A NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

By David Walker, Professor of English and Creative Writing, Chair of the Danenberg Oberlin-in-London Program Committee

WITH THANKS FOR the many expressions of support in response to last year’s inaugural newsletter, we hope you’ll be interested in this year’s update. The 2015 program has, of course, drawn to a close. Associate professors Gina Pérez (comparative American studies) and Baron Pineda (anthropology) taught courses focused on London as a global city, immigration, and cultural identity (in addition to our usual classes in theater and London history) to a lively and highly diverse group of students. Preliminary reports have been highly enthusiastic; look for a more detailed account in next year’s newsletter.

Meanwhile, professors Anu Needham (English) and Steve Volk (history) are busy recruiting for their 2016 program, which will feature courses on British national identity, contemporary British fiction, and the history and design of museums. And waiting in the wings are associate professors Maureen Peters (biology) and Drew Wilburn (classics), who in 2017 will teach a curriculum focused on scientific and folk approaches to health and illness, drawing richly and imaginatively on the resources of London.

One recent development is the effort to use London as the site of winter-term projects. This year Professor of Musicology Charles McGuire took a group of students to London in January to explore the city’s rich musical life, and in 2016 I will direct a similar project on London theater. While not formally a part of the London Program, such projects are direct offshoots of our experiences teaching on the program and benefit hugely from the infrastructure already in place and from the invaluable assistance of resident director Donna Vinter. We’re happy to share the thrill of studying in London with as many students as possible.

We continue to be grateful for your donations to the London Program endowment. The income it generates goes to on-the-ground programming (theater and concert tickets, field trips, guest speakers, and the like) and to direct grants that enable high-need students to participate in the program. We welcome gifts of any amount. Please see information about the Friends of the London Program on the last page of this newsletter.

EXPANDING HORIZONS: A BOARD MEMBER’S VIEW

By Anita Avramides ’74

I WAS AN UNDERGRADUATE AT OBERLIN many decades ago—the 1970s, to be exact. I majored in philosophy and went on to a job in that subject at Oxford University, where I am still employed. There is no doubt that the reason I am in Oxford has to do with Oberlin. My philosophy professors at the time were inspiring and supportive. It was by their suggestion that I ended up applying to graduate school in England. When the opportunity came for me to join the London Program Board, I could not think of a better way of repaying (some of) my debt to Oberlin.

Ours is no ordinary board. Like everything Obies do, we are truly dedicated to the success of the program and its students. Over the years we have tried to come up with new ideas to help the program and to make the students feel supported and welcome in London. One of our ideas was to host an event for the students in the first days after their arrival at which they could meet members of the board and others. It has taken different
forms over the last few years, but each event has been a wonderful opportunity for us to mingle and meet each other. It is also a terrific way for us to catch up with the Oberlin professors who are doing the hard work of looking after the intellectual welfare of the students.

This year the group came to Oxford for a visit. I was very pleased to host them at my college, St Hilda’s, and offer them a classically English cup of tea and scones after they had walked around the town. I talked with the students about the differences in the educational environment between Oxford and the U.S. and encouraged them to ask questions. They were not shy. We were soon locked in discussion over whether philosophy is the domain of “dead white European males” (a phrase I have been hearing a lot these days). Suffice it to say that the students gave me much food for thought; I can only hope I said something that at least got them to think about the issues involved in putting together a curriculum of study.

Soon after they left I met up with Jay Garfield ’75, another philosopher who studied philosophy at Oberlin. He just published the book Engaging Buddhism: Why it Matters to Philosophy. Jay has devoted his career to extending philosophy’s repertoire. That is what education is all about, and what the London Program is dedicated to doing. I hope it will continue to flourish so that continuing generations of Oberlin students—from many disciplines and with many interests—can study in London and expand their horizons.

Editor’s Note: The London Program has its own board of loyal, hardworking alumni in the UK to help oversee and advise it, on which Professor Anita Avrimeades has served for many years.

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LONDON 2015 SNEAK PEEK: GLOBAL LONDON, GLOBAL STUDENTS

By Gina Perez, Associate Professor of Comparative American Studies, and Baron Pineda, Associate Professor of Anthropology

THIS SPRING WE TAUGHT three linked courses focusing on globalization, race, class, gender, religion, and immigration, inviting students to consider the ways London serves as a control node for flows of people, goods, information, and capital.

We were fortunate to have a diverse group of students who engaged in a rigorous and thoughtful way with the core issues of the semester: multiculturalism and national belonging; religion, race, and class; the tension between use and exchange value of places in London in the context of urban development and regeneration policies; gentrification; responses to the global economic crises by powerful institutions such as the Bank of England to activist groups such as Occupy London; and the relationship between London and the rest of the United Kingdom in the wake of the Scottish referendum in September 2014.

We and some of our students will report more fully in next year’s newsletter, when we’ve had a bit more time and distance from which to reflect on it all. For now, though, we are profoundly grateful for the opportunity Oberlin’s London Program has given us to teach and learn in such a special city, to connect with Oberlin alumni both in London and in Oxford, and to share a unique experience with inquisitive and challenging Oberlin students.
I HAVE ONE OF THE BEST JOBS ON THE PLANET:
teaching The London Stage to students on the Danenberg Oberlin-in-London Program. That sentence is much better rewritten, though, as “enjoying” the London stage with students. Theater, in parallel to any teaching space, is nothing if it’s not about people coming together in real time to share an active, collective endeavor of imagination. It can blow the top off your head to see an excellent play, but almost as powerful is the post-play recreation of it in discussion. I continually find myself gaining insight and additional pleasure from what these smart, observant Oberlin students bring to the feast.

The 2015 semester was no different. We unpacked together a broad range of plays (no two are ever really similar: the diversity of ways that theater can be theater continued to impress us). It’s painful to be able to pick out only a few. Though I usually try to stay away from American plays in London, two of the best experiences we had were in fact in that category. We were moved by The Royale, a play by Marco Ramirez based on the true story of Jack Johnson, the African American boxer who defeated the white holder of the world heavyweight title in 1908, against odds that were to do with far more than sporting prowess. That it was staged in the 144-seat Bush Theatre with the audience as spectators round the boxing ring added visceral power to a story that was told in minimalist and expressionist fashion, without even one literal punch actually being landed.

We also saw Jennifer Haley’s The Nether, the title of which refers to what the internet has become at some point in an imagined future when it’s possible to live within it completely, so any person may decide permanently to cross over from the real world (the “in-world”) to its alluring realm. When one of the places that such a person might cross to is the Hideaway, where pedophilic preferences can be indulged without consequence, as the “children” there too are consenting adults, you have the basis for a disturbing moral thriller, astonishingly imaginatively staged.

My personal favorite was probably Kevin Elyot’s My Night With Reg, about love and loss in the 1980s as AIDS ravages a group of friends—a perfectly crafted and very English play of wit and heartbreak in equal measure. We likewise enjoyed—though with bracing disagreements about to what extent—plays that created onstage apocalyptic or disturbingly fractured worlds: Beckett’s Happy Days, an almost-monologue by Winnie, buried centre stage up to her waist in Act 1 and in Act 2 up to her neck; and Simon Stephens’ challenging Carmen Disruption at the Almeida Theatre. That play takes the characters of Bizet’s opera and “disrupts” everything about them—and much about the theater itself—in a contemporary version, so that, for example, Carmen becomes a rent boy, Don José a female cab driver, and the bullfighter Escamillio a high-rolling commodities trader. It’s impossible to begin to convey the flavor of this sadly beautiful and wildly inventive production (there was a life-size dying bull centre stage) in a short space. It will live in our memories even more so because actor John Light, who played Escamillio, came to our class afterwards. As he had also played Dr. Conrad, a Nazi officer in the very first play we saw, Taken at Midnight (centering on the true story of Hans Litten, a young lawyer who put Hitler on the stand in 1933), conversation flowed.

London theater has tied into themes of the wider 2015 program as well, with everyone attending Multitudes at the Tricycle Theatre, a play about multicultural Britain that the Guardian reviewer called “as urgent and immediate as the morning headlines.” Many of us also went to the tiny, 140-seat Soho Theatre to see the powerful Lampedusa. We sat in the round on backless seats, as if in a boat, to support the play’s central focus on migration, including by those migrants who attempt the dangerous journey in flimsy boats from North Africa to Europe. One of the play’s two main characters is an Italian fisherman whose job has become to pull the drowned bodies of migrants out of the Mediterranean. As we saw this play during a week when hundreds of people had died in just this way, this play too merited the adjectives “urgent” and “immediate.”

The students were interested in the degree to which we were and weren’t seeing black and minority ethnic actors, what stories were and weren’t being told, and related questions of representation. They were likewise observant about the class, race, and age composition of audiences and the effect of ticket prices on audience composition. In short, and to return to where I started, they were critically aware Obies in the best sense.
LONDON 2014: ON FOSSILS AND FINCHES, LAKES AND LYRICS

By Nicholas Jones, Professor of English

IT IS NOW MORE THAN A YEAR since Roger Laushman (biology) and I were wrapping up our spring semester in London, but we think back warmly on the flurry and excitement of those final weeks: projects to write up and report on, field trips in the gorgeous late April weather, celebrations and goodbyes!

Roger and I had hatched our joint program two years earlier. We’d known each other as neighbors and fellow members of the College Faculty Council—where we had enjoyed interviewing candidates for faculty positions—but we had never taught together. That’s one of the great benefits of the London Program: it cements friendships and collaboration by raising the stakes. When you have to actually sit down and plan a course in which each of your areas is represented, it makes for a much deeper and more lasting collaboration.

We realized that the common thread was our mutual interest in the innovations and anxieties of the long 19th century (“long” is a term that extends back to the Enlightenment in the 18th century, and forward through the global disaster of World War I). Britain—London in particular—was central to the expansion of knowledge that accompanied imperial expansion: as England took over more and more of the world as colonies, London became increasingly the hub of scientific and cultural interest in those new worlds beyond the shores of Great Britain.

Thinkers such as Darwin tried to make sense of the new multiplicities of natural objects: new species that pushed the boundaries of the Linnaean classification systems; unimaginably old and strange fossils that extended the timeline of creation far beyond the literal scriptures; and the evidence of cultures new to Londoners — artifacts from native Americans of north and south America, tea, coffee and porcelain from China and Japan, and Egyptian and Greek sculptures of immense size. Things of astounding interest and perplexity came flooding into London. The scientific advances included medicine, e.g., surgery, as we saw in the Hunterian and Wellcome collections, and pathogens, e.g., the cholera epidemics of the mid-19th century. The consequent turmoil of thought—theory, experiment, artistic expression—created a century marked by the foundation of great museums and the burgeoning of literature first in poetry in Romanticism and then in the great explosion of narrative in the Victorian novel.

So it was that nexus of explosive thought that made the basis of our joint course. We read a lot: books about the great collectors, the cholera epidemics, the discoveries of fossils (Remarkable Creatures, along with a class visit by its author Tracy Chevalier ’84), and we were out and about in London and England as much as we were working in the classroom. Field trips were the mode of learning from day one when we walked down the street to the British Museum, through a two-night bus trip to Dorset (fossil hunting on the sands at low tide), a day at Darwin’s house, and near the end of the semester, a three-day bus trip to the Lake District, home of the Romantic poets and a great site for ecological study. The frequent sighting of sheep was a high point for many of the students! We shared common theater experiences, such as Oh, What a Lovely War.

At the same time, we were each teaching smaller courses. Roger led his 10 biology students in an advanced course that took them deep into collections, specimens, and scientific repositories (Darwin’s finches, for example). And I taught 15 English students in a course that linked poems with visual art—a great opportunity to spend time in the exciting art museums of London. A tour of 17th-century Dutch art in the National Gallery with curator Betsy Wieseman (formerly curator at Oberlin’s Allen Memorial Art Museum) was a hit: Rubens, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and a passionate and knowledgable guide—who could ask for anything more!

At the center of all this was our wonderful on-site administrator, Donna Vinter, who with her assistant, Lacey Ostermann, made it all possible with grace and skill and taught an exciting course on London theater as well. Our excellent adjunct instructor, Katy Layton-Jones, a British historian, taught a mostly on-your-feet-on-the-sidewalks course on London history (which my wife, Sue, enjoyed greatly).

All through the semester we were reminded of how special Oberlin’s London program is: how academically rigorous, how innovative in its interdisciplinarity, and how engaged in on-site, non-textbook learning. All that can be demanding, and the program is baffling at times for students and exhausting by the end of the semester for all of us. But the rewards—for us, and, we are confident, for our students—are great and lasting.
I started reading Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* this week, and the mentions of London have made me incredibly happy that I know the places mentioned and also nostalgic for all the places I discovered. In the beginning of the novel—which, alas, we did not have time to tick off our reading list during the 2014 spring semester—Clarissa Dalloway declares, “I love walking in London. Really, it’s better than walking in the country.”

I heartily agree. London may be called “The Old Smoke” for the Great Smog of 1952, but every person who has encountered London in any way, shape, or form has created his or her own London, composed of the experiences and sights, sounds, tastes, and smells of the places they visited. And what better way to experience a city as rich as London than by foot?

The second day of the program, we (25 students and two professors) attended a day-long orientation organized by the lovely Donna Vinter. My flatmates and I left to head to the study center on Great Russell Street, just down the street from the British Museum, in a state of apprehension and profound disorientation. We had no idea where to go, but we met up with our other classmates, and almost all 25 of us traveled the streets in a pack, stopping on every corner to consult the map of someone’s guidebook. The highlight of the day was a guided walk around the British Museum, University College London, and Fitzroy Square, where Virginia Woolf lived with the Bloomsbury Group. My feelings of disorientation and confusion were exacerbated by the famous London rain that brought on a sea of umbrellas jostling on the busy sidewalks. Luckily, that feeling did not last long.

London is a city for people who like to walk. If you have enough energy and are willing and happy to get lost, London has endless possibilities. I found many more interesting things on my wanderings about than I would have if I had stuck to my path, such as markets with food vendors serving up delicious international delicacies, the smells of Indian, Jamaican, Italian, and Persian cuisines adding to the exhaust fumes of black taxis and red double-decker buses. I discovered much of the city by traveling on my own two feet, with the frequent help of the indispensable and ever-convenient London Underground.

The Oberlin-in-London program gave me not only the ability to walk the streets and discover anything and everything, but also new ways of looking at the city. Oberlin’s campus and academic atmosphere have been a wonderful place to live and learn for a few years, but you can only learn so much in a tiny town. London, on the other hand, is full of stories of different people and different cultures. The vibrancy and electric feel of the city were ever-present, and the joint class called Nature and Culture taught by Professors Roger Laushman and Nick Jones explored that. Reading Oberlin alumna Tracy Chevalier’s novel *Remarkable Creatures* exposed us to the hardships of Victorian life for Mary Anning in the male-dominated field of hunting the fossils that lined the cliffs of Lyme Regis and now line the walls of the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. We all became more familiar with the great spirit of Charles Darwin, still so important and prevalent today, during a visit to Down House, where we strolled around his house and gardens, finding bits of evidence of his endless scientific inquiry everywhere.

The layers upon layers of London’s very long history, dating from the time of the Romans when the area was called Londinium, coexist and shine both individually and as a whole.

Continued on page 6
BE OUR FRIEND!

TEN YEARS AGO, in the midst of a budget crisis, Oberlin-in-London was saved by the massive outpouring of support from alumni, students, and parents, including many of you. To help assure that the program will never again find itself in that position, we created an endowment. The fund is supported by the Friends of the Danenberg Oberlin-in-London Program, to which so many of you have also contributed in recent years. We ask each of you to be our Friend year in and year out so that the program will always be a part of Oberlin—and, we like to think, one of its very best parts.

Income from our endowment enhances the program in two ways: by contributing directly to our programming budget (to help pay for theater and concert tickets, field trips, museum admission fees, guest speakers, and so on), and by providing special Danenberg financial grants to students who might not be able to afford the program otherwise. Your gifts also provide tangible evidence of the support of alums and friends for the program, which is vitally important to ensure its future in a time of rapidly rising costs.

Unlike other such “membership” schemes, we have no sliding scale of donations and benefits—no mugs, sweatshirts, exclusive dinners, or other prizes. What we do have to offer you is the abiding knowledge that you are helping 25 Oberlin students experience the thrill of learning and living in London each and every year.

That said, this year we can offer all our 2015 Friends who contribute $100 (or more!) a copy of _What the English Know as Class_, the book that the politics students of the 2012 program produced based on their field research. If you’d like a copy, please say so in the Special Instructions box on the online donation page. Ta!

PLEASE CLICK TO JOIN THE FRIENDS OF THE LONDON PROGRAM.

LONDON 2014: CREATING MAPS, cont.

Weekly walks with the excellent British professor Katy Layton-Jones exposed me to facets of London about which I never would have known. From walks around Chiswick Gardens, which I encountered again in my Jefferson Architectural Books class this past fall, to strolls around the East End where we stood at some of the locations that Jack the Ripper was suspected to have haunted, the city (and the City—there’s a difference!) of London became an endlessly captivating novel. Other exciting walks included trips with Professor Laushman’s biology class by foot to the London Zoo in Regent’s Park or train rides to the Natural History Museum at Tring, and the hikes along the beach of Lyme Regis on the southwestern coast of England and the foggy fells (hills) of the Lake District during our group trips.

During my semester, I wrote in a journal every night what I had done that day. I made a point to remember the names of the streets I traveled so that I could then lay out my map of London on my bed after dinner and trace my steps. The map served me well, but after a while I began to create my own map in my mind. I walked enough around London that I could zoom in from a bird’s-eye view on the area I wanted to visit and then chart my journey before I began. I still have that map in my head more than a year later—even if it is a little vague and the names of the streets do not come as readily as before. The Oberlin-in-London Program made the construction of that map possible, and I eagerly look forward to the day when I can return to London. I look forward to not only tracing over steps I made in 2014 but also extending that map every time I go back.

OBERLIN WANTS TO KEEP IN TOUCH WITH YOU!

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