book in hand...totally enjoying

life. It was the wet season, but this year had not been all that harsh on us. The sky was crystal clear the day I left, and stayed that way for the majority of my trip. I put my forehead against the window and dozed off.

Dà Lạt is a quaint little colonial mountain town. It is the largest city in the central highlands, but most cities in Vietnam are surprisingly underwhelming. The sky was full of puffy white clouds and the landscape was covered with large pine trees...not exactly what you would expect when thinking of tropical Vietnam. It was nice to be outside of the city and to breathe some fresh air.

The bus pulled into a small station and we all exited without much fanfare. I only had on a backpack, so there was no need to wait around while the luggage was doled out. I walked a few steps from the bus and was immediately approached by a half dozen taxi drivers and motorbike operators. I opted for the motorbike and negotiated the price in Vietnamese. This may have saved me a couple thousand dong, but I'm sure I was still getting ripped off at this point.

My stay in Dà Lạt was cozy, but short lived. I had a rustic but simple hotel room that let in just the right amount of cool air. There was a vegetarian noodle shop directly across from where I stayed, so finding meals was not really a problem. I chatted with the polite daughter of the owner and she gave me some information about things to see in the city. I saw those things, and then I left. Not much to it.

The mountains were a nice way to start the vacation, but my next stop was the one that I was really looking forward to. I had heard a lot about Nha Trang. This was supposed to be Vietnam's most renowned beach, and home to that year's Miss Universe

pageant (I missed it by two weeks). Besides white sand beaches, lively water parks, and towering Cham monuments, Nha Trang was supposed to have the best nightlife outside of Sài Gòn.

The trip there was a good example of the unexpected poor traffic conditions. The road was virtually nonexistent about an hour south of Đà Lạt and the pavement began to morph into a long muddy snake winding down the mountainside. I have to admit that the scenery was absolutely astounding. I stayed awake the entire trip and thoroughly enjoyed our coffee break at the midway point.

Once we got off the dirt road things began to pick up again. The mountain effortlessly turned into sand dunes spotted with cacti and small lizard holes. The bus was going in waving semicircles like you would see in an American car advertisement sans Vietnamese desert scenery. After a few hours of the same thing we began to see an unimpressive skyline appearing in the distance. It is somewhat shocking how Vietnamese housing changes from shack to city dwelling in a matter of a hundred yards or less.

I was anxious to get off the bus, but we pattered around small street after small street. Nha Trang didn't look nearly as impressive as I had imagined. Things improved when we cruised by the beachfront. The beach was without argument one of the finest I had seen. There were not nearly as many people as I had expected either, so that was a good thing. I was so busy peering out the window that I didn't even realize we had come to a stop. The bus station was surprisingly just opposite of the ocean. I stood up and stretched as I waited for the full bus to empty out.

We were of course greeted by throngs of overzealous taxi/motorbike drivers. I figured since I was already at the beach that I might as well hoof it. I had drivers follow next to me for half a block trying to convince me to change my mind. I decided to use the “I don’t hear you approach” and kept my eyes straight ahead. The touts finally gave up and backed off as I reached what appeared to be the main street. I tucked down the first side road I came to and walked into the Orchid Hotel. I got a mid-range room and retired to take a shower and refresh.

I spent the rest of the day walking around the beach and taking pictures. I jumped in for a short time and had a nice afternoon swim. That evening I enjoyed some Mexican food for the first time in Vietnam and decided to go for a stroll along the waterfront. I hadn’t gone far from the main area of town when a girl stopped me with an excuse me, can you help me with something? I walked up to her shop and she asked me if I could explain a note that someone had written to her in English. I was kind of surprised at the request because her English seemed to be quite good anyway. The letter was actually quite personal and was written by an Australian gentleman explaining that he missed her but wouldn’t be coming back. I probably should have questioned if this was a scam of some kind, but my good nature led me to sit with her a while and explain the content. I was able to pepper in some Vietnamese when she was confused and this helped to win me some points. She offered to take me around that night if I was free, so I agreed to meet her back at the shop around 8pm.

As agreed, I met my new friend at 8 o’clock and waited for her to close down the store she was working at. She was a pretty girl and appeared to be around my age or maybe slightly older. We walked on foot to a nearby ocean side restaurant and had some

cocktails and chatted about nothing in particular. She asked me all the standard questions for Vietnam: where are you from? How old are you? What do you do? Are you married? What is your salary? I answered all of them politely and asked a few of my own. She wasn't from Nha Trang, but from a small town in the Mekong Delta.

She told me she wanted to take me somewhere more Vietnamese, so we left that place and got in a taxi. She told the driver where to go and asked me if I liked dancing...I said that I didn't care for it much, but I was open to whatever. The taxi cruised down the main street and away from the bright lights. A small part of me actually started to feel nervous about where we might be going. I didn't know this person. What if she took me to some desolate place and group of men decided to take me for whatever I had and throw me into the sea? I tried to focus on more positive thoughts and suddenly some signs of life started to reappear. We were apparently just going into the less touristy area of town. The car stopped and I paid the taxi fare. The club we stood in front of was noisy and had hordes of locals rolling in and out of the door. Even from outside the music was deafening.

We went inside and ordered some drinks. She had some friends there and they chatted together while I just stirred ice and observed the madness around me. We didn't stay all that long, but she would shoot me reassuring smiles and also to check and see if I was having a good time or not. I would later find out that it is extremely important to Vietnamese hosts that you are enjoying yourself and don't feel sad. After a while she asked if we should go. Back on the street we hailed a taxi and she asked me where I was staying. She dropped me off at the hotel and gave me her number and told me to stop by the shop again the next day. I smiled and thanked her for a good time and gave her some

money for the ride home. She seemed nice, but I was a man on a mission and didn't have time to waste another day on smoky nightclubs and loud techno music. Also, at this point I was pretty much already in love with my tutor and felt guilty about going out with other girls. From the hotel lobby I was able to book tickets on a night bus for the next day up to Hoi An. I went to my room and settled in bed with the sound of waves lightly crashing outside of the open window.

I was up early and ate a light breakfast near the hotel. I picked through my book a little bit trying to get prepared mentally for the next town. I heard that the ride was a bit of a long haul, but I had booked a sleeper bus and planned to spend most of the trip with my eyes closed. I wandered around the town some more and stopped by a used book shop. The books were just printed copies of the same generic titles. I settled on some travel adventure short stories from the people at Lonely Planet. Really, I just needed something to pass the time...not necessarily to enjoy.

The people at the hotel were nice enough to let me hold onto the room past checkout since they weren't heavily booked. I decided to spend the last few hours in the ocean enjoying the warm water and calm waves. I splashed around for the better part of three hours and then headed back to my room. I took a hot shower, made sure my bag was packed, and snuck out for some dinner before heading to the bus station. I made it to the station early and got on as soon as they allowed us up.

I was surprised to be stopped at the door and asked to remove my flip flops. I took them off and placed them inside the plastic bag that the attendant handed me. I found my seat and pulled myself up to the top level. It was a little unpleasant to discover

that sleeper bus seats do not have a reclining option...you have one choice: horizontal. I flopped down and flipped open the book. It was already dark outside, but I figured that the light would be on until after 9. This assumption was quickly proved wrong as the bus pulled out of the station and all the lights were shut off.

I also discovered the bus did indeed have a toilet, but the door was padlocked shut, and as with most things Vietnam, no explanation was given. To add injury to insult, they threw on some terrible Vietnamese language DVD (why they do this on tourist buses I will never understand) and cranked the volume as loud as it could go. I tried in vain to read my book but eventually gave up and stared out the window. Sightseeing at night time on a barren highway isn't really a great way to pass the hours, so I eventually just shut my eyes and tried to sleep.

Sleep didn't really come, but we did make a few pit stops. Sometime around 2am I was able to down a few lukewarm beers in a roadside stall in hopes that it would put me to sleep. The trick worked, I was out like a light within twenty minutes.

When I opened my eyes again it was light outside. I could see lush green meadows, flowers, and muddy ponds on both sides of the bus. Once again the environment had taken on a different form and offered a new kind of excitement. Vietnam is not a very large country, but the incredible changes between regions are really something to behold.

It was still early morning when we reached Hội An town. It was a lot smaller than I had imagined, but it really gave off that ancient aura that was advertised in the guidebook. There were impressive ruins just outside the town and loads of old stone

structures within the city limits. The bus station was less amazing and far more modern than the other surroundings. I thought since I had succeeded with walking in Nha Trang that I would just try my luck again on foot. I tried close to a half dozen hotels before I realized that there is such a thing as being too early in Vietnam. No place would offer me a room without paying an extra day's fee because the check in was before noon. I opted to skip out on this obvious rip off scheme by grabbing breakfast and a coffee.

I walked a few blocks down into old town towards the river and came across a Com Chay shack. They had a decent selection of fake meats and vegetables, but I opted for a bowl of vegetarian Bún Riêu. The food was decent and the people were friendly and didn't bother me too much. I paid the tab and walked just a few houses down to a coffee shop to kill the next two hours. I had some coffee, orange juice, and about six glasses of the complimentary green tea. I was nearly finished with my book, but I decided to save the rest for the beach and went back to the outskirts to look for cheap lodging.

The hotel I chose was not really memorable and looked almost exactly the same as all the other places in the immediate area. I showered and took a short nap with the balcony doors wide open. The air was breezy and cool inside my room, but outside the sun was starting to crank up to the standard tropical heat. Unfortunately, I hadn't really prepared myself for how powerful the sun can be in the center of Vietnam and I went out in short sleeves and shorts.

My clothes were just mistake number one. I also didn't wear a hat or sunscreen or take public transportation. I had no real idea of how close or far the beach might be

from my hotel, but I decided to man up and walk all the way there. This decision proved to be a really stupid choice on my part. The walk took more than an hour and a half and I was thoroughly exhausted by the half way point. I had sweated gallons of moisture but hadn't thought to bring any water. Then like a beacon of hope I saw a sign in English from the roadside that said Vegan Food and had an arrow pointing down a path toward the water. The restaurant ended up being a gem. I ate there every day I stayed in Hoi An. The beach was only a short walk after that and it felt like nothing after the long trip prior to lunch.

I took a bike taxi back to the hotel to save time. I cleaned up and strolled through town. I was very pleased to find that they ban motorbike traffic in the evenings as a way of preserving the old time atmosphere. Hoi An is world famous for silk, so I stopped off and ordered some dresses for Trang. They said they would be ready in one day, so I continued on to the riverside. There were a lot of nice shops and restaurants on both sides of the river and I picked one on the far side for my evening meal.

I watched some musicians set up on a stage across the water and when I finished I moseyed over to have a listen. The traditional music was a backdrop for lantern lighting that was happening by the river. I later found out that this was the Tết Trung Thu celebration. The actual mid-autumn day was still weeks away, but I guess they run the programs for foreigners to observe a little bit longer in tourist areas like this. I enjoyed the music and watched the lanterns get placed in the river. It was a delightful scene and a nice bit of Vietnamese culture to soak up on my first real trip around the country.

On the way back to the hotel I stopped off at an old jewelry store. Trang had been here recently with her friend and saw a silver bracelet that she really wanted. She asked me if I could pick it up for her and she would pay me back. The bracelet in question was a wrap around that had two carved elephant heads on each end. They had several different options, but fortunately she had sent me a photo by email. I showed them the print out and they got the one I wanted from the showcase. I bought the one she liked and an additional one just as a surprise gift. I had no intention of letting her pay for either one, so she could consider them both as presents.

The next stop was just north to Đà Nẵng. I decided to take a bike taxi since the trip was only supposed to be about forty-five minutes by road. This ended up being a great decision. The road was long and winding but went over the remarkable Hải Vân Pass. From the top of the road you could look down and see the Pacific Ocean lapping up against the rocks, long meandering white sand beaches, and the puffs from the huff of the Reunification Express charging down the coastline. My driver stopped at a really nice scenic view and we bought some ice coffees and took pictures. I was a little on the tired side but didn't feel all that bad. We continued down the other side of the mountain and up the short empty stretch of highway to the city.

Đà Nẵng was easily the most metropolitan area I had seen outside of HCM, but it was far from impressive. It was a rare cloudy day and I wasn't feeling so hot by the time we stopped in the city center. I didn't really know what to do so I asked for him to just drop me off and I would walk around looking for the beach. I asked some people how to get to China Beach, but no one understood what I was talking about (I would later find out that the Vietnamese do not call this China Beach and would probably have been

insulted if they knew where I was trying to go). I eventually picked a drab old colonial hotel by the Bạch Đằng River. The room was massive but smelled bad and had a haunted feeling about it. I flipped around the television channels for a bit and decided to go out and see what the city had to offer.

Walking around the city didn't really help my opinion of it. I couldn't find a beach any where nearby and there was nothing in particular to see or explore. I ate a meager lunch and realized that I just didn't feel good any more. I found an indoor pool and went swimming for a small fee. I had no change of clothes, so after I finished I had to walk back to the hotel in damp shorts and slippery shoes. I took a quick shower and plummeted into bed, I was hot and didn't feel much like doing anything. I was actually so miserable I could barely sleep. I watched TV and went outside for a short walk. I didn't feel any better, so I bought a cold Coke and went back to the room. I left the lights on and passed out. I woke up at various intervals in the night feeling rather disoriented. I somehow managed to make it to the next morning without dying and checked out as early as I could get my things together.

I couldn't bear the idea of riding on a bus at that time, so I flagged down a taxi and asked the driver to take me north to Huế. He was happy to oblige since it meant an enormous cab fare directly in his pocket. I couldn't have cared less about the price. I closed my eyes in the backseat and ignored the now seemingly bland scenery as we made our way out of Đà Nẵng.

I awoke in a new town and felt slightly refreshed, but not much better. I had the taxi driver drop me on the main road by the Perfume River and made my way down the

first street I came to. There were two hotels opposite each other on this road, so I picked the one that had the visible pool. I chatted with the reception in Vietnamese and was pleasantly surprised to find that I could follow their difficult Huế accent...chalk it up to the fever. I relaxed in the room for a bit, took a dip in the pool, and then had a nap. In the evening I went and caught an evening water puppet show. I had seen this once before in HCM, but it was more exciting to see it here in the royal theatre. The crowd was so small that they nearly canceled the event. The stories were basically the same as what I had seen before and I could more or less follow the plots even though the language was hard to grasp through the crackling PA system.

The next day I checked out the Imperial City down by the river. Huế was originally the capital of Vietnam during the Imperial days of the country, and the Imperial City was one of the crowning achievements of that era. I actually really enjoyed the historical markers and read most of the descriptions scattered around the grounds. I took a lot of pictures and decided that I had gotten my fill of Huế. It is a beautiful city, but I was a bit on the ill side and decided that I wanted to head back south. My original plan was to continue on to Vinh and eventually to Hà Nội but I figured I could save it for the next go round. That evening I took a taxi back to Hội An...about 3 hours from where I was but again, taking the bus seemed completely impossible to my tired body and mind.

Hội An this time around wasn't nearly as pleasant. I was completely out of my mind by this point and felt feverish. All I could think about was how to get back to HCM and if I would even make it that far. I was red as a lobster and my forehead was damp no matter what the temperature in the room was set to. I had a small lunch at my café and then took a rest the remainder of the afternoon. In the evening I got on a night bus and

continued on to Nha Trang. The hours flew by as I struggled in and out of a heavy sleep. The whole thing felt like a dream at this point. I could no longer hold a regular conversation and I was consuming 4-5 liters of water a day. I was forced to stay overnight in Nha Trang but I had the Orchid arrange a plane ticket for the following morning to take me back to HCM.

I nearly overslept the next day and made it onto the street a mere hour before my departure time. I also ignorantly thought that the airport would be a short taxi ride away from the hotel. When I asked someone how long it takes to get there I was absolutely shocked. They said it would take an hour or more on a good day. I flagged down the first bike taxi I could find and offered him \$20 US dollars if he could get me to the airport in forty minutes. We made it there in thirty...counting the five minutes it took to go back and pick up the helmet that flew off my head.

Fortunately there are very few formalities about boarding a plane in a domestic Vietnamese airport. They took away a pair of scissors I had in my bathroom bag and I was on the flight without any further incident. The travel time was next to nil and we were descending into Tân Sơn Nhất almost as soon as we had reached the maximum altitude.

I was so happy to be home and crashed face down on my mattress. I called work to let them know I needed a couple extra days off, flipped on the TV, and turned on the air. I texted Trang later to say hello and tell her I got some gifts for her and the family. I made plans to see her the next day after a visit to the French hospital.

The doctor ran a number of tests on me and I feared the worst. This was surely it I thought...I had never felt so utterly exhausted in all of my life. I had accidentally swallowed some kind of weird microscopic bug and now I was going to die. I knew I shouldn't have eaten the ice...why didn't I just listen to the guide book. The verdict came back: heatstroke. They gave me some vitamins and told me to be more careful in the sun. I still don't know if this was the right diagnosis, but it at least eased my mind. I took the Vitamin C tablets for about a week and after that I was golden. I was back to work a few days later and ready to start the new school year.

Chapter 4: Transition

The new academic year showed up quicker than I could have imagined. The school had a short training week and then it was time for the kids to come back. Our school followed a Vietnamese calendar, so there are very few breaks...something like four days and the Lunar New Year.

We had a major shake-up within the hierarchy of the school as well; during the summer break the principal announced that she was leaving the company. There had been a bit of an internal struggle between the HR (the title doesn't sum up the position...it was more like branch director) and the very popular principal. In the end the management in Malaysia put their faith in the HR lady and that was it for Ms. May. The HR lady, Wang, was quite smart but not really suited to be a principal...nevertheless she was thrown into the position and that was that.

They also decided that we would all change age levels and mix things up a little bit more. I had moved from the Pre-Nursery group (2-3 year olds) to Nursery (3-4 year olds). The school is set up so that a person will act as a homeroom teacher for one group and a subject teacher for the entire student body. Unfortunately, the other Westerner had left and I was pushed in as English teacher. We were more or less short one main subject teacher, so the arts were divided up. I was able to hold onto my Music and Movement classes, but Visual Art was split up between Vietnamese assistant teachers. Honestly, the change was all for the best. I got the chance to improve and expand my teaching abilities while still doing the one thing I wanted to do the most...teach dramatic arts.

I was happy to continue my role playing classes, but I also started doing more with music. I would bring in my travel guitar that Roy bought me before I left and play songs with the kids. I even started to work on some basic things with them like trying to pick on a string with some consistency or trying to keep some kind of steady rhythm by clapping hands along with the playing. The music lessons were also a big hit among the kids and they really seemed to dive in head first. It is strange how when people are young they are so easy to overcome shyness...what is it about time that introverts us?

After a few months an Australian teacher joined us and I was able to pick up some more M&M classes. She preferred to teach more traditional subjects, so this gave me a good opportunity to focus more on what I wanted to do.

My enthusiasm started to rub off on the other teachers, and we convinced the boss to let us redesign the upstairs room and make it more “arts” friendly. It was already supposed to be used for the M&M and Art, but we made the environment more welcoming and it became one of the highlights in our school tour. We had a lot of expensive musical equipment that had been imported from Malaysia and even a puppet theater. I used the theater to work on some shows for the kids later. They liked to watch puppet shows even more than they liked to hear stories. I worked on a variety of different voices and started to gain an appreciation for this art form as well. Maybe I could have some kind of future in voiceovers?

It didn't take long for the Australian to grow tired with the company. Honestly, I had noticed that our company was not really a champion of worker's rights and not many people stayed long. Foreign teachers usually only lasted a month or two and Vietnamese

could last anywhere from a few days to a year. There were the rare few that stayed on, and that was something that bonded us together.

One of those that stayed on was Trang. Trang was made one of my assistants. As with the previous year, I was the homeroom teacher for the largest group, so it was divided into two separate classes. The class I had with Trang will go down in history as one of the most rambunctious and mischievous collections of little boys the world has ever seen. The class only had one girl in the beginning, but the boys were a riot. I have to say that I probably enjoyed that class more than any class I had taught previously or since. I know it was stressful, but it was also the thing that sealed the bond between Trang and I.

After the Australian left I had to secede some of my M&M classes. It wasn't as bad as it sounds, because the younger groups were starting to become a bit much for my day to day mental health.

I put a great deal of effort into my English teaching as well. I think that I really learned a lot that year about working with preschool age children. It is definitely not something that everyone can do, but some of us were actually made for it. I have since taught many age groups and none of them have matched the feelings I had from those small kids in CreativeKids. I saw many of them develop in significant ways and others grew like weeds in front of my eyes.

I had an autistic boy in my class that year as well. He was a chubby little guy with a Taiwanese dad and Vietnamese mom. He was a delightful person and smart as a whip. When he first came to the school he spoke mostly in Chinese but could understand

Vietnamese as well. As with many autistic children, he had a great deal of difficulty socializing with others. He also had a bad habit of biting, pushing, or squeezing people near him. He would often grab a teacher's elbow and pinch. I think that a lot this behavior stemmed from his difficulty communicating with others and the fact that his old Vietnamese school was a bit abusive when disciplining the kids. It sounds unbelievable in this day and age, but for some reason the Vietnamese are still quick to use the hand in both public and private schools.

After a few months Hao Hao had made tremendous progress. I had really taken to him and made sure to make him feel special and help him to interact with other kids. His condition was quite mild and he made a lot of progress socially. He started to make friends and speak without too much coaxing. He also improved a lot with eye contact and being able to express his feelings.

We used to do games where the kids would compete in English language ability. I did a combination of exercises in speaking, writing, and to a lesser extent reading. The kids were very young, but they were an incredibly bright group. The class champion was a Korean named Gaon. He was an undeniably brilliant kid, but was totally pampered. Gaon's attitude was a reflection of his treatment at home, and he was not very respectful or nice with his classmates and teachers. It didn't take long and we noticed that Hao Hao was starting to catch up with him in a lot of areas. Previously, Gaon was always the clear winner in our weekly competitions but young Hao Hao was making strides!

The day inevitably came where Hao Hao was the champion. It was a funny scene but kind of sad too. Gaon was crushed. It took me the rest of the day to bring his spirits

back up. I also realized that having competitions at this age is probably not the best idea. I always made sure to praise all of the kids, but they were well aware of the competitive nature. When I talked to Hao Hao's mom about the incident she said that he had been training at home. His weakness was always the writing portion, and his mom said that he would come home every evening and take out a pad to write in. He also started learning to read in English, a language he barely knew four months before. He was three years old.

Meeting Hao Hao was a big turning point in my life too. I had never met anyone like him and I was so completely blown away by his ability and the massive personality he had for such a little person. If I ever have a kid, I hope he is just like him.

Trang and I connected a lot over the students too. We enjoyed them together on a daily basis and spent endless hours talking about them outside of school. In the late fall I asked her to come to my apartment one afternoon. I was living in a Vietnamese one room flop at this point. I had no hot water, no furnishings, no fan or air, and lived amongst workers and students in the middle of a very poor district. She was kind of nervous about what everyone would think with her and I being in the room alone, so I left the door cracked to make her feel more comfortable. I gave her a ring and told her I didn't want to be with anyone else and that she didn't have to promise to marry me but to at least consider it. It kind of shocked her and she didn't say much. I was not sure if she had accepted my proposal or not, but my whole point was to not be pushy...so I didn't wait for a response. My mind was made up and it didn't matter how long it would take to get her.

We started the paperwork to get married shortly thereafter. Trang is not very close with her family outside of the three women in her house, and I had no one in Vietnam, so we decided to forgo a traditional wedding. In retrospect, it was really the best decision for us at the time. We had rushed into the marriage and the wedding would have been too much. Vietnamese weddings are quite the scene anyway...champagne fountains, karaoke, endless courses of exotic meats...not really our thing.

The paperwork was a god-awful nightmare. It took us almost two months after filing before everything was finally settled. The way things work over here is that if you don't pay a bribe, you better be prepared to wait half an eternity for whatever you want. Trang is by no means a nationalist and absolutely refused to budge on this issue. I suggested more than once just taking the shortcut, but she wasn't having any of that. Her convictions were admirable to say the least. This stamp was wrong, that signature was in the wrong place, I wasn't wearing the right kind of shirt, and somehow it still eventually got done. We celebrated with two large bottles of cold red wine, yes they drink it cold, and after that we were officially attached.

My contract at work was also coming to an end and I needed to figure out what I wanted to do. I knew that I couldn't stay and work for the same salary that I was making. The job was a lot of fun and I loved the staff there, but now I was married and had to start thinking about the future. I was offered a laughable increase as a teacher and refused it outright. It was becoming obvious that Wang wanted to return to her old position and was looking for a way out, this is what led to her offering me the principal's job. The owners in Malaysia were fully behind it for two reasons: 1) They would get a white

principal at cheap price, and 2) I had become increasingly popular with parents and kids. It seemed to be the logical thing to do.

I accepted the principal's job but agreed to finish the year training and continuing on as a teacher. Trang was meanwhile promoted to full-time office administrator, a job that she had been doing as a substitute for the last few months anyway. Even after our school year finished, we would be working closely together. Trang was not particularly thrilled with me taking the principal's job, but I figured she would warm to it after a while.

For the end of the school year I had to come up with a special end of the year performance for the kids to present at graduation. I decided that I would showcase all of the musical work that we had been doing that year. The idea was to come up with some original songs and put them together with choreographed actions. This concept is taking the popular route of dance and music but throwing in a new twist that the audience wouldn't be so used to.

Getting the songs together was quite easy and one of the things I enjoyed the most about the whole process. I hadn't really been involved in any kind of songwriting since Beer Wagon dissolved in 2007. This was a far cry from the grind-country that I was churning out in that outfit but it was definitely a chance to use my musical creativity. I also became aware that I have a real knack for writing children's songs.

We started out by doing a game of MadLibs. I would give the kids a simple noun or verb topic to choose from and they would all shout out answers. We compiled the most popular words and then I filled in the rest of the blanks with things that I knew they

would like. The results were phenomenal. We had three songs to present: “My Bike,” “Tomato Soup,” and my favorite, “On The Farm.” The kids would go wild for the songs too. The practices reminded me of a G rated version of my band’s practices at home. Kids are actually easier bandmates to work with because they agree to almost everything. Things seemed ready to go for the graduation ceremony.

The other class was actually more a piece of experimental theatre. Trang helped a lot with the concepts and eventually did all the makeup on the day of the performance. I made a simpler song for this group that had the same refrain over and over with the kids doing a stage action to a recording of their own voice.

The children each picked an animal that they connected with, and I assigned a few that I thought were appropriate. We recorded all of them doing the spoken word with a hand held recorder and taught them some simple stage actions. The song simply went “Im’a (animal name), Im’a (animal name) and I go like this (sound/extra action).” It ended up being a lot more work than it sounds like.

I helped book the venue for our graduation, one of my first large scale actions as principal. The place of choice was the infamous Continental Hotel, Graham Greene’s short-lived home while writing “the Quiet American.” The Hotel had a nice little stage area inside for small receptions and an immaculate garden out back for banquet events. Our gig was fully catered, so everything outside looked right nice.

The students were obviously very nervous and many of them were fussy. Any time you have an event where the parents and kids come together you are in for trouble. It is murder trying to separate some small children from their parents, especially in an

unfamiliar environment. I was thankfully not assigned a difficult task. I sat at the door greeted families and checked off names as they arrived.

Once everyone was settled inside it was time to go backstage and get the kids ready for the performance. The dressing room was chaotic. The youngest children were going berserk, wailing, flailing, and rolling every which way. My kids were more or less ok, but Trang was having a hard time getting all of their faces painted to look like the animals they were playing. Her artistry was fantastic, but I was scared that we would run short of time. After a brief look around I went back out to take my now traditional place as MC. I welcomed everybody and introduced special guests. These formalities actually bought us some time and I was thankful that the guest speaker was a bit slow in his delivery.

The youngest kids went first and paraded around wearing cute costumes. Most of them cried and others stared blankly into space, one or two left the stage with arms pointed at their seated parents...teacher in tow. The younger children don't really need to deliver anything amazing, just stand there and look sweet is good enough.

My music class was next. I thought that it would be a breeze since they seemed to really have everything down when we practiced the day before. I couldn't have been more wrong. It was an absolute disaster. There was an actual student revolt and many of them chickened out, others just refused to sing. It was a rough performance but we got through it. A few of the reliable students helped to redeem us somewhat, but overall it was a bit of a nightmare.

I continued to introduce the other acts while my second class prepared. I was very nervous for them. I could see them waiting in the wings and they were already starting to misbehave. Hao Hao was writhing in Trang's arms...for whatever reason he was terribly upset. I hadn't seen him cry in a while, but he was really letting it go.

The Senior Kindergarten finished and I announced my class as the next act. I went in front of the stage and kneeled down to give them some direction. It ended up being the crowning achievement of the day. Even Hao Hao came through and did a good job. I was so proud of them and it was pleasing to see our somewhat abstract concept come to fruition.

Once the skits were finished, we all moved outside for some refreshments and small talk with the parents. I chatted with everyone that I knew and it became very apparent that the school was about to face some major challenges.

I left out the tiny detail that we had a student flat-line at a pool outing. We were so fortunate that one of the other student's mothers was a doctor. The lady jumped in and saved a boy that had nearly drowned from gross negligence. It was an upsetting event for everyone but obviously the fault of the outgoing principal...this did not help already wavering parent opinions of her.

The damage was apparently done and the happy day turned into a grim premonition. I had a feeling this was going to happen, but I didn't expect quite so many people to be leaving. The school was effectively emptying out by summer. This meant that I would have a really steep mountain to climb in the following year. I had wanted a challenge, well I most certainly had one at that point.

Chapter 5: Administration

There was less fun to be had that summer. I was busy running summer camps that I had planned back in the spring, and making sure that I was putting in training time as well. Amidst all of the problems, Ms. Wang announced she was resigning but offered to stay on through late October. Trang was now full time in the office and no longer working as a teacher. I was rushing to find foreign teachers to take my place and to fill the void in some empty classes.

An online search provided me with a promising candidate from Costa Rica. It was a risky hire because Asian parents are almost always expecting a Caucasian teacher for English language subjects (aside from the generous proportion of Filipinos taking up the leftover jobs). After a Skype interview it was apparent that this was our teacher. I made the arrangements and we anticipated her arrival for late July. This meant that I just had to find one more foreigner and we would be all set.

In late summer Barbara arrived from Costa Rica and we were pleasantly surprised. She was very down to earth and motivated. The other slot was soon filled when a hairy young Irishman sent a resume in response to an ad I placed on Vietnamworks. I liked Liam from the first time I met him and knew that he would make a good fit in our school. He had virtually no experience, but he had the right attitude and he was willing to accept our substandard offer...so good enough.

We had lost a long time Vietnamese teacher as well, but other than that we were more or less intact. The classes were arranged accordingly and Liam was installed as the

English instructor and Barbara in Phonics. The Vietnamese teachers were put in charge of the Arts, which meant goodbye to having Drama. I was sad to have to relinquish the position, but I thought that it would be best for my career to take on the new job. The Vietnamese teachers were more comfortable doing music only, so that is more or less how things started.

I made some other minor changes to the school as well. I had the interior and exterior painted for the first time in three years and Trang and I started a nice garden outside. I bought the children fish and turtles, and even changed the whole food menu. Previously we were serving cheap food from the market. Offerings from our old Chinese-Vietnamese cook were closer to punishment than they were to lunch, so I also took the time to show her how to prepare some items. I let the staff sample everything and the parents really seemed pleased by this move.

Halloween was our first big event of the year. We had already had a small celebration for the Vietnamese Mid-Autumn Festival but it was just a quiet internal event. For Halloween we advertised heavily and really pushed for outsiders to join in. It was a kind of make or break moment for the fall of that year.

The advertising paid off and close to one hundred people attended the party. We had games, face-painting, photo options, and decent catering. The children all looked nice in their costumes and everyone enjoyed the activities. The parents chatted with each other and it reminded me a lot of the better times in the previous year.

Not long after this Trang and I took our long delayed honeymoon to Egypt. We had planned to go back in the spring, but we had a bit of a scare when Trang suddenly got

ill. Misdiagnosis is big problem in Vietnam and in our case it was a major error. She was told that she may have stage two uterine cancer. It was a traumatic experience for both of us. I was consumed with grief and anxiousness. I tried to act strong in front of her, but it wasn't easy. It was difficult to be a newlywed and to think that your wife was at death's door. Fortunately it ended up being grossly wrong, and she just had to deal with painful removal of benign cysts.

Egypt was of course outstanding and life changing as a trip. Trang had never been outside of Asia, so it was a major shock for her. In the two weeks we spent traveling we had good times and bad times, but overall the memories were unforgettable. It was a great trip for us and something that we continue to talk about on a fairly regular basis. There is no need to go too in depth, as Egypt is a whole other story entirely.

All in all it seemed like I was doing things the right way at school, but the enrollment was so miserable that no new students wanted to sign up. We were stuck at around 10-12 children only. Something desperately needed to be done or we would all likely need new jobs in the coming year. I came up with a promotion that allowed people to sign up in groups and receive discounts based on the number of people that were registering together. This scheme ended up working well with Korean parents and helped bring in a few more students before the Thanksgiving holiday.

Of course there is no such thing as Thanksgiving in Vietnam, but I decided that I wanted to arrange special celebrations every month and to make the school more international. I invited all of the parents to come in for lunch and to join their children in a special Asian-fusion Thanksgiving Day feast. I have always been a hands-on manager,

and this occasion was no exception. I cooked the entire meal myself and gave the old lady the day off. I made Turkey Fried Rice (using Turkey Spam), Coconut Mashed Sweet Potatoes, Cranberry Filled Boiled Wontons, Green Bean & Bamboo Sautee with Garlic, and Warm Pumpkin Bread. Some of the parents brought in additional food items. It was quite a spread and everyone was very pleased with this new and strange holiday.

The promotions and special celebrations were beginning to breathe life back in the school. As Christmas approached the enrollment was struggling forward and by the short break we were over twenty. Trang and I decided to keep a holiday tradition alive and jumped over to Cambodia for three days. Our Filipina friend Karla came along and we spent most of the time in Sihanoukville. There is nothing like floating in warm tropical water, staring at lush green mountains, and then suddenly remembering that it is Christmas day. The break was a good way to simmer down and relax after a very stressful fall term.

This was also the time that a new face arrived. I was unaware but the higher ups in Malaysia wanted to bring in someone to help scout development. They were also quite distrustful of anyone that was not Malaysian, so I think part of it was to have someone there poking in and giving them feedback. The owner showed up somewhat unexpectedly with an older man with wiry glasses. The guy seemed very positive and a bit too ambitious. I have to admit that I didn't care for Chris Chua the first time I met him. I even resented his presence because I felt like it was a power grab right when I was starting to turn the school around. My negative attitude affected Liam and Trang as well, and we all decided that we didn't really like him.

The great thing about Christmas in Vietnam is that it is extremely close to the only major calendar holiday, Lunar New Year. We just had to push through a few weeks and we would be on our next break. Of course we had a celebration at school and invited the parents in for a half day program. We worked on a special play for the kids about the Lady in the Moon. The Vietnamese teachers worked on traditional songs and showed the kids some dance moves. Many of the children left early on the last day and the afternoon classes were very laid back.

Trang had gone to Nha Trang with her friend's family the past few Tết Holidays, and she decided that she would do the same thing in that year. We weren't getting along terribly well anymore and marriage was proving much harder than we both had thought it would be. Culture is a much bigger divide than anyone could imagine from an outsider point of view. I was upset with her decision and decided to go back to Singapore alone (we had gone for Valentine's Day the year before). This in turn made her a little upset at me.

The trip was actually good fun and helped to take my mind off of the marital woes. Singapore is so dramatically out of place in South East Asia. The city is like some of the bigger U.S. cities, but much cleaner and safer. It was easy to get western style treats that I missed from home, like veggie burgers and portabella sandwiches. I also enjoyed getting lost on Arab Street and in Little India for a few days. I missed Trang but I didn't miss arguing, so it was nice to be alone for a bit.

When I returned home I spent a few days at the house with just the family. Trang wasn't due to get back until the next week. I wasted time watching the plethora of

pirated DVDs that I had amassed over the years, and sitting around idly in coffee shops. It was a nice little break, but I was ready to get back to work and try and finish the school year strong. Trang returned home and we watched the last few days melt away in a haze of bickering and discomfort.

My contract was coming to an end. I started working for the company at a strange time of the year, so it was inevitable that my agreement would expire at a somewhat inopportune time. I was negotiating staying on with the company but I wasn't very happy with the new set up. I had to share my office with Chris a lot of the time and I felt like he was always watching me to see if I would make a mistake. Meanwhile, we were adding more and more students and by the spring holidays we were at nearly thirty.

The offer the school made me was a bit of a joke, but I honestly didn't care that much about salary. I told them I would consider what they had suggested and answer them closer to the expiration date. A few other employees were also up for review including my wife. Trang had never had a salary increase despite taking on a much more difficult and demanding job. I was getting things done and improving the school, but none of it would have been possible without her. Her guidance and decision making was critical to the school's recovery. The other employee had been with the school since the inception, she was even working there before any students had started. I gave them both good reviews and a less than perfect evaluation for the incapable Filipino teacher. The evaluations were more or less ignored and the three of them were offered only 10% increases. This was a bit of a shock to my system. I thought that I had some reasonable clout within the company, but it was apparent they didn't take anything I said all that seriously. The increases for Trang and the other Vietnamese teacher were a great insult,

as 10% of nothing is still nothing. I sent a long and somewhat unprofessional letter giving the Doctor my final thoughts on his offer to the staff, and advice on where he could file my offer letter. He was obviously not pleased, but asked me to kindly stay on through graduation. I agreed, but not for him. The staff and the kids were important to me, and I was quite proud of what we had done that year.

So the year marched on and the size of the school reached a near peak at just under forty. This was not such a big number, but it was a considerable resurrection considering we had dropped into the single digits at the beginning of the year. The school's spirit was revived and there were a lot of new faces that ended up staying on for the years after I left. Esthetically the school was in much better shape as well. We had a lush garden outside, everything was neatly swept and tidy on the inside, and the walls looked fresh and new.

It was near the end of the year that I also realized who Chris really was. I had rushed to misjudgment on him earlier in the year and later noticed that he was just a lonely guy in a foreign land just trying to make money to send home. He was married, had a son attending college in Canada, and another one about to move there to start the last year of high school. He didn't know anyone in Vietnam and had hinted at wanting to get out of the house sometime. I invited him to go have a beer with me one day after work and the rest was history. He became something of a father figure for Trang and I. We both had pretty lousy ones of our own as kids, and it was nice to have someone who had experienced things and could give advice from time to time.

Aside from being a good listener, he was also a fantastic drinking buddy. We spent many early afternoons at the local tavern dealing with the stress of our day jobs. Trang and I still weren't getting along very well and I think that he really helped with a lot of that as well. He knew how to talk to me as a guy and as someone that had lived in Canada for many years, and he understood Trang because he grew up in South East Asia.

I was happy to have a new friend at that point because it was becoming apparent that Liam wouldn't be staying much longer. He was a few years younger than me and that meant that he wasn't ready to stay in one place for an extended period of time. Chris on the other hand was doing the same thing that I was doing...just trying to get by. For a short period of time things overlapped and we would all go out together. That was kind of the pinnacle of everything for that year. I was happy for the most part when I wasn't at work, but felt miserable from morning till afternoon.

The bosses were driving me nuts and I was fighting with my wife on a daily basis about the operation of the school. We would get along ok outside of school, but it was obvious that the job was taking a toll on both of us. I couldn't wait to get out, so I began to look for other jobs. I still planned to stay on as promised, but I needed something to give me motivation and take my mind off of things. I applied at many places in person and that is how I ended up at the nearby Canadian International School.

CIS normally only employees Canadian nationals, but I learned that they were about to open a new learning center offshoot that would accept people of all nationalities. They were particularly interested in me because of my background in theatre. Their goal was to eventually establish a theatre program that their regular students and outsiders

could attend in the evenings. They were also running a program where they outsourced English teachers into the Vietnamese public schools. This excited me because I wanted to get back into teaching theatre and because I had come to Vietnam to work with the everyday people...not the incredibly rich.

They made me an offer and said that it would be ok if I started part-time while I finished my contract at Creative Kids. Because the management in CK was completely under my control, it was easy to leave if CIS needed me for something in the middle of the day. On a normal day I did most of the work for both schools from my office, but from time to time I would go in and do things in person. I was preparing some ideas for the drama department for the first few weeks I was there, and trying to help set up some events for the following year. Soon thereafter they arranged for me to begin teaching in the public schools.

I was assigned classes in a combination middle/high school and in a nearby elementary school as well. Most of my classes were with students ranging from 6th grade to 11th grade. The curriculum was wide open and I was allowed to teach anything I wanted. This was a great experience and allowed me to make some really fun and interactive assignments. I taught the class using an English-immersion approach and decided to teach them other things that are not touched on in Vietnam like Geography, History, and Technology. The kids really responded to it for the most part and we had a great time working on projects together.

At first the students were a bit hard to control. Classes in Vietnamese public school generally have about forty to fifty students and are noisy beyond belief. There is

also only a small fan to circulate around the warm locker room style air from corner to corner, and the smell is unbearable. The students, like all kids that age, loved to act up and show off and get into trouble. I was able to earn a lot of respect through my strong command of Vietnamese language, and generally they listened better than they would for other teachers. I was also able to communicate with the principal and administration, so the fear factor was weighed in. In other classes the students would go berserk during the foreign teacher's time, but in my class they worried because I could actually report their behavior.

I distanced myself from the Creative Kids graduation that year, because I was more or less staying on out of charity. I did my best to advise Chris on things that he needed help with, but he had Trang there to arrange everything anyway. I agreed to make an appearance and helped to secure the location that they would use. As the time got closer it seemed that I wouldn't really be able to show up, so I quietly bowed out and joined in the Canadian school full-time. This was the end of my first job in Vietnam and marked a new beginning for me.

I was happy to be working full time and the public school year was also beginning to wind down. I had some final projects lined up and the students were going to make one last presentation, but everything was canceled rather abruptly. It seemed one of our teachers had made a bit of scene when the students wouldn't listen to him, and also the main director left the company. The departure of the director was effectively the termination of CIS's relationship with the government run schools. The old director was Party connected and had set up the opportunity for us. There is an inherent distrust in the government for outside education and without Mr. Ngai we were considered a virus. I

was deeply saddened to lose this aspect of the job and found little sympathy in the fact that my new company was making us act as substitute teachers for their normal staff while they had summer vacation.

The next few months were spent teaching in a poorly planned summer camp. It was a disaster. No one working the camp was happy. The students hated the topics, and no fun was being had anywhere. I begin to regret my decision to leave the stable job I had held before, but found some comfort in the fact that the theatre position was just around the corner. I did manage to do some playwriting workshops with the high school students I had in the summer. The group was made up of disgustingly rich Vietnamese children and disinterested Korean youths. They did not like the course at all and preferred to sneak out of the room and try play video games every chance they got. The other teachers complained on a daily basis as well. The overall environment was a huge downer and it was all I could do to finish the camp. We were promised a triumphant state of the art learning center would be available by summer, and it hadn't even begun to show signs of completion.

The summer began to wind down and the camp only had a few weeks remaining. There were rumors swirling that our half of the company was going to shut down and that we would all be effectively terminated. I didn't worry too much because I was quite familiar with Vietnamese labor law. We had valid contracts that lasted for more than a year, we had done nothing wrong, so what could they do?

Apparently they didn't care. We were all fired immediately after the summer camp with the exception of the dean's dart playing teammate and a guy that had married

a high level staff. The rest of us were told that the company losing the contract with the public schools was the reason that we had been let go.

This began the pursuit of legal action and months of battling to get documents indicating wrong doing. I never ended up suing them, but the largest Vietnamese language Communist newspaper (Báo Lao Động- The People's Newspaper) did a story on me and wrote about CIS in a very negative light. They even had a picture of me in the paper...it was vindication enough. I also presented CIS with a letter from the public school I taught at saying that I was a commendable teacher and they were very pleased with my service. They were unaware of my language ability and knowledge of law, and the fact that my mother in law held a high position in District 7 education.

Another year had ended and I was at square one. I had no job and only scraps to live on. I began applying to places but the cruelest thing CIS did was fire us after fall hiring season had ended. I couldn't find an open space anywhere in the surrounding area or city center. I was beginning to lose hope when I was finally offered a job in a far away language center. I never wanted to be stuck in a language center, but a job was a job and I had to start making money again.

Chapter 6: Thy Long

I was disappointed tremendously to have lost my job and I had very little motivation to find a new one. It was a crushing blow to my self esteem and left me feeling generally distrustful of Vietnamese employers. No one likes being lied to and used to meet someone else's ends before being discarded without a thought.

I spent a decent amount of time moping around the house and sleeping in late. Trang was sympathetic, but it still wasn't easy for her to see me so idle. I was actively searching for jobs and having virtually no luck. Finding a job in late September is nearly impossible. All of the schools have already fully staffed and begun working on the upcoming academic year. I resigned myself to applying in language centers after I got tired of hearing so many schools say that they had nothing currently available.

I applied at some places close to my house and received a positive amount of callbacks. Unfortunately, language centers do not pay very well. I would finish an interview or demo and feel positive about it, but then inevitably I would be disappointed by the meager offer laid out in front of me.

I had applied for some places online without knowing where or what they were. One of the places that contacted me was a school called North American International Language School (Bắc Mỹ). It seemed kind of questionable from the website content, but I was getting a bit desperate. The interview was very far from my house and I had to get Trang to take me. Even though I had been living in the city for quite some time, I still didn't really know my way around all that well.

The school was about what I had expected. It was an old building with an extraordinary amount of Vietnamese employees shuffling about doing this or that. I was ushered into a back room to meet someone they all called Ms. Jane. Jane was of course not really named Jane, but coincidentally had the same name as my wife, Trang. The interview was short and basically a negotiation about how much they would offer me and what district I would be working in. They assigned me to District 11 and offered me a respectable hourly rate. I was pleasantly surprised by the amount, so I accepted the offer despite the commute.

I started working just a few days later. The schedule was a bit intense, but I didn't really have anything else to do. The way things were set up I would be working mostly afternoons, and a monstrous fourteen hour Saturday. I still requested to have Sunday off so that Trang and I would be able to spend some time together. Overall the hours were manageable and I would have a decent amount of money to hold me over until I could find a better job. The other great thing was that they didn't make me sign a contract, and all of my salary was untaxed and given to me in a nice crisp envelope.

The job itself was more or less mindless. They gave me some books that I could work out of, and I had an assistant to help with the class when the level was low. After they realized that I could speak Vietnamese at a high level they stopped giving me an assistant and let me teach the class bilingually. I really liked being able to use my language skill and this was definitely the time period where I developed the most as a Vietnamese speaker. My writing skills were also proving to be very helpful and getting better with students correcting me. They all really enjoyed having me as a teacher,

because I could answer a lot of questions that other teachers could not understand or communicate properly.

It was also my first experience teaching much older students. I had taught some tutorials in the past with adults, but never a full class with many pupils. I really enjoyed the university level students and working class people. We had a lot of really fun conversations and learned a lot from each other. Even to this day I still have some friends that I taught in those classes. Adults are easier to work with because they can reason better than a child. You can discuss life experiences and give many examples that will help them to understand a concept or rule.

Around the middle of October I was offered a job at an American international school near my language centers. The hours would fit so that I could keep both jobs, and even give up the Saturday mornings. The money also wasn't fantastic, but it wasn't bad either. The gig was for teaching 4th and 5th grade general elementary. They needed a teacher urgently, so I started the following week. My class only had seven kids and the room was quite large. They were attempting to meet WASC standards so they had everything set up nicely. There were three other foreign teachers from the US, so it was a chance to make some friends as well.

A bushy haired student with big glasses and tall chubby frame was introduced on the same day as me. All of the students had English names and actually preferred to not use Vietnamese. The new student had chosen the name Kevin, but since there was already a Kevin in the class he became KD and the other boy KK. I could tell that he was going to be a bit of a troublemaker by the way that he held himself. He didn't seem

scared of anything and was very outgoing. In fact, KD probably asked me more questions than anyone else did. Of course they were all very excited that I could speak Vietnamese and that I had a local wife. These aspects of my life were proving useful on an almost daily basis. You can earn a great deal of respect from Vietnamese when you have shown the initiative to adopt their culture.

The American school was called American Pacific University...I have still never really figured out why. The owner was a Vietnamese lady that had lived in the States for a long time and amassed a good deal of money. The school consisted of an elementary school, a middle/high school, and even a university. They were in the process of building an immaculate study abroad university out in the countryside by HCM. The school was easy to settle into and I made a close bond with the kids and my co-workers. It seemed like everything was in place again and that I could get on with life.

It was also around this time that I made a very big life decision. Trang's birthday was approaching and to show her I was serious about family life I decided to buy an apartment. She found a great deal on a yet to be built piece of property and we arranged to go see the model home. The apartment is situated out in a quiet rural area called Nhà Bè. The county is being developed and will eventually become a part of the large economic district that borders it. The investment opportunity was overwhelming in itself. The deal was sealed after we saw the interior. The apartment was spacious enough for us and even children. There were two large bedrooms, two bathrooms, a laundry room, kitchen, and a big living room. One of the living room walls was a large bay window looking down on the Saigon River. We were a little unsure about the big money commitment, but the price was doable, so we took it.

Now I had reason to start saving more and something to work towards. I was doing better about squirreling money away, but still didn't do as much as I should or could. I would try and give Trang a third of my salary when I could. Some months it was more than that amount, sometimes it was less. She seemed happier that I was putting forth effort and I knew that it was the right decision for our marriage and future.

The language center didn't have much special planned for Halloween, so I decided to do my best to make it fun. I only taught each class once a week, so I told the same story over and over again, but it always had the same end results. I told a story I knew from childhood about a farmer that finds and eats a toe. Later, the toe's owner comes to reclaim what was his. I did all of the dramatic voices and built the tension in the room. It helped that I always made sure to ask someone to turn the light off first. Some classes I had to do in Vietnamese but for the most part English was ok. The story builds up with the ghost wailing for his toe and the sound getting closer and closer until finally the storyteller pauses and stops...no one in the room could ever breathe by that point and when I let out the final scream people nearly fell from their chairs. One of my bloodcurdling moans actually made an adult cry a little bit.

A few years earlier Ms. Wang had taught me some palm reading techniques and I also decided to weave this into my lessons. The lessons were always hopeless because fortunetelling is a very serious thing in Vietnam. I believed in what my friend had taught me, so I didn't mind trying my best along with a disclaimer that I wasn't by any means a professional. The classes would eventual devolve into students rolling up in lines to have their palms deciphered. I am never one to hold back either and some of them looked rather grim if their fortunes didn't seem so bright. I told them to remember that it was all

in good fun and that surely I wasn't to be believed one hundred percent. I got a startling number of things correct from people's pasts and this solidified me as a genuine article. The word of mouth about me was so popular that all of the staff eventually asked me to read their fortunes as well.

On Halloween night I was called out of my class and asked to come down and give a speech to the kids about Halloween. They didn't want me to use English, so I was quite nervous. It went ok but I didn't have a whole to say or ask. Everyone seemed delighted that I had made an effort and looked happy that I was willing to speak in front of so many people. It gave me a warm feeling inside to participate and to be accepted...just another sign that I was finally home.

Meanwhile back in American Pacific University, I replaced the kid's French class with Drama. They were a great group of kids and felt excited about anything new. We started out doing mostly movement and voice exercises. They really enjoyed an exercise that I had learned from Michael Bruckmuller where you increase the volume of your voice as you move apart from your partner. The idea is to learn to bring the voice from your diaphragm and use a motion of the finger and arm to focus on pitch and delivery. It was a totally new idea for them and grabbed their interested. It obviously didn't hurt that they got to yell at the top of their lungs by the end. It was a fun activity, but I don't know if they really grasped the explanation of why we were doing it. Not a single one of them had any exposure to drama previously and it was a bit difficult to get them to understand it is an actual craft. Vietnamese entertainment is mostly rubbish these days and it is 99% recycled Korean or Chinese rubbish at that. They think of

dramatic arts in the same way that they think about buying an iPhone or a pair of sneakers.

After a few weeks of working on various movement and speech exercises we moved into something a bit more challenging. I looked up some monologues for the students to work on and to practice using our voice exercises in a more constructive way. The boys were given a piece from “Huck Finn,” and the girls were given “Alice in Wonderland.” I wanted to choose something that they were probably already familiar with and also something with a distinct style. I would read the pieces for them and do some actions. They all laughed a lot when I would read, but they looked really intrigued by it all. I was so pleasantly surprised to see that they dove right into the parts. They would all pace around the room saying the lines to themselves. We did some readings in front of the group and I tried to have them practice giving feedback. Usually the feedback sessions just turned into teasing, so I stopped doing it to avoid discouraging them.

I set a date to have final performances of the monologues and encouraged the kids to work together and to read it for their parents at home. They would come in sometimes before the first bell rang and tell me that they had been practicing the night before and ask if I would check them. They would look very nervous and wring their little hands while they recited the words at top speed. I knew that they wouldn't really think much about technique and would focus more on memory, so I tried to give them some suggestions and to give positive comments if they did something in a unique way. In the end I just wanted them to get over stage fright and to start viewing performance as a

normal part of class. My long term goal was to get them performing regularly and to motivate creativity.

The performances went well and the kids were actually a lot more supportive of each other than I expected. They were a small group, so most of the time they were very kind to each other. I gave them all reviews and just focused on the positive things that they did. They were all pleased with the results and I even overheard them telling some of their friends in other classes at lunch later on in the day.

Aside from drama, I also started playing sports with them and teaching them how to cook. They really liked when I would join in activities and we could do things together. If I ever had to teach something else while they had gym they would be very disappointed. The cooking classes were so popular that other classes and the kitchen staff would usually gather around to watch what we were doing. I always made sure to have a little bit extra so that their friends could reap the rewards of having chefs for friends.

Around Christmas time we prepared our first scenes. I gave about a month's time to prepare the pieces and make sure that the kids were ready to deliver them in front of a real audience. The school was going to have an afternoon Christmas program and the parents were invited to come and watch. Most of the classes worked on music segments, but my group would present various scenes from "A Christmas Carol." We decided to do it old school and even make the costumes and props ourselves. It was an exciting couple of weeks and really helped seal our bond even more.

The work was not easy. I was tired and frustrated watching them forget lines and not take things seriously at times. It is also hard to get in the Christmas spirit when you are sweating buckets under a sweltering mid-afternoon sun. It should be mentioned that our rehearsals had to be done outside, because it was a bit too noisy to practice next to the other classes. I was always ecstatic when one of the children had a breakthrough and made it a point to encourage their development. I could see that they were all looking for those same kinds of moments.

The event day was full of laughs and cheers. Vietnamese parents make a good audience and are very supportive and enthusiastic. I was happy also that my kids didn't seem to have any nerves that day and came onstage with confidence. It was easy to see that they had also learned to master volume and could fill the room much better than their peers in other classes. The plays generated a lot of laughter and everyone really liked the ghosts and their costumes. When the scenes ended the kids were really helpful in striking the sets quickly and efficiently...a little extra tech work that we had been practicing.

After the Christmas performance we all headed home a little early to start our vacations. Trang, Chris, my friend Jerry, and some others decided to go to Mũi Né beach for a few days to celebrate the holiday. It was the first time we weren't going to Cambodia, so I was a little disappointed by that. Chris was leaving soon, so I wanted to get to spend time with him. His family was visiting and then they would all head back to Malaysia together after. It was a really nice couple of days, but went by so fast that it seems years ago at this point. We played pool, ate Indian food, swam in the ocean, cruised around on motorbikes, drank buckets of cocktails, danced and had a merry time.

After Christmas we only had to fill a few weeks until the Tết holidays. Not much happened and we began to make plans for a Cambodian trip. Trang, Jerry, and my sister in law were all joining in, so it seemed it would be another good time. It was not. Trang and I's fighting was coming to head and I couldn't really stand much more. The trip was difficult, but it helped me to really re-evaluate our relationship and decide to make some big life changes. When we got back I began to slowly alter things in my life and live more Vietnamese. I was strict about staying home more, going out less, and started to hand over my salary for her control. This is hard for American people to understand, but is quite common here and showed the amount of trust and faith that she needed. I also started to see things from her point of view more and tried to begin listening and stop being so thick headed. If I wanted to stay in Vietnam long term, I would need to adapt the culture in a bigger way. Since that day, things have just gotten better and better. I will always reflect on that trip as a turning point in our relationship. Now we know how to decide things without fighting and how to respect each other more. This inevitably meant cutting toxic people like Jerry out of my life, but that was not a big problem.

In March I began working on some fun new things with my kids in APU. We studied about recycling and started a competition with my friend's class to see which group could save more. We ended up losing, but the kids had a great time. We sold all of the recyclables and had a big party.

I also looked up the classic build a volcano exercise and started that as an afternoon project. It was messy and tedious, but tons of fun. We built a paper town that fanned out around the base of the towering lava heap and spread towards the back of our cardboard surface. Unfortunately, it is not so easy to get the right ingredients here and

our explosion was less than magnificent. The lack of spewing molten lava didn't seem to upset anyone and many of the other classes asked their teachers if they could do the same thing.

I was becoming a little unhappy with the management of the school and started to look around for possible openings for the summer. It is hard to find jobs in the fall, so I wanted to get a head start on things. This is when I contacted a kindergarten I had read about back in September called Maple Bear Canadian Kindergarten. I was surprised to hear back from them relatively fast. The owner was not so interested in me as a teacher, but wanted to discuss the possibility of me working as a principal. I agreed to meet him after work one night in March.

The meeting with Thomas Chan was the beginning of what would become my next career step. He was a quiet person and seemed to do nothing but listen. He only asked a small number of questions and more or less focused on what I was giving out in response. His personality was inviting, and since I wasn't pressed to find a new job I didn't feel so nervous. The meeting ended up being a lock and secured me a job in the growing CitySmart organization. I would have to take a massive pay cut to join the company, because I would be losing not one job, but two at the same time. I ended up taking the position because it seemed to promise more in the long term than either of my current jobs could.

This news was of course quite sad for my children. I gave both of my schools the mandatory one month notice and promised to fulfill the time that was required of me. We still had time to do one more thing. I had been working on a playwriting course with

them and had them developing their own plays. The girls and boys were split into two groups and were quite secretive about their operations. Both of the plays were uber violent, but this is not uncommon with children over here and is widely accepted as appropriate. I tried to tone it down some and up the humor output instead. The girls had trouble agreeing because they were all too bossy and didn't know how to collaborate. The boys on the other hand were quietly constructing a masterpiece. Their performance was to be my swansong at American Pacific University. I taught them many things about comedic timing, and gave them some physical comedy tricks, but a lot of the humor stemmed from their superb writing. I couldn't believe that two ten year olds and a nine year old could come up with some of the things included in their piece...it was brilliant.

The performance of "Nerf War" was the crowning achievement of my theatre teaching career. The play was performed for an audience of about thirty to forty and brought out many many laughs. The story revolved around a bank heist gone bad that ends with everyone laid out on the floor. The kids used real nerf guns, so a lot of the timing was really crucial. It was also fun to be involved in something that would be so politically incorrect in my country, because it really showcased how little boys think and what they are truly interested in. The comedic bits we worked on were golden, these were the moments that the audience really lost it during. I wish that the I had been able to tape the performance, but my wife attended at that was enough for me...at least I will always have her to share that memory with.

My time at the school came to a quiet end after that. The last few days of school were sad and the kids seemed genuinely bummed out. Many of them would continue to call me for a long time thereafter, and KD does even to this day. I had helped him bring

his grades up a lot and worked one on one with him often to improve his math scores. Bác Mỹ was no different. All of the students were sad to see me go and my boss told me the door was always open for me to come back. It was important for me to end everything on a positive note. I liked both of these jobs and I knew that I was embarking on something very big...it was best to keep all options on the table, just in case.

Chapter 7: Maple Bear Canadian Kindergarten

When I first came to CitySmart everything was exciting and fresh. I was busy assembling my team before I even officially started with the company. I would sneak in lunch time interviews or hurry out after my last class to meet people at various locations around the city. The company struck me as really professional and well organized, which is very rare for any operation in Vietnam. There were departments set up for each area and all of these entities functioned separately.

I began to meet various coworkers and understand better about how the company worked in Hanoi. The kindergarten had been open for almost three years in the north already. The first school was full with a waiting list and the second also had an impressive enrollment. The bar appeared to be set high, but everything seemed possible based on the resources that were available.

In my first month of work we made a trip to Hanoi for training. I had never been on a business trip and it was also my first time going to the north. I was excited that everything seemed so professional and that I was given so much responsibility. The Hanoi trip was not very informative, but it was still nice to see the schools in person. The facilities were really top notch and more impressive than most kindergartens I had seen in Saigon. The sheer size was also noteworthy. Normal kindergarten space is around 200-300m², but the Hanoi schools were well over 1,000m². All of the materials, toys, and electronics were very modern and expensive. It seemed that the schools would be able to sell themselves.

We had two locations picked out for Saigon and both of them were under construction. The first one was in a very familiar location and within walking distance of my house. Previously the site had served as a woman's cultural center, but we were doing renovations and fixing up some details inside. The second location was quite far from my house and was actually close to my former schools in District 11. The renovation in the second school would take much longer because we were starting from scratch. It was hard to imagine what they would look like when walking around the empty building. Because I was coming on at an early time, I was actually asked to give a lot of advice on the interior of the buildings as well. I was quite surprised how attentive Thomas was to my suggestions. It was refreshing to feel so involved and to actually be a part of something. Teaching is wonderful but it is also a bit limiting. I felt like so much of this new company's success was relying on my actions, and that was certainly an empowering feeling. Going to work was exciting and I was learning more than I ever had in any previous company.

In late June I began searching out a drama program for the after school portion of the company. The owner didn't know anything about the performing arts, so he really trusted my opinion on the subject. I ended up finding a course in the U.S. called Drama Kids. This was a well known franchise that had been operating in the States for many years. I was surprised to find out a friend of mine from university owned and operated a franchise in Richmond. The main office in the U.S. is actually in Leesburg on the street where I was born. I sent an email inquiring about the program and was surprised to find it was actually just a small part of a much bigger company called the Helen O' Grady Drama Academy.

I was introduced to the Southeast Asia representative, Nancy Soon and began to have some online correspondence. Nancy set up a time to come to Vietnam and meet with us and discuss the possibility of CitySmart bringing the program to the country. Nancy and her partner were very impressed with my background, goals, and insight about the theatre. They agreed to let CitySmart purchase the franchise and set the signing date for a few weeks later. They said it was the fastest contract they have signed in the history of the company and based almost solely on the fact that I was working with the company. This was a proud moment for me and I was a bit sad knowing that I couldn't be much more involved than the initial paperwork and training.

The signing ceremony was a lot of fun, but the training was even more entertaining. We had to do a lot of improvisation and even take turns teaching the class. The lessons are set up for children that may have no experience with performing arts and limited English-speaking ability. A tambourine is used to start and stop actions and the idea is to get kids engaged and thinking creatively. The number one selling point of the program is to teach children confidence and to help them come out of their shells. It was fun to see the grown up Vietnamese participating in the training and how timid they were with all of the actions.

My overall desire for the program is that it will help recapture the greatness that once existed in Vietnamese performing arts. Pre-war there were some fantastic musicians, comedians, and actors making names for themselves. After the war the country went into isolation and a lot of the enthusiasm was lost. Today most performing arts in the country are simple regurgitations of Chinese or Korean plays or films. The Vietnamese have lost their identity in this area and I hope that Helen O'Grady will give

them the tools to rediscover the things they lost. It is obvious that the arts did not change because of a lack of enthusiasm. Vietnamese people are creative, innovative, and ready to experience new things.

It is also easy to see the influence that the performing arts of the past had on the youth today. Many Vietnamese youth enjoy the traditional Vietnamese music and have a great deal of pride in this art form. Most of the music from the past originated in the South and Southwest, and involved traditional instruments like the mandolin and harp. A normal song will begin with a person or ensemble speaking about a standard situation. Perhaps they will talk about the toils and troubles of living day to day life in the Mekong Delta, or perhaps to lovers will have a dispute over money. The singers usually speak in very high pitched voices and thrust the words at each other in a playful or at times very violent way. The emotion in the story eventually builds into an unanticipated song routine and the characters continue their conversation through singing. The singing is very rapid but flows smoothly while the musicians plink and plunk on the rickety wooden instruments. The songs can be humorous, insightful, melancholy, or all of the above. With certainty, all of the songs directly reflected the lives of the people living in those days. Vietnamese strongly believed in weaving in their personal experiences into music and theatre.

Some of the singers also doubled as comedians. Their performances would have subject humor that usually involved something with a wife, money, and alcohol consumption. The singers were able to be tragic and sympathetic while still making people chuckle from the utter ridiculousness of their situations. These stories usually touched home because many of the people in the southwest were living similar lives.

People then were very poor, allowed to practice polygamy, and had very little structure regarding laws and regulations. The comedians would look the part as well, and appeared somewhat clownish but still very true to traditional dress of the time.

The war time saw the rise of Red Music or Propaganda music in the north, and even some protest anti-war music in the south. Red Music is famous mostly for the messages that were contained in the lyrics. Some of the words are quite obvious, but others can be likened to slave anthems that gave instructions and were used as a way of communication. One of the most famous anti-war songwriters was Trịnh Công Sơn. His music has recently become popular again with a lot of modern day singers recording his classics.

After the war ended there wasn't much singing, acting, dancing or anything else for that matter. The south was devastated and the north had effectively dragged the rest of the country into its deafening state of poverty and despair. My Vietnamese family spent close to twenty five years eating plain white rice and garden weeds. They lost their jobs, land, and social standing. Teachers went to dig ditches in the southwest and soldiers went to prison. A few of the lucky ones were able to survive boat trips to the U.S. and other areas of the world.

The performing arts didn't really begin to stir again until đổi mới (renovation) reforms in the mid-1980's began to erode the thick wall between Vietnam and the outside world. By the time Clinton normalized U.S. relations with Vietnam the country was already devouring Chinese and Korean pop music. As time went on the Vietnamese began embracing western films and developing similar movies of their own. They even

started to introduce soap operas and sitcoms into their television rotations. The performing arts were back, but they lacked anything resembling Vietnamese culture. It is my great hope that programs like ours will help to influence a new generation of Vietnamese to think creatively and use western techniques to introduce their thoughts and traditions.

Everything in the kindergarten started to change around late summer. The schools were still not completely finished and we were losing time. I needed to have at least the first location done so that we could do intake for the fall. We opened the door at a discount price despite the ongoing construction. In retrospect this was probably not a great decision and we lost some Korean students because of the mess. It is not easy to convince people to pay for a full year's tuition when things still look incomplete. I was being meticulous with my recruiting as well and this gave people the impression that we weren't ready. I don't regret not rushing the hiring though, because in the long run quality teachers are more important than just filling a class as fast as you can.

Many of the parents that came early on ended up leaving the school before we even officially opened. Korean parents want everything to be ready immediately from the start and this was not a possibility in our situation. The most damaging part was not losing the students we had in the summer, but developing a bad word of mouth among the Korean community in the nearby business district. It would take us several months after this to repair the early unprepared image that many of them saw. It helped that we had a Korean liaison that worked closely with outsiders to spread the word about the school.

Once the team was assembled in the first location things began to move a little bit faster. The construction was more or less finished and we were just correcting a few things here and there. The enrollment was growing on a weekly basis and the classes were being split by age and program. Once we separated the kids into groups the parents felt much happier. There were other minor details that had to be worked out, like food suppliers and transportation issues. I had dealt with some of these things when I was running Creative Kids, so I already had some contacts for many of our needs. It was also easy to add staff because I knew many people from other companies. In Vietnam turnover rates are outrageously high, so it is very important to have a long list of future employee possibilities.

The second location was far from complete and it looked like we would miss the fall start date that was fast approaching. I was deeply concerned about this school's starting time because the area was not very ideal to begin with. District 11 is still five years or more away from having the kind of wealth that is required to attend an international school. Many of the people in the district are actually poor ethnic Chinese and the bulk of the rest are laborers. There are a few nice apartment complexes directly next to the school, but most of the units were empty in the fall and not likely to fill any time soon. If we missed the August start time then we were likely to spend the entire year struggling with enrollment.

I was going into the location on a near daily basis despite having to manage the other location which is nearly an hour away by motorbike. There is not much you can do with local contractors other than plead, threaten, and shout. When the projection came in that we wouldn't be able to open the door until October I was obviously distraught. We

all knew what this meant, but the owner was still optimistic. It is easy to have a positive opinion about filling the school when you are not the one that actually has to perform the task. With a heavy heart I reluctantly agreed to the October opening and went back to work on the first location.

The first few months in our school moved really fast. Every week we had new inquiries and people ready to sign up and try the program out. I had three teachers in place and they seemed to be a good enough lot. The first teacher was a bit of a train wreck outside of school, but she was strong in the classroom and the kids liked her. At the time we thought that we could at least get through the year enduring her personal problems, but that would come to a head in just a few short months. The other two teachers were easier to deal with and both seemed to have good attitudes. Unfortunately, they all lived up to the stereotype of being underachievers and that all foreigners think they are above doing the same duties as Vietnamese staff. This mindset has always been a pet peeve of mine and it is something that I have never personally subscribed to.

I was also happy that the enrollment was very diverse and that our school was truly living up to the international label. We had students from Vietnam, China, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, New Zealand, Denmark, Korea, Japan, Australia, Israel, and America. It is always easier to recruit for a school when the children hail from a many different countries; no one likes to see a majority of one background because they fear that English will not be a focus. Ironically, out of all of those nationalities we didn't have a single Canadian.

I had never worked in a company where I didn't have complete control over the marketing and event planning, so it was difficult for me to watch while another department planned an event for my kindergarten. The first event that we had to put on was for Mid-Autumn Festival. Weeks went by and I didn't really see much being done. At the last minute they sent me the plan for the Friday event and I was shocked. There was nothing special about it and the entire event would last no longer than twenty minutes. I was upset and reported it to the owner, and without hesitation he agreed to scrap it and let me step in on the planning. In just a few days I put together a much nicer event that involved mascots, gifts, lantern building, moon cakes, a school parade, and a special lion dance. It was hard to organize all of the things I wanted because somehow the previous planners had already spent six hundred dollars. I asked some neighbors of mine to do the dance at a discounted price and everything else I pulled together from materials that we already had inside the school.

The event wasn't great but it was much better than it would have been. The important part was that all of the kids seemed to have a lot of fun and we attracted some attention inside the shopping mall where we did our parade. The lion dance was a nice finish and all of the kids seemed very excited and fascinated by the mysterious animals dancing in front of the school. Admittedly, lion dances are a bit scary even for adults. There is usually one man that wears a spooky human mask and tames the lions, a group of people pounding drums, and then two very large dragon-like lions. There is a good deal of commotion and the dance is entirely based on rhythm. The groups are usually teams that perform for Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival twice annually, so the performances hardly ever lack pizzazz. It is funny to see the children react to the large

animals with a fixed gaze that simultaneously conveys both wonder and terror. We were able to get some decent pictures of the performance as well, and our website began to reflect a school that was open for business.

October rolled around and the second location was ready to begin operation. We had a large discount promotion worked out for the first few weeks but it didn't have the same draw as it did in the other campus. The biggest reason for the failure was obviously due to the time of year being well past normal enrollment. We did manage to corral close to ten kids and that is the number that would stand up until the present. We were still without a license in both locations and this made it impossible to advertise. It is hard to let people know you are operating a kindergarten tucked away in an empty shopping mall if you can't even put up a sign saying that you are there.

The second location was so slow that it made it impossible to justify hiring more than one foreign teacher. A nice British fellow named Matthew took on the position and became our first male teacher. Some of my staff from the original location moved over to the second one because they lived closer to that school. It was nice to have both schools in operation but it also increased the pressure and made me well aware of how much responsibility I was now caring on my shoulders.

Halloween was coming up and I didn't want to have a repeat of our first event. I asked the teachers to be working on everything ahead of time and I started to put together the itinerary and make assignments for the celebration night. I decided to forgo heavy advertising and to hand out flyers on my own and give some to our current parents to help distribute. We combined the two locations to make the cost more efficient and to

encourage a larger number of students to attend. I also opened the event up to our after school kids because I thought that it would help raise the awareness of the kindergarten. This ended up being both good and bad, but it did help bring in a higher number of attendees. The older children have a harder time behaving themselves and because of recent changes in Vietnamese culture there is a real lack of discipline. This reality would unfortunately rear its ugly head on the night of the event.

The teachers helped to get the school decorated and everyone chipped in on turning the activity room into a haunted house. I agreed to read palms again as I had done for the past two years in other locations. It is a bit boring for me now but people always seem to like it and it contributes to the overall spooky mood of any Halloween bash. The IT downloaded some seriously scary music and sound effects as well. I thought we should consider changing it but everybody else said that being scared was the idea behind the night, so I allowed them to keep the strange sounds and creepy melodies.

That night we set up booths for face painting, games, fortune telling, and piñatas to go along with the haunted house. There was a good crowd in the lobby before we were ready to open the doors. Once everything was in place we shut down the lights and turned the music on. For the next two hours the parents and children went from room to room and enjoyed the various stations that we had set up. The costumes all looked great despite the balmy weather outside, it actually felt like Halloween. The feedback from the event was also overwhelmingly positive and the parents appreciated all of the effort we had put into it.

The month of November went by quickly. We were having a hard time bringing the enrollment up in the second school and the first school was running into problems as well. I was promised outdoor areas and pool access in both facilities, but neither location had produced. The licensing problems continued and we had to constantly bribe police to not shut us down immediately. All of the problems were not helped by the arrival of the new divisive general manager. Her lack of experience and overall approach to the staff caused many people to leave the company and others to just give up altogether. No one had the same attitude as before and the overall feel of the company had reached a dramatic halt.

I continued to push to have things updated in the school but the slow enrollment was causing the owner to get very grumpy on a daily basis. He would often shout and say condescending things to staff members. By mid-month I was also feeling a bit hopeless with the situation, but I am inevitably stuck in the job for the time being. I am tired of changing companies and really need to pay off the apartment that I bought. My salary is still nice but I am no longer enjoying anything about work. No one in the school is ever in a good mood and people constantly fight with one another.

I have taken comfort in the fact that Trang now has a very good job with Room to Read and seems to really enjoy herself. She was always so stressed out before, so it is nice to see her come home happy. The hard part about her job is that she travels constantly and we do not see each other as much anymore.

The job at CitySmart has made me aware that situations that seem too good to be true probably are, and ones that seem easy but boring should actually merit a second

look. In retrospect I wish I had kept my job as a teacher at the elementary school and continued in the language center at night. I was making far more money before, but more importantly I was happy. I know things will eventually improve in this company as well or I will quit and move on again, but I still have no desire to leave my life here. Vietnam is the kind of place where no matter how bad things may seem, there is always an easy way to another option.

VITA

Robert Matthew Wilson was born in Leesburg, Virginia in 1982. He spent his early years living on a farm in Hillsboro, Virginia. He later moved to Richmond, Virginia and attended Virginia Commonwealth University where he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre Performance. Aside from acting, Robert was also involved in directing theatrical productions, writing for small publications, and recording music.

He later entered the Graduate Theatre Program at Virginia Commonwealth University with a focus in Dramatic Literature Pedagogy. He has spent the last four years working as an administrator, teacher, acting coach, editor, and curriculum developer in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He is married and currently resides in the Saigon South area of Ho Chi Minh City.