

“BUILD IT”
THE BEGINNINGS OF FOREST FRINGE

Written component of a practical dissertation in producing

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For the MA of Text and Performance Studies
King’s College London
September 2008

THE IDEA



The Fringe: a backdrop

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe, more often called “The Fringe,” consists of several separate festivals happening during August in Edinburgh. The details of these events are usually listed in “The Fringe Guide”, a thick brochure compiled by the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society comprising of separate sections for visual arts, theatre, dance, music, comedy, and until 2008, Film¹. Edinburgh’s theatre festival is the largest English speaking festival in the world. In 2008 there were over 2,088 shows at over 247 official fringe venues². The theatre festival comprises of the International Festival, a handful of programmed and invited shows from around the world, and “the Fringe,” which started in 1947 when eight companies came uninvited to perform alongside the International Festival. Although “Fringe” still refers to a specific faction of the festival, the term is also interchangeable with “The

¹ 2008 was the first year that the annual Edinburgh International Film Festival took place in July instead of August.

² ‘Fringe Facts’, *EdFringe.com: Official Site of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe*, <http://www.edfringe.com/area.html?r_menu=global&id=48>. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

Edinburgh Festival” because the Edinburgh Festival *Fringe* Guide generally lists all Festival events. When the term is employed in reference to the theatre festival, it generally means anything outside of the International Festival, and Fringe theatre varies from student, to amateur, to professional productions. Companies taking part in the umbrella term “The Fringe” are not vetted artistically. Providing one finds a space and pays their entry/programme fee of £328, any one can perform in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

As participation depends on space, local properties become venues in Edinburgh during August, renting out performance space at extremely high prices.³ Companies often bring shows to the festival with loss built into their contracts with a venue. While the festival is an artistic free for all⁴, cost of programme inclusion, travel, accommodation, publicity, and venue hire mean that it risks being a festival that is free for all who can afford it.

Having spent August 2006 as a performer in a puppet show in Edinburgh, I was impressed by the magnitude of the Edinburgh Festival, but also well acquainted with its problems. Free access to companies at the festival meant that there were too many desperate performers constantly flying in a publicity frenzy that suffocated creativity.⁵ Securing a good, central venue was integral to a show’s success.

In 2006, Edinburgh shows could be separated into five categories, based on their venues:

1. *Invited groups*: Established artists who were invited to perform at established venues - The Traverse, The International Festival and Aurora Nova. Artists do not have to pay for the rental of their space, though they do have to pay for inclusion in the Fringe Programme⁶ and are selectively programmed. In the case of the Traverse, they also give 40% of their box office to the venue.
2. *Student theatre*: Shows sponsored by a university which take place at a venue for hire or a venue with a commitment to student theatre, C Venues or the Bedlam Theatre among others. Artists have to pay for rental of their space, but these costs are usually covered by their universities.
3. *Self funded groups on application*: Artists with shows at selective commercial venues: Pleasance, Assembly Halls, the Under Belly,

³ See Venue Rental Prices in Index

⁴ “Remaining true to our policy of open-access for all performers” quoted in ‘About the Fringe’, *EdFringe.com: Official Site of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe*, <http://www.edfringe.com/area.html?r_menu=global&id=36>. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

⁵ “Before going up there everyone told me that Edinburgh was a beautiful city and that I would have a great time. But I was also warned that we might play to one or two people in the audience! That we needed to hand out flyers for four hours each day!”
Connie Baumann, ‘Edinburgh Experience’, *iCreative Choices*, <<http://www.creative-choices.co.uk/server.php?show=ConBlogEntry.194>>. 22 August 2008. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

⁶ See letter from Volcano General Manger in Index.

Guided Balloon or the Bedlam Theatre. Artists have to pay for space in these venues, but the shows are selectively programmed based on artistic merit or commercial viability.

4. *Self funded groups*: Artists who pay entry into the Official Fringe Programme and perform at venues that do not choose work based on artistic merit, but on a first come, first serve basis. These are usually amateur theatre groups paying for their rental of their space themselves.
5. *Groups at the Free Fringe*: A comedy and theatre festival offering free venues. Artists only pay the fee of being included in the programme and are not selected for artistic merit. They are taken at venues on a first come, first served basis. These venues, however, are consistently far from the city centre.⁷

The Venue: What is in a Space

At the Edinburgh Festival, punters (the slang for Edinburgh Festival goers) consciously or unconsciously tend to group their preconceived ideas of shows according to venues to keep track of what is on offer.⁸ The venue becomes a major selling point in a punter's mind. What seemed to be a constant in my grouping for 2006 was that venues with a reputation for quality work (those that were selective with their shows based on artistic merit) were free for established artists (Aurora Nova and Traverse) but not for emerging artists. The venues that selectively programmed emerging artists (Assembly, Pleasance, The Bedlam and Underbelly) charged for rental of their space. The Free Fringe was an option for emerging artists on a shoestring, but included as many as 350 shows, and in such a large, patchy festival companies would have to work doubly hard to publicize their show and stand out from the crowd⁹. It seemed that for talented emerging and unknown artists at the Fringe, performing in a venue with a reputation for artistic quality was reserved for those who could afford it.

In 2006 my friend Charlotte Jarvis was General Manager of the Bedlam Theatre during the festival. She had seen a reading of a play of mine that was in development and offered me one of the slots at the venue. I was elated, until she told me that this competitive slot would cost £600 to rent for

⁷ See Venue Rental Prices in Index

⁸ "Although there are hundreds of venues that run performances during the Fringe, there are a handful that dominate in terms of boasting the best shows and the biggest names." James Seabright, 'Surviving the Edinburgh Fringe' *iwhatsonstage.com*, <<http://www.whatsonstage.com/blogs/scotland/?p=104>>. 25 July 2008. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

⁹ "The Free Festival boasts 158 shows spread over 13 rooms in eight venues, The Free Fringe has 120 shows in its programme in venues all over the city [...] It takes a huge amount of work to get bums on all of these seats and although the groups are supported to an extent by Peter Buckley-Hill, who runs the Free Fringe, they are essentially on their own." Corry Shaw, 'Should It Be a Free-For-All?', *Chortle*, <http://www.chortle.co.uk/correspondents/2008/08/14/7234/should_it_be_a_free-for-all%3F>. 14 August 2008. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

a two week run. She added that including flyers, inclusion in the Fringe programme and publicity I should expect to pay at least £2000 for the show, which would be cheap since I lived in Edinburgh and would not have to pay accommodation for myself or my cast. I was still developing as an artist, and the play itself was also in development. Turning this project into a costly two week run at a saturated world famous festival was a terrifying prospect that seemed antithetical to the ideals I had always associated with Edinburgh Festival. I realized that for an artist in my position, bringing work to the Edinburgh Festival was essentially a gamble.

Stars and Costs: The Fringe as a platform

Blackjack in Edinburgh is a success story. This is a prize that has been extremely well publicized. Tom Stoppard is a good example: He came to the Edinburgh Festival with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* as a student in 1966, and the performance was so successful that his play came to the attention of Kenneth Tynan who staged it at the National Theatre in 1967. That same year the play transferred to Broadway¹⁰. The hype and the excitement that an otherwise unknown artist can generate during their three weeks in Edinburgh does appear to make careers, though many would argue that the Festival is not pivotal in these cases:

Many highly successful performers first made a critical success on the Edinburgh Fringe, but it would be fatuous to claim that the Fringe 'made' anyone's career. All it did, and does, was provide a platform for anyone who, if they are good enough, can enjoy national, and even international, critical and popular acclaim.¹¹

In 2006, in addition to performing in a puppet show, I was peripherally working as a press attaché for Volcano Productions, an established theatre company from Canada. Volcano's 2006 show *Goodness* fit into the first category of festival shows mentioned - This was their fourth time being invited to perform at the Traverse at the Fringe, and *Goodness* went on to win a Fringe First and the Carol Tambor "Best of the Fringe" Award, which provided a New York transfer. I represented *Goodness* for the press launch at the Traverse in June, and that day I was struck by the feeling that even in the highest and most well respected echelons of the festival, a commercial pressure was very present. All of the companies performing at Traverse awkwardly sat at tables and waited for members of the press to approach them. Few did. Although Traverse did not charge artists, for a Canadian company like Volcano, bringing a professional cast of eight to Edinburgh was expensive enough. In fact, *Goodness* was denied a substantial grant from the

¹⁰ 'Tom Stoppard', *Contemporary Writers webpage, British Council*, <<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth254>>. (Accessed 3 September 2008)

¹¹ Alastair Moffat, *The Edinburgh Fringe* (London: Johnston and Bacon, 1978), p. 41.

Canadian Arts Council in July and had to petition by email to provide the extra £12,000 required to stage the show.¹²

Once the festival was underway, *Goodness* was reviewed at three stars by one newspaper early on, and they were crushed by the news. The director knew from his experience the year before (with a play he directed called *My Pyramids*) that too many three star reviews can ensure that an Edinburgh play, regardless of its initial publicity, venue or quality, is quietly forgotten. In 2006 there were, after all, twenty shows at the Traverse to choose from over a three-week period.¹³ If a punter only focussed on shows at this, arguably the most selective, venue in Edinburgh, they could still never watch everything. In Edinburgh, a surplus of shows means that a five or four star rating is the only acceptable review. Although a three star review points to a show being adequate, in Edinburgh a show needs to be “unmissable” to stand out from the two thousand others it is competing with.

“Networking” or the Race for Attention

The Scotsman, an otherwise medium run Scottish paper, is the arbiter of taste during the Festival. This is largely due to the fact that The Scotsman gives out an award called “The Fringe First”, which was started in 1973 to recognize excellence in new plays. The award goes to several shows at the Festival, and is decided on by a panel comprising of the theatre reviewer from the Scotsman and two other reviewers to recognize excellence in new writing. There can be no greater honour at the Edinburgh Festival, and even the American Carol Tambor “Best of the Fringe” Award works from a shortlist of four and five star reviews in the Scotsman.¹⁴ This year, Ella Hickson’s *Eight* won a Fringe First, despite only getting two reviews, one of which was two stars.¹⁵ Nonetheless, *Eight* was reviewed favourably by The Scotsman and went on to win the Carol Tambor. Next year the show will be staged in New York.¹⁶

The clamour for press attention breeds a kind of frenzy at festival time that riddles most conversations with a “Who are you and where can you get

¹² “The department of Foreign Affairs notified us that our touring grant is \$9,000. This is \$24,000 short of our request. Our costs exceed \$80,000. I am in trouble. Volcano is in trouble.” Ross Manson. “Something I’ve Never Done Before” Email Petition. June 23, 2006. Included in Index.

¹³ *Traverse Archives 2002 to Current*, <<http://www.traverse.co.uk/archive-2002.php>>. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

¹⁴ ‘Join Us to Celebrate the Very Best of the Fringe’, *The Scotsman*, <<http://thescotsmanscotsmans.com/festival?articleid=4351144>>. 1 August 2008. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

¹⁵ Smith, Jack, ‘Review for Eight’, *whatsonstage.com*, <<http://www.whatsonstage.com/blogs/scotland/?p=271>>. 11 August 2008. (Accessed 6 September 2008)

¹⁶ ‘Fringe First Awards Week 3’, *Edfringe.com*, *Official website of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe*, <http://www.edfringe.com/story.html?id=2465&area_id=31>. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

me” veiled small talk. At the Press Launch in June of 2006, I was experiencing this for the first time. It seemed a shame, given that the atmosphere at the Traverse bar can also be geared towards networking in the best sense. Performers meet, share ideas, email addresses, and often go on to collaborate. Companies inspire each other by seeing each other’s work, and directors at the bar are constantly scribbling in their notebooks about a new idea. It occurred to me that an opportunity to air, communicate and create new work without the war for five star reviews to attract awards and artistic directors would likely be as exciting a possibility for established companies as it would be for emerging ones. In Edinburgh during the festival, theatre feels particularly alive and everyone has an opinion– Where better to establish a supportive place for these artists to develop ideas for their own sake?

The Problem of Edinburgh Festival: The burden of costs and the prospect of experimentation

In 2006 I was about to begin my Master’s in London, and the overseas fees I would have to pay loomed heavy over my bank account. To save money I was reviewing for a Scottish website and seeing shows free of charge and at the Bedlam Theatre at a performer’s discount of £1. It was very rare that I would pay over £5 for a ticket unless it had been enthusiastically recommended to me by at least three people. For me, the 2006 Edinburgh Festival was about paying for the price of my ticket with my feedback – either on the Scottish Theatre website or in conversations at the Bedlam bar with my fellow performers.

In most cases, a company pays at least £328 for inclusion in the Fringe programme (more likely £2000, depending on venue rental and including costs and publicity), and a ticket bought goes toward recouping some of these costs. But very few shows make money at the Fringe. If the show is very successful it breaks even¹⁷. Seeing shows costs money and producing shows costs money - so both performers and audiences appear to be losing money at the Festival. If the Festival is about the experience of performing rather than making money¹⁸, reducing the cost of performing would necessarily reduce the cost of a ticket. If costs were covered for performers, they might feel comfortable making ticket prices free, considering the experience of performing at the Fringe payment in itself.

In summary, the major problem of the Edinburgh Festival was that risk and experimentation were being suffocated by:

¹⁷ See Volcano budget in index. Keep in mind this show won the Carol Tambor “Best of the Fringe” award.

¹⁸ “Willy [you] make a fortune? Honestly, probably not. But the experience of performing at the Fringe is priceless.”

‘How Much Will it Cost’, *edfringe.com*, <http://www.edfringe.com/story.html?id=345&area_id=27>. (Accessed 6 September 2008)

1. An emphasis on five star reviews as an “Edinburgh Success.”
2. The expense for audience members and companies.

Luckily, in December 2006, I was put into the position to take steps towards creating a place that would go some distance toward providing an alternative for what I felt were the major problems with the Edinburgh Festival. I was put into the position to found the Forest Fringe.

Forest Fringe: a backdrop

I had been volunteering at the Forest Café and Arts Collective since moving to Edinburgh in December of 2005, and quietly analyzing what I felt were the main problems with the organization. Forest is an arts charity run and managed co-operatively and supported by a volunteer staffed organic cafe. Quoted from their website, these are their objectives:

a) To enable greater access to all forms of the performing arts by providing an open arts venue and facilities in which all events will be open and free of charge to artists and audiences alike.

b) To provide opportunities to learn and develop skills by providing art and cultural workshop programmes. All programmes will be open and free of charge to members of the general public.

c) To increase access to art by providing a community art gallery and exhibitions of local and international artists. All exhibitions will be open and free of charge to members of the general public.

d) To facilitate the development of artists' work and skills by providing facilities to practice, rehearse and advance their work.

*e) To build co-operation and cultural understanding by working with other institutions and individuals, both locally and in the wider international community.*¹⁹

When I first arrived in the city I was amazed by the ethos of Forest. After joining and volunteering, however, I soon realized that the best intentions and ideas of the organization lost out to bureaucratic arguments in

¹⁹ 'Objects of the Forest', *The Forest Constitution*, <<http://www.theforest.org.uk/constitution/constitution/>>. (Accessed 3 September 2008)

meetings and a lack of seriousness among members.²⁰ This resulted in perpetuating Forest's reputation among Edinburgh locals as a cliquey and unreliable organization.²¹ The upstairs space in the Forest was also frustrating. From the moment I saw the converted Adventist church they were using for the occasional Yoga class, I knew that it would make an enviable fringe theatre space. Unfortunately, most theatre-making members of the Edinburgh community avoided Forest avidly because they worried that the "half assed hippy" reputation of the café would somehow rub off on their project. Edinburgh can be a small and judgmental city and the atmosphere of Forest stuck out like a sore thumb, except during the Festival.

Forest at the Fringe

During the festival artists would flock from all over the city to enjoy eating at one of only two organic cafes in Edinburgh. Famous and emerging musicians alike would scramble to play on the cafe stage to attract punters to their show. Those who know Forest from August had an impression of it as exactly what it aims to be: a free access arts space full of creative, vital energy and a refreshing sense of community.²²

For theatre, however, Forest had established itself badly. The Forest Drama Group had been meeting once a week for eight years and generally, in my experience, had been creating sub-par political work that they would occasionally perform at the Fringe. Achieving a credible space upstairs would mean working against their reputation and distancing ourselves from one of the key components of the collective's mandate: Free Access.

A successful theatre festival needed to be co-operatively staffed by a talented and small community of professional and emerging artists who were committed to the work and were *selected* by a core panel of programmers. Quality was key to this project – if the Forest came with a certain set of expectations for audiences, we would have to consistently surpass those expectations until the expectations had changed. Free Access would not only make the venue confusing for audiences, but it would be detrimental to building a long term reputation as a venue with a stake in developing quality work. A policy of free access would also make us no different than the Free Festival and the Free Fringe.

²⁰ A perusal of the Forest bulletin board, where members discuss projects online, does justice to this statement <<http://www.theforest.org.uk/bb/viewtopic.php?f=66&t=4803>>. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

²¹ "The Forest Café is full of hippies" Comment posted. *The Edinburgh Evening News*, <<http://edinburghnews.scotsman.com/ViewArticle.aspx?articleid=3274562>>. 4 August 2007. (Accessed 3 September 2008)

²² "Situated in an old building on several floors, in the Edinburgh University area, the co-operatively run Forest Cafe isn't just a restaurant for wholesome veggie food, but a hub for Edinburgh's activists, artists and free-thinkers."

'The Forest Café', *EdinburghGuide.com*, <<http://www.edinburghguide.com/venue/forestcafe>>. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

One early morning I realized that my problem with the Edinburgh Festival and my problem with the Forest had the same solution.

1. Forest was in need of a committed and talented group of artists to realize a project and do the ethos of the organization justice.
2. The Edinburgh Festival was in need of a venue committed to development that rejected the commercial frenzy of the festival.

Forest and Fringe: the making of a new model

Where Forest could provide a free space for a non-commercial venue, the opportunities provided at the Edinburgh Festival could draw the talented group of artists to run and staff that venue. Forest Fringe was the answer. I was in the fortunate position of having recently met dozens of talented emerging and established theatre-makers in London and Scotland who would help me create the initial programme. It would take two years, but we would pull it off. With the original spirit of risk and experimentation that must have led the eight companies in Edinburgh to come to the International Festival uninvited, I began planning a Fringe of the Official Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It was time for us to pull up our bootstraps and do something different.



THE ETHOS

Participatory Economics and The Artist Led Co-operative Model



Theatre has a history of co-operatively led companies. In the 1970s in Holland Werkteater operated as an Actor's Co-operative, "without a director, designer or writer."²³ Student and community theatres operate on similar models. The Co-Operative Arts Theatre in Nottingham's Silver Jubilee Programme shows a photograph of members on a tea break from building the theatre itself.²⁴ But running a two-week Edinburgh Festival venue co-operatively presents challenges to the co-operative model. Where co-operative companies, student theatres and community theatres generally work together on a long term basis, Forest Fringe runs as it does for two

²³ Jack Heyer, 'Her Werkteater: An Actor's Co-operative', *Theatre Papers*, ed. by Alan Read, 4th series, 3 (1981-1982), p. 3.

²⁴ *The Co-Operative Arts Theatre Silver Jubilee: 1948-1973*. (Nottingham: The Nottingham Printers Ltd., 1973), p. 7.

weeks, meaning that establishing a sense of community and ownership in a short period of time with performers may be more difficult, but not impossible.

What makes Forest Fringe unique from other venues in Edinburgh is our firm commitment to developing rather than performing work. Through the volunteer run model at Forest Fringe, which was adopted out of financial necessity, we were able to establish a greater sense of community between performers that lead to useful connections, feedback and likely collaborations between performers who were previously unacquainted. Ultimately, this method of staffing of the venue lead into developing new works. The unorthodox structure of this approach, however, also requires an alternative business model that is reflective of its particular artistic concerns and collective sensibilities—a new form of conducting business, a new form of economics.

Participatory Economics is an alternative form of economic organization championed by Michael Albert. Chomsky is quoted as saying that Participatory Economics “merits close attention, debate, and action.”²⁵ *Parecon*, as it is often called, involves every member of an organization rotating tasks and receiving equal pay, while having equal ownership of a business. The same person who one week might do a “high profile” job such as Graphic Design, the next week would do recycling or take out the garbage.²⁶

Although Forest Fringe does not operate on a strict model of Parecon (There are venue managers, but these roles rotate responsibilities – one manager is in charge of the hall one day and the tech where the other manager is in charge of co-ordinating volunteers, etc), in planning our staffing we took some of the essential tenets of Albert’s model on board. The question of equal distribution of payment does not apply – nobody is paid at our venue, except, arguably, in obtaining longer access to space. However, companies with a longer run at the Forest Fringe are expected to volunteer more than other companies, and every performer is told they have to volunteer a minimum of three times regardless of the length of their run.

Albert’s model is particularly useful with regard to the rotation of tasks. There is a significant difference in glamour in the required day-to-day tasks. For instance, where some shifts involve watching other companies’ show and doing publicity and box office, morning shifts include recycling, by far the most taxing job at the venue; several very large bins filled with all of the beer, broken glass and miscellaneous rubbish from the previous day at the

²⁵ Noam Chomsky, ‘*Parecon: Life After Capitalism* Item Overview’ AK Press Website, <http://akpress.com/2003/items/parecon?affiliate_id=2848>. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

²⁶ “Each actor does a job, and each job of course includes a variety of tasks. In rejecting current divisions of labor, we decide to balance for their empowerment and quality of life implications the tasks each actor does”
Michael Albert, *Parecon: Life After Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 2003), p. 9.

café, the bar and for the venue are left in our stairwell every morning, and as part of our arrangement with Forest, we dispose of them. Because of the Edinburgh Council's unique recycling laws, these bins need to be wheeled to the receptacles a block and a half away, then emptied by putting bottles through the Edinburgh bins individually, bottle by bottle. This is followed by the mandatory cleaning of the bins with soap and subsequent drying—a potentially unpleasant task given the bins' strong, foul stench. Every volunteer (and venue manager) is expected to do the recycling duties at least once, and this “dirty work” goes a long way toward creating a sense of good will and support among performers and staff.

Andy Field, my co-director this year, writes nicely about the sense of community created by co-operative cleaning at the venue:

I grabbed a mop and some hot water and started at it. Soon enough a gaggle of folk from some of the companies performing at the venue arrived to volunteer their help. Stepping out of the early morning rain like characters in the tearjerking finale to the 1987 film Batteries Not Included they rolled up their sleeves, grabbed their own bucket and started cleaning. A BAC producer and a Royal Court young writer scraped dried children's paint from the wooden alter at the front of the auditorium, meanwhile outside two performance artists from Bristol mopped the stone steps.²⁷

The publicity/front of house role at Forest Fringe is also integral to creating a supportive and non-competitive atmosphere for performers. The publicity aspect of Front of House involves taking one of our programmes with several extras on hand (we have a no flyering policy) and speaking to members of the café or punters in the Guilded Balloon about half an hour before a show. Publicity volunteers let prospective audience members know, in a conversational way (without yelling or pressuring) that a show is going on across the road or upstairs and that it is pay what you can or free. We only publicized within a one block radius. If the punter seemed interested in the venue then they were given a programme to come see more work later. I established this method of publicity because I had personally found the kooky “Come SEE Our Show! Come See Our Show!” method of flyering common on the main Festival thoroughfare to be one of the most irritating aspects of walking around Edinburgh. I felt that word of mouth and consistent quality would provide the greatest number of audience members at Forest Fringe, and very often, especially learning that the show was pay what you can or free, members of the public who were approached casually were likely to take a risk on a show. Interestingly, I recently read an article

²⁷ Andrew Field, ‘Absurd Living and Heartbreak at Edinburgh’s Independent Festival’, *The List*, <<http://www.list.co.uk/article/11549-absurd-living-and-heartbreak-at-independent-edinburgh-festival/>>. 13 August 2008. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

espousing the same principle as an effective way of generating interest in a show.²⁸

This aspect of volunteering creates solidarity between performers. When one performer sees another performer talking about their show to members of the public, they are reminded that we have an obligation to each other to support and promote each other's work. This is where the model is extremely effective for development. Possibly as a result of our free tickets, performers at the venue constantly went to see each other's pieces and offered feedback, often while working together as volunteers (recycling being a prime bonding activity). Although collaboration and discussion happen in any venue, having previously unrelated companies work together and for each other created a sense of camaraderie that was particularly strong at Forest Fringe. There was no hierarchical structure for staff and talent because companies and staff were one and the same. Moreover, the majority of the performers who filled in Feedback Forms in 2007 agreed that volunteering alongside their colleagues and peers strengthened the sense of community amongst them (see index).

The limitations of the model

As discussed above, the advantages of collective participation are the ideal benefits of the volunteer run co-operative, however the model was not without its problems. Charles Ryder, who performed and volunteered at the venue in 2007, commented on the problem of other performers not "pulling their weight" in his feedback form. When asked what aspects of his experience he was unsatisfied with, he replied: "I would have liked to see the other companies be more involved in volunteering. I thought the venue managers did a wonderful job and I found time to help out even though I was performing 2 shows a day and I was a one man band."²⁹ The difficulty in forcing companies to meet their volunteer obligations was that the only palpable threat was to pull their show, which in our inaugural year would have been as damaging to the reputation of our venue as it was to the company.

As a result of poor volunteer turn out in 2007, James Baster, Andy Field and I discussed holding deposits from companies in 2008 to ensure that they risked a loss if they failed to volunteer adequately. In the end we abandoned this idea, fearing it may encourage performers to offer us money instead of time, which was antithetical to what we were trying to achieve. Instead I co-ordinated a volunteer schedule that was booked further in

²⁸ Tania Katan, 'Interview: Selling Tania's Privates', *The Scotsman*, <<http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/festival/Tania-Katan-interview-Selling-Tania39s.4373759.jp>>. 8 August 2008. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

²⁹ Charles Ryder, Forest Fringe 2007 Feedback Form. See Index.

advance than the year before, and was more persistent with performers in 2008. I had a mobile phone specifically reserved for volunteer management. I called performers the day before their shifts to remind them that they were working. Despite this arrangement, nonetheless, some performers did not show up for their shifts, often at very inconvenient times. Fortunately, however, this year members of the Edinburgh theatre community and the Forest, unrelated to Forest Fringe, volunteered their time in support of the venue, and a few of these members of the community turned up last minute to cover shifts for absent performers.

The Co-operative model for Forest Fringe is, admittedly, not fully reliable as it hinges on the goodwill of the companies' involved. But the benefits it brings are integral to the spirit of community at Forest Fringe. Ideally, as the venue's reputation continues to build, performers will see it as being in their best interest to remain on good terms with Forest Fringe, and the desire to be invited back next year will mean that companies fulfil their volunteer requirements more consistently.

SUCCESS AND DEVELOPMENT



Last year I wrote in the RADA Alumni magazine “...My idea had nothing to do with ‘bums in seats.’ It had to do with the benefits that performers could take from our venue during the festival. This is what development is all about.”³⁰ This, however, is not always true. If a performer has travelled a long way and worked very hard on a piece, a small audience is disheartening, unless all the right people (meaning press and promoters) come to see it. Nonetheless I was prompted to make the above statement because at Forest Fringe in 2007, the shows that went on to have paid commissions were *not* the shows that sold out.

David Overend created a show called *Demises* for Forest Fringe inspired by our space, Bristo Hall. He created his show over the course of his six days at Forest Fringe, starting from nothing and building his project every day through rehearsals that were open to the public. *Demises* has since gone on to tour at theatre festivals in Derbyshire, Glasgow and Amsterdam while also appearing at Arches LIVE this September.³¹

Andy Field identified a way to make a mark at the festival when he used his slot in 2007 to create a show called *Exposures*. He bought several disposable cameras and gave audiences instructions to create a photographic tour of Edinburgh. At Aurora Nova, where Andy was working,

³⁰ Deborah Pearson, ‘New Material,’ *RADA’s Magazine*, 4, 2007. 12 -13 (p. 13).

³¹ ‘Demises: Touring in 2008’, *davidoverend.net*, <<http://davidoverend.net/>>. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

he met Lyn Gardiner, the theatre reviewer for the Guardian, and she promised to come to see his show. Lyn came with her daughter Ellie and loved it.³² Lyn Gardiner went on to champion our venue in 2008, when Chris Goode commented that “for a while the Edinburgh page at the Guardian web site seemed as though it might actually have become a sort of surrogate marketing department for them: and why not?”³³ Wolfgang Hoffman, the artistic director of Aurora Nova, heard about Andy’s show and pointed him toward a commission with Komedia at the Brighton Festival and a commission with Aurora Nova for the Dublin Fringe Festival, both for 2008.

These are the two primary success stories of Forest Fringe 2007. David’s success was a result of his commitment to the idea he had developed over nearly a week in Edinburgh, while Andy had one shot (Andy had one slot at Forest Fringe 2007 and David had six) but made it count. At such an early stage in the venue’s reputation, Forest Fringe’s model was only as strong as the initiative of the artists involved and the quality of their ideas – we gave the artists the space, and they saw how far they could go with it.

Interestingly, however, both shows were developed specifically for Forest Fringe and both shows were completely unrehearsed, which leads one to believe that as the venue has a stake in development, ideas and work that are newly born tend to work best at Forest Fringe. My personal experience attests to it – in 2007 I brought a relatively polished and rehearsed show to the venue, but this year I brought two shows to Forest Fringe, one that was rehearsed with actors, and one that was created over the course of the festival. The show I created over the course of the festival was the more successful piece – it was an intimate show for four people that I performed four times over the course of an evening, and I was improving on it and experimenting with it from performance to performance. Several producers from the Battersea Arts Centre came to see it and have invited me to take part in Scratch Fest this October at the BAC as a result.

“The Paper Cinema,” our company in residence in 2008 and undoubtedly the biggest success story of our venue, were also changing their show from performance to performance. The Paper Cinema had an office at Forest where they were building their show, drawing, scripting, and rehearsing during the day, then every night they would perform a longer and slightly different version of what audiences had seen before. This process meant that audiences who fell in love with the piece came back several times to see it evolve. “Night Flyer” was an incredibly well recognized yet

³² “Earlier this week I had one of my most enjoyable evenings on the Fringe this year doing a piece called Exposure, which was dreamed up by Andrew Field, a young theatre maker, who blogs at The Arcades Project.”

Lyn Gardiner, ‘Edinburgh has never been so vital’ *The Guardian Blog*, <http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/theatre/2007/08/the_threat_to_arts_funding_mea.html>. 24 August 2007. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

³³ Chris Goode, ‘Gargling with stringrays, and other pastimes’, *Thompson’s Bank of Communicable Desire*, <<http://beescope.blogspot.com/>>. 27 August 2008. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

unpolished piece of theatre - it was given four stars from the Guardian³⁴ and Metro³⁵, shortlisted for a Total Theatre Award and won the Arches Brick Award. The completed version of the show is running at the Battersea Arts Centre this September, and has been invited to the Traverse, Shakespeare and Company, and the Arches among other festivals.

A Forest Fringe success is particular in that it means shows that came to Forest Fringe as an idea have found a home for further development. Success stories that have begun to emerge from 2008 include Bristol based company Action Hero who have been invited to scratch their show "Watch Me Fall" at the Arches, Peter Petralia who performed "About Silence" at Forest Fringe and is now involved with the Soho Theatre, and the Battersea Arts Centre having expressed interest in Ioli Androumadi, who created a new translation of Antigone named "Epidemic."

Growing and Evolving: the importance of development

Development can be a priority in Edinburgh. This is not exclusive to Forest Fringe. In 2007, the Traverse commissioned Mark Ravenhill to write eighteen new plays (some written during the Festival itself) for early morning readings. Rather than shy away from the less rehearsed elements of Ravenhill's project, audiences celebrated the project's fresh approach.

A rotating lineup of volunteer directors and actors, most in other festival shows, met the afternoon before each play for their only rehearsal. Yet even without full production the plays seemed remarkably finished, and an equally effective six-hour production would be difficult to imagine. Enthusiastic audience members got hooked on their daily fix of disturbing political theatre, and the plays soon transferred from the Traverse's smaller to its largest stage to accommodate their popularity.³⁶

What is truly encouraging about these stories is that they show a growing trend toward embracing embryonic ideas that can develop in Edinburgh, and that go on to have the space, resources and facilities to continue outside of the Edinburgh Festival. This is far more exciting than the consistently disappointing "Edinburgh Transfer." Instead of creating a show specifically for the saturated environment in Edinburgh, artists stop limiting their ideas to a one hour slot in a black box theatre, and instead view

³⁴ Lyn Gardiner, 'Edinburgh Festival: The Night Flyer', *The Guardian*, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2008/aug/12/edinburghfestival.thenightflyer>>. 12 August 2008. (Accessed 5 September 2008)

³⁵ Zena Alkayat, 'Nightflyer Recuses his Woman', *Metro*, <http://www.metro.co.uk/metrolife/edfest/article.html?in_article_id=259033&in_page_id=300>. 11 August 2008 (Accessed 6 September 2008)

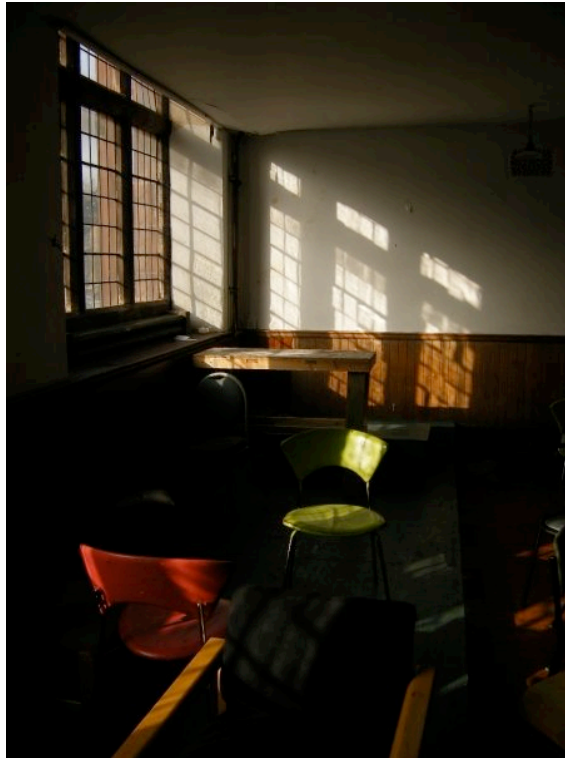
³⁶ Jenny Spencer, 'Shoot, Get Treasure, Repeat: Review', *Theatre Journal*. 60 (2008), 285–288 (p. 285).

Edinburgh as a training ground, a jumping off point for ideas that will have a longer life and turn into more ambitious projects. These shows do not happen in Edinburgh, they are born in Edinburgh, and artistic directors act as prospective parents, deciding which idea to adopt.

A growing trend toward development at the Edinburgh Festival could have positive implications that lead past August, into bigger venues, bigger ideas and lasting projects.

THE SPECIFICS

How Did We Do It?



Every year, the Battersea Arts Centre hosts a discussion at the Edinburgh Festival about the future and sustainability of the current Fringe model. This year it was called “Edinburgh: To 2009 and Beyond.” This discussion was attended by the two artistic directors of the Battersea Arts Centre and a smattering of Edinburgh producers, punters and performers, all with an equal stake in the future of the festival. There was a lot of discussion about the simple contributions of a venue like the Forest Fringe and questions about why something like this had not happened earlier.

Although I appreciated the spirit of the discussion, it seemed to me that we were discussing the festival in a very unspecific way, ignoring practicalities. There was a suggestion that “the wrong attitude” meant that a venue like Forest Fringe, which put its artists first and distanced itself from the commercial aspects of the festival, could never have started before now. In part, this was true. Bristo Hall had been gathering dust during August for decades –but this was in part due to the reputation Forest does not enjoy throughout Edinburgh during the year. The attitude within Forest had always been one of collaboration and artistic experimentation – but most other professional theatre-makers had the “wrong attitude” not toward the Festival, but toward the offer of free space at the Forest.

As far as the Edinburgh Festival is concerned, without the free space, Forest Fringe would not be possible. For all of the idealism of the venue, the cost of renting space and upkeep of space is the inherent reason that venues charge for their slots and that the Edinburgh festival spirals into a project that

is costly and commercial. Everyone is trying to make their money back – which means more competition for well off but talented companies from venues, more competition for audiences from companies, and more competition for press as publicity. On top of this, for an unofficial festival started in the 1940s, the “Official Fringe” as an organization has since become increasingly bureaucratic, costly and officious.

Here is how we are able to operate Forest Fringe:

1. We pay nothing for Bristo Hall.
2. Forest gives us a £700 budget for our license, a small amount of publicity and to repair and improve lighting and technical equipment in the hall.
3. Performers staff the venue collectively, meaning we do not need to pay staff.
4. Audiences give donations at the door, which we record in an effort to recoup production costs for artists.
5. A staff member of Forest in Edinburgh administrates for us free of charge throughout the year.
6. Volunteers from Forest help us build and decorate the front foyer, while outside volunteers (Gary Campbell from Shunt this year) help us build a rig and do final preparations on the performance space.
7. Forest provides the Battersea Arts Centre with an office in return for £1000, which we use to rent a flat to house visiting companies and artists.

Past this, there are some aspects of the Edinburgh Festival that can not be changed. Theatre licenses are a fact in Edinburgh. They are a necessary evil, and James Baster was a fantastically helpful resource in this respect, doing hours on end of preparation and licensing administration to help the venue run legally this August. But the “Official Fringe” does not have a monopoly on these licenses, meaning that a Fringe outside the Fringe is a constant and wonderful possibility. This brings me to the aspects of the Edinburgh Festival that were a case of the “wrong attitude.”

As Andy’s commission after one performance in 2007 proved, artists do not have to come up to the festival with a fully developed idea and do a three week run to get exposure or interest in their piece. Promoters and reviewers can be open to the embryonic stages of a good idea. Extensive publicity is key – a cohesive programme of shows that is well designed can go far. The unofficial venue motto was “If you build it, they will come.”

The Edinburgh Festival has become an ineluctable fact – a community and entity of its own for three weeks in August. As a fact it will constantly change and renew itself. In May, the Guardian announced the closure of

Aurora Nova side by side with the opening of Forest Fringe³⁷ – as though Edinburgh were a revolving door with new creative initiatives coming and going all the time. Sustainability of these new and creative initiatives remains a question, and for an organization like Forest, which runs year round, it is a pressing question.

³⁷ Lyn Gardiner, 'A Loss and a Gain for Edinburgh Audiences', *The Guardian Blog*, <<http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/theatre/2008/05/edinburgh.html>>. 21 May 2008 (Accessed 5 September 2008)

THE FUTURE

What next for the Forest Fringe?



Perhaps in the right light all fledgling theatre initiatives look the same, but in my research it appears that there are many links between the recent history of Forest Fringe and the history of the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. After the BAC discussion this year, Dan Koop, an Australian theatre-maker who has worked largely in London, approached me and outlined what he saw as an ambitious but worthwhile model for the future of the Forest Fringe. This model was based off of the Melbourne Festival, which happens every two years in Melbourne, Australia.³⁸

“So you get a grant to have someone who lives in Edinburgh year round, and can pay travel, accommodation and expenses for companies to come up, then ten months of the year, companies are invited to use Bristo Hall for a month to workshop and develop a piece. They invite the Edinburgh Public to come to performances of their works-in-progress, free of charge, and then in August the Forest Fringe is where all of your companies in residence present the product of their residencies.”

This would of course require someone to move to Edinburgh and accommodate the space and the artists year round. I wondered why no one had thought of doing this before. It turns out someone had:

At the opening of the 1963 Fringe Club in South St Andrew Street, Kenneth Ireland spoke about the idea of an all-the-year-round Fringe Centre, a permanent theatre which

³⁸ See Index for more information on the Melbourne Festival.

*would promote the style of drama which had come to be associated with the Edinburgh Fringe. He also hoped that such a centre would include an exhibition area and in general be more than simply a small, intimate theatre. One of Ireland's assistant stage managers at Pitlochry, Terry Lane, had been involved with the plays and discussions organized by Jim Haynes at his Paperback Bookshop. He must have listened attentively to his boss's words because it was Lane and John Malcolm, an actor from Anne Tryall of Heretiks, who began working to establish the Traverse Theatre Club.*³⁹

The Traverse began as productions with forty-person capacities in Jim Haynes' Paperback Bookshop on Charles Street. Similarly to Forest Fringe, the performances in Haynes' bookshop were followed by feedback sessions and were directed toward audience feedback and participation. After three years of staging shows at Paperback, the theatre club was founded in an old brothel, formerly called "Kelly's Space" on the Grassmarkets by Haynes, Lane and Malcolm. Although the three founders had the creativity and initiative to set up a much needed and critically lauded venue, the Traverse was broke from the start, and was seriously in deficit until Mike Ockrent's artistic direction in 1973.⁴⁰ When Haynes resigned from Artistic Direction in 1966, he bitterly said that the move was linked to 'creeping professionalism' and restrictions on his creative activities.⁴¹ Jim Haynes was obviously a creative thinker, but what is worrying for Forest is that his radical approach to organizations was unsustainable. Thelma Holt comments in interview to Roland Rees: "This Boulevard Café Theatre thing was started by all these Americans. But with no disrespect, they could start it, their enthusiasms were great, but they did not have the discipline to carry it on. This applies to all of them – Ed Berman, Jim Haynes. We were the ones – people like you and I – who slogged through and carried it forward."⁴²

I am achingly aware that Forest Fringe, in its first two years, operated in a grassroots, idealistic and communal way. Chris Goode, a playwright who performed at the venue, wrote on his blog:

It's curious and in a way slightly disappointing to see even the biggest fans of the Forest Fringe sounding off excitedly about how it must return "bigger and better" next year. [...] Should it even "return"? What would that, or could that, look like? Could Forest Fringe's most progressive legacy

³⁹ Moffat, p. 54.

⁴⁰ Moffat, p. 55.

⁴¹ Moffat, p. 64.

⁴² Thelma Holt, in Roland Rees, *Fringe First: Pioneers of Fringe Theatre on Record*. (London: Oberon, 1992) p. 250.

*perhaps be not in returning but in enabling other quite separate outcrops of lo-fi innovation?*⁴³

These same attitudes were certainly echoed for the Traverse by its greatest critical champion, *The Scotsman* in 1968, when it still had an £11,000 deficit and was under the Artistic Direction of Max Stafford-Clark. "The Traverse is now solidly established – which is about the worst fate that can befall this kind of enterprise."⁴⁴

There is a similar story in Canada, with Toronto's Free Theatre. Founded in 1971 by John Palmer, Martin Kinch and Tom Hendry, the theatre operated (like Forest Fringe) out of a space leant to them by the University of Toronto, Hart House Hall. The company's policy statement was similar to our mandate: "...To provide, eventually, a milieu in which talented newcomers can learn and work. A School. A place of growth. An opportunity."⁴⁵ yet the company itself was only able to provide tickets free of charge for its first two years, and in 1976 began offering a subscription season. By 1981 the company had abandoned its policy of presenting exclusively new plays by Canadians and began putting on plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Hamlet*. In 1988 the company merged with another Canadian company, Centrestage, to form the Canadian Stage Company, Canada's National Theatre, renamed Canstage in 2000. In this case, we see a similar initiative moving from a training ground for untested talent with free tickets to the most institutional and established theatre possible – a National Theatre.

Of course, this is an unlikely fate for the Forest Fringe, but by and large, similar initiatives to ours either disappear or inevitably evolve into more conventional institutions. The saving grace could be Forest Fringe's relationship with the Forest Café, which I was so anxious to distance the project from in 2006. Forest has operated in its oddball anti-bureaucratic way for eight years, and despite its troubled reputation in Edinburgh, has become something of an institution. If Forest Fringe remains the official "Festival Enterprise" of the Forest Arts Collective, then the volunteer run, free for artists and pay what you can systems will be the bread and butter of the venue, and will help our venue remain unique and maintain the integrity of its initial vision. This is provided that Forest itself survives.

Furthermore, the question of payment for co-ordinators does come into play as well. I have done a lot of work for Forest for two years without being paid (while Forest café managers and administrators are paid), and last year I vowed not to return without some sort of salary. The rewards have been great, both in morale, recognition and work, my own and others, and it

⁴³ Goode, Chris. Ibid.

⁴⁴ Moffatt, 62.

⁴⁵ 'Toronto Free Theatre', *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia*, <<http://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Toronto%20Free%20Theatre>>. 19 October 2006. (Accessed 3 September 2008)

will always be a labour of love. But sustaining Forest Fringe as a staple of Andy Field and my lifestyles as we get older and take on more responsibilities means that eventually we will need some funding to provide our own paychecks.

I sincerely hope that Forest Fringe, as a venue with a stake in artists' development, and housing artists with a stake in the venue, continues to run as it did this year (not bigger and better, merely more recognized and attended) until it is well established for being exactly what it is, a space for growth and development. I only hope that more established theatres and art spaces like the Battersea Arts Centre continue to support us by recommending artists to us and giving us financial support, recognizing us as a serious and useful training ground for good ideas and good artists. The Arches in Glasgow have already expressed interest in supporting Forest Fringe next year, and the Soho Theatre spent a lot of time at our venue. Contrary to the Scotsman's warning for the Traverse, I personally do not think that being well established would be the worst fate that could befall our little enterprise. At the very least, I hope to see the push toward lessening costs for artists and audiences and focusing on developing ideas as a new staple and trend of the festival.

This year Forest will go on to have a life past August. The Battersea Arts Centre have already invited us to do a "Forest Weekender" in 2009, featuring artists and projects from this year's Forest Fringe, and other venues in the UK and Europe have expressed interest in Andy and I programming mini festivals to tour. The immediate future of Forest Fringe looks bright.



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