

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Text and photos by Sean Tan

BEFORE MEDICAL students at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine begin their final year, they are given 14 weeks to spend on electives. This allows students to further their interests and diversify their learning experience beyond the normal timetable. However, with the frightening idea of the final MBBS hurdle and then starting work as a glorified clerk (whether houseman or resident) looming ahead, many of us (including myself) lined up rotations overseas and also took the opportunity to travel. To that end, I spent a total of ten weeks in New York City (NYC) and London, two of the biggest cities in the world from March to May last year. I spent many a happy afternoon exploring these two amazing cities. Although NYC and London are the most populated cities in the US and the UK respectively, they offer visitors completely different experiences.

The Big Apple

New York bustles with activity at all hours, and Singapore cannot hold a candle to this city that truly never sleeps. Nothing can compare to walking around Times Square, aglow with bright neon signs, at

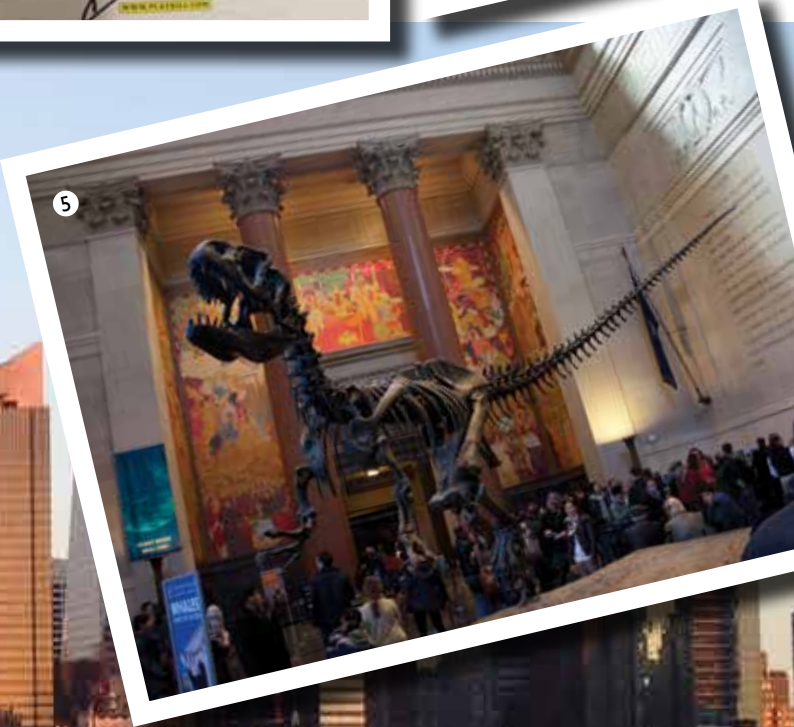
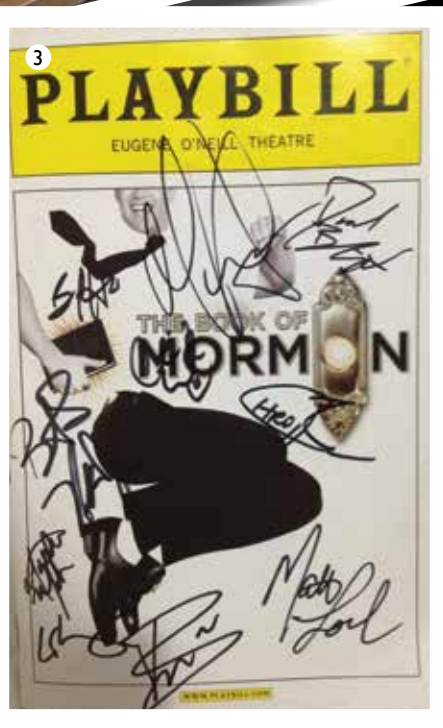
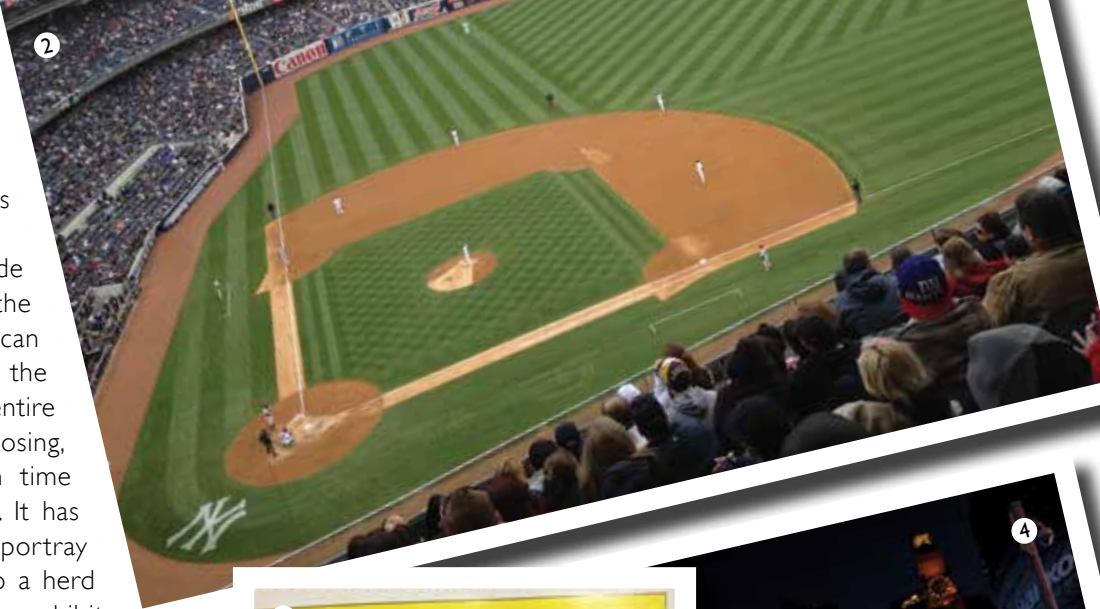
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2 am in the morning, with crowds of people still out and about.

The must-sees in this city include its many museums. One of the most noteworthy is the American Museum of Natural History on the Upper West Side. I spent an entire day there, from its opening to closing, and still did not have enough time to fully explore all the exhibits. It has amazingly realistic dioramas that portray everything from grizzly bears to a herd of African elephants. My favourite exhibit was the entire floor dedicated to fossils and the evolution of animals, with the T-rex and the woolly mammoth as the highlights. These exhibits are the real deal, unlike other museums, which display plaster casts of such extinct animals. I highly recommend the free highlights tour, led by wonderful volunteers, that takes you through the main attractions of the museum's extensive collection, in just over an hour. The most amusing part of the tour was when my guide gave out free sharks' teeth as souvenirs at the end because the museum apparently had too many to spare.

One thing I feel most visitors overlook is that the admission fees are only suggested fees, meaning



that the prices stated are not set in stone. As a student with zero income, that meant that I could pay all of one dollar (S\$1.30) for a full-day pass at the museum. (However, having said that, I fully intend to pay the full suggested price once I start earning an income, for one of the most enjoyable experiences I ever had at a museum.) However, such pricing schemes do not extend to all museums, the Museum of Modern Art being a prime example.

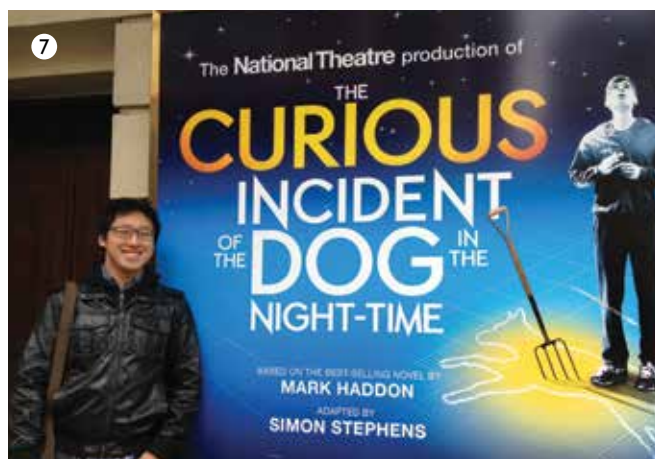
Another thing that you *have* to do in NYC is watch Broadway shows. I was able to catch quite a number of shows comfortably (seven in total) because I spent almost six weeks in the city, a little longer than the average tourist. One of the hallmarks of Broadway is the lottery system. Simply appear at the theatres two-and-a-half hours before a show. Two hours prior to curtain call, they will draw names for discounted tickets (usually for pretty decent seats, and some even offer

And as any Singaporean male who has done National Service can attest, standing still for nearly three hours is not a problem – at least they provide a railing to lean on during the performance!

London calling

My time in the British capital was a whole different ball game. In general, London is slower paced, and the people a lot more reserved in their manner, in contrast to NYC. Unlike the NYC subway that runs 24/7, the Tube in London only runs until about 12.30 am and most restaurants in London close around 10 pm, whereas it is possible to still make dinner reservations at 11 pm in NYC. Although NYC is extremely vibrant, I felt that London has a lot more cultural capital in comparison.

One of the most interesting experiences I had was watching *A Midsummer's Night Dream* at the



those from the front row stalls). The big shows that do this are *Wicked* and *The Book of Mormon* (BOM). The latter in particular is sold out for months in advance, making the lottery one of your only options to get a reasonably priced ticket. I tried my hand at the BOM lottery four times, but walked away empty-handed at every attempt.

Thankfully, there is actually an even more economical alternative. Many sold-out shows issue cheap standing room seats, which is what I eventually resorted to. You have to be really determined and patient though! I started queuing at 2.30 pm one afternoon for the 7 pm BOM show. However, it was definitely worth the wait, and for a student, the ticket is *highly* affordable too. My BOM standing stall ticket was US\$27, as compared to normal tickets which can cost more than US\$150 each.

Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in Southwark. I'm usually not the biggest Shakespeare fan, but being in such a beautiful building and watching such a great staging of the play is an experience in itself. It also doesn't hurt that standing yard tickets are only five pounds (S\$10.40).

There are also plenty of other things to see in London, like the Tower Bridge, London Eye, Natural History Museum, but what I enjoyed the most was the West End.

London's West End puts on the usual musicals that are naturally worth seeing, but what they truly excel in is staging really engaging plays, which are not always on the average tourist's radar, but should *definitely* not be missed!

One of the two best plays I watched was *The Curious*

Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, a play based on the eponymous book by Mark Haddon, which tells the story of an autistic child who solves the murder of his neighbour's dog. The whole stage was built as if it were made of graph paper. With minimal props and some clever lighting, they were able to transform the space into anything from a row of houses to a tube station. It was one of the most enthralling plays I have seen in a long time, and I would highly recommend it to anyone visiting London. No wonder it won Best New Play in last year's Olivier Awards, which honours the best in British theatre!

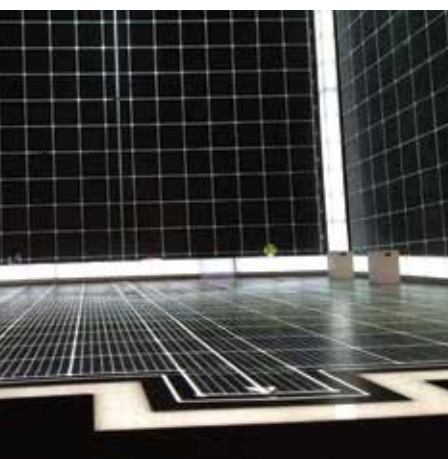
I watched the other play, *Peter and Alice*, more for its famous headliners than the performance itself. Judi Dench and Ben Whishaw (who played M and Q in the recent James Bond film *Skyfall*) played Alice Liddell Hargreaves and Peter Llewelyn Davies, who in real life inspired the titular characters of the children's classics

bit crazy, but I feel that it's part of the whole West End experience. Plus, you meet some of the nicest people in the queues. I had long conversations with the most fascinating people who are all bonded by their love for the theatre. It's definitely an experience to be had!

I feel extremely lucky to have had the opportunity to visit these two world-famous cities. Until the next trip then, hopefully on my own dime (and a thicker wallet) this time! **SMA**



Sean is a final year medical student at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, and according to his friends, "studies overseas in Singapore". He aims to visit all the continents in the world one day.



Alice in Wonderland and *Peter Pan*. The play revolves around a chance encounter between the two in a bookstore and expounds upon their ensuing discussion. The two stars effortlessly pulled off a gut-wrenching performance about childhood, innocence and the trials of growing up.

Both of these shows were sold out for months, and unlike NYC's lottery system, London relies on the day ticket system, where people would start queuing before the box office opens around 10 am, and buy a limited number of day seats. With regard to *Peter and Alice*, because it was a highly anticipated show, my friends and I began queuing from 3.30 in the morning, a full seven hours before the box office finally opened at 10.30 am. The limited number of day tickets were all accounted for by the time 5 am rolled around. It all sounds a little

Photos

1. The NYC skyline
2. Watching the New York Yankees play at their home ballpark Yankee Stadium
3. Managed to get the autographs of the BOM stars!
4. Times Square at night
5. The amazing Museum of Natural History
6. The stunning Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, a modern reconstruction of the original Globe Theatre which existed in 17th-century London
7. I highly recommend *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*
8. *The Curious Incident's* inventive set
9. BOM was also showing in London
10. Waiting for *Peter and Alice* to begin