New Master of Arts Prepares Graduates
For Arts/Cultural Management and Advocacy

Looking out the floor-to-ceiling glass walls of the vacant 54th floor of 4 World Trade Center in New York City, MSU student Taylor Rupp turned to survey the 360-degree unobstructed views of lower Manhattan, New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty. Observing it all in silence, Taylor thought, “Amazing.”

Rupp was in the city at the invitation of Tina Newhauser and Adam Suellentrop. Within the College of Arts and Letters, Newhauser is faculty of stage management and associate director of the arts and cultural management master’s program, and Suellentrop is VP of client services for event design and production firm Barkley Kalpak Agency (BKA). BKA and Suellentrop were putting on an extremely high-level professional theatrical-type media event for client AOL.

“I’ve worked with Tina many times,” Suellentrop says, “and the only reason I’d bring on a student for a major event like this is Tina having confidence in her. Taylor didn’t disappoint.”

Working toward a BA—interdisciplinary studies in social science—Taylor recently added the College of Arts and Letters’ new arts and cultural management minor to her degree program. She says it is a perfect fit to help broaden her skills and enhance her value to employers.

After graduation, she hopes to work in grants administration, fundraising, or events management for an arts council or a foundation, and she has already had area internships with The Greater Lansing Arts Council and The Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs (MCACA).

The College’s new arts and cultural management master’s program is next for Taylor, and she notes that nine credits—three classes—will transfer over from the ACM minor to the two-year master’s program. “That’s a big incentive to continue on. Plus, I’ll be in the founding class!” Taylor says.

As to the reasoning behind her visit to New York this past April, Taylor says, “It’s important for my professional development that I learn everything I can about what all goes into putting on a large corporate-style event, a point that Tina also stresses in class,” Taylor says. “When the opportunity arose to do this, I jumped at it.”

Says Newhauser, “It’s a big deal for the students in our program that I can take them on these experiences. I know of only two other university programs that have this opportunity. But, then, it’s extremely rare to have a faculty stage management person who also has corporate show-calling experience, and for them to be able to share this with their students. These student experiences are a standout component of our arts and cultural management program.”

Start-to-finish work
Taylor says that it was particularly valuable to travel to New York City and experience firsthand—as well as actually work on—a major program from start to finish rather than just coming in the day of the event.

Arts and Cultural Management in NYC offers powerful student work experience

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We flew in on Sunday and flew back out Tuesday night after the show. Seeing how the stage, set and screen take shape, and working with professionals like Tina and Adam, was an incredible opportunity. Having never performed the stage manager or assistant stage manager role, it feels good to have some major experience under my belt.

And major, big-time professional experience is precisely what Taylor got, says Suellentrop. "AOL is our client, and there's an event in New York City called NewFront where all new media show what their upcoming digital online content is for the year," Suellentrop says. "And they're selling this to advertisers. It's the digital content version of the annual UpFront that does the same thing for television."

"So NewFront is an opportunity to showcase all the new digital content, and show advertisers where everything's going at AOL, or YouTube, or Hulu—or any of the numerous other digital content providers. It's a two-week-long schedule where marketing and advertising buyers go from event to event, and our job is to show that our client has the best content."

Continues Suellentrop, "We're pitching about 20 new shows in that hour and a half, with people on stage to present what the show is all about, and we have to make it theatrically entertaining, exciting, and move very quickly. Not a lot of time"

"We have to prepare the event space, and there's not a lot of time for rehearsals; maybe 15-30 minutes max. So rehearsal time is very, very tight and we need an efficient team that is highly focused. People are tweeting and blogging about it as it happens, so any fumbles are all visible."

On a technical level, Suellentrop says, the event was hugely time critical, too. "The event venue has to be one that helps communicate the excitement and vision for the coming year. So we were working in the 53rd and 54th floors of 4 World Trade Center, loading in and out of the most secure loading dock in the world—for obvious reasons—and working in a completely raw space with cement floors and open ceilings and glass walls with a 360-degree view of the city."

"We created a 100-feet-wide by 10-feet-tall video screen in the main presentation space, and our team was tasked with working together to transform the space into an intimate yet cinematic theatre experience. We had to create the setups for everyone, and some had multiple people, multiple props, or multiple cameras, as well as upwards of 50-60 people who had to be ushered onto the stage or backstage. So it's a very intense time where you're greeting people, getting them mic'd up, handing out scripts, making sure teleprompter changes get made."

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Adam says that among other tasks, Taylor was ushering the people, making sure props were in place and removed when done, making certain spikes (tape on the floor that shows where various set pieces go) were laid. "For instance, there was a three-piece band and we had just 30 seconds to set up and 45 seconds to strike it, so the spikes were critical," Suellentrop says."

"I found Taylor to be a very mature and strong team member. Whatever the problem we needed to solve, she was on top of it and jumped straight to the phase of 'Okay, I'm going to solve it,' or 'Here are my two questions to get that resolved.'"
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The feeling was mutual for Taylor. "BKA gave me a great deal of responsibility and trusted me not to 'fan-girl' with the stars," Taylor says. (Stars in the show to promote the upcoming season of their AO L online programs included Steve Buscemi announcing the return of his show Park Bench; James Franco who did the same for his show Making a Scene; as well as Kevin Jonas, Ryan Duffy, Deion Sanders, Arianna Huffington, and the New England Patriots’ Rob Gronkowski to name a few.)

"I learned about the cost of mounting such a huge show; the amount of staff required, including different sets of people each day; and many other important elements we studied about in Tina's class were reinforced on site."

Taylor says that she and Tina had no time to do anything other than the show, having to be on set at 8 a.m. each day and not leaving until 11 p.m. On Tuesday, the day of the show, they were on set the entire time except for lunch. "I handled props, made sure that doors were open or closed, that safety checks were made, and quite a bit more," Taylor says. "Tina was always available to answer questions, and give tips on what and how to approach various duties."

"The show was totally detailed and planned out, which led to an overall calming effect. In fact, Ariana Huffington's publicist commented that it was such a calm event, and how calm I and the other backstage people were during the show, including keeping our voice levels to a minimum."

Taylor adds that one of her key takeaways from working on the AOL NewFront event was to always anticipate what can go wrong. "For instance," Taylor says, "some talent didn't come to rehearsal, so we had to fill them in backstage on what they needed to do right before they went on."

But what was truly eye-opening to Taylor was BKA exec Adam Suellentrop's mastery of the onscreen images and video. "It amazed me that he knew every piece of content and its order. If it was the wrong piece or in the wrong order, he'd say, 'No, it should be….' "

"Adam would say, 'Let's go back to this line or this exact moment'' simply communicating over the headset and watching the screen. It was really cool to watch him work. He just got it, backwards and forwards. And seeing how good he was at his job made me aspire to someday be that good."

Asked to sum up the total three-day experience, Taylor says, "I absolutely loved it! It was such a cool experience. And it made me think that maybe I'd like to do corporate events a few times each year, like Tina does. They're so unique, and typically are in great places. But, more than that, this experience gave me a close-up look at another excellent career option."

"I don't think it's clear that it's an option for them, and that there's a great deal of work for it. NewFront is just one example among many."