

1-13-2013

The commercial & artistic viability of the fringe movement

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**THE COMMERCIAL & ARTISTIC VIABILITY
OF THE FRINGE MOVEMENT**

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A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Theatre & Dance
College of Performing Arts
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts
At
Rowan University
December 13, 2012

Thesis Chair: Dr. Elisabeth Hostetter

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my drama students at Absegami High School, to my mother, Rosemary who's wish it was that I finish this work, and to my wife, Lois and daughter, Colleen for pushing me, loving me, putting up with me through it all.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to Jason Bruffy and John Clancy for the inspiration as artists and theatrical visionaries, to the staff of the American High School Theatre Festival for opening the door to the Fringe experience for me in Edinburgh, and to Dr. Elisabeth Hostetter, without whose patience and guidance this thesis would ever have been written.

Abstract

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THE COMMERCIAL AND ARTISTIC VIABILITY
OF THE FRINGE MOVEMENT
2011/2012
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This investigation compares and contrasts an established theatrical festival (The Edinburgh Fringe Festival) with two relatively new American festivals (The Cincinnati Fringe Festival and The New York City Fringe Festival) to determine the commercial and artistic viability of those particular fringe festivals and any commonality with the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Each festival displayed four primary struggles on the ongoing path towards commercial and artistic viability: the involvement and development of locally-developed, internal theatre companies versus the invitation and involvement of external theatrical companies from other cities; the decisions determining if and how productions are selected or filtered for the festivals; the acquisition of suitable theatrical venue space versus the opportunities created by expanding the types and varieties of venue spaces; and the ongoing struggle between the impulse to create groundbreaking artistic works versus the need for economic, commercial success.

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CHAPTER 1

METHODOLOGY

In just over sixty years, an artistic movement has spread over the world in six of the seven continents of the world. Fringe Theatre, with its auspicious beginnings as an outlier to an established theater festival held in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1947 has grown into a fairly significant theatrical movement. According to the website Worldfestivalnet.com, there are now one-hundred and seventy-nine separate fringe festivals held around the world. In Australia alone, there are seven separate festivals. Fringe festivals are now held in eastern Asia in Beijing, Taipei, Seoul, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Bangkok and Shanghai and in Africa and the Middle East in South Africa and Tel-Aviv. In eastern Europe, former Soviet-bloc cities like Budapest, Prague, Brasov and Sopot all hold festivals, as do western European cities like Athens, Naples, Rome, Amsterdam, Avignon, Arles, Amsterdam and Delft. In the United Kingdom alone, there are over fifty festivals. The movement has even spread to the west, with fringe festivals in Canada, Brazil and all across the United States. In a relatively short period of time, what began as an afterthought has become a worldwide phenomenon.

Clearly, what has transpired in just over three generations has had a cultural impact on the theatrical arts. In communities where the only available previous theatrical experiences were the typical tried-and-true Broadway-style production touring companies and ceaseless community theatre productions of works by Shakespeare or Rodgers & Hammerstein, opportunities have now arisen for local and traveling artists to seek new avenues in theatrical work. The fringe experience has opened up new doors of

possibilities. The question is to what extent those opportunities have, if at all, been fully realized.

This study explores the commercial and artistic viability of the fringe movement in general and specifically compares and contrasts the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the original Fringe which started the movement, with two relatively new American festivals: the Cincinnati Fringe Festival and the New York City Fringe Festival. By sifting through the history of each festival, it is clear that several common struggles that all the festivals share in terms of artistic and economic viability seem to preclude the potential for commercial and artistic success.

First, fringe festivals survive and thrive primarily because they provide a relatively low-cost artistic alternative to what passes for community-based theatrical entertainment. Local companies are encouraged to produce their own theatrical works at fairly low costs and rent alternative fringe venues for performances. At the same time, outside companies who travel from fringe to fringe book venue space in different cities and live on the road. Since most fringe festivals allow both locally-formed theatre companies and companies from outside of the host city to perform their works. This intermingling is almost chemical in nature. In the best situations, the local companies share critical information about their home city (e.g. where the good pubs are) which then gets shared in other cities as those outside companies travel abroad. The outside companies expose the local companies and community to an ever-widening range of contemporary artistic tastes and experiences. This ongoing exchange of information then creates an expanding network of fringe artists and fans. However, in the worst situations, petty jealousies, rivalries and grudges about venue space and times can certainly derail

even the best festival. Also, local companies can have difficulty drawing audience when in direct competition with external companies that have established reputations and better advertising.

Second, fringe festivals live and die based on the quality of the works presented. Each city in the study faced its own set of challenges in selecting works for the stages of their respective festivals. One of the most important decisions made by the fringe festivals in the study concerned the production selection process. The decision as to whether a company could perform whatever they wanted or whether a selection board would determine what pieces were presented had a tremendous impact on the development of a fringe festival.

The third common struggle faced by all three of the festivals in the study focused on the ongoing search for suitable performance space. Trying to find suitable space at a relatively low cost for the many and varied productions was (and is) a challenge for each festival, but the solutions to the logistical problems faced were varied, creative and helped push the respective festivals in new artistic directions. Those decisions help define how a festival is perceived by both audiences and visiting artists alike.

The final struggle faced by the three festivals in the study is the conflict all artists face: the ongoing struggle between the impulse to create groundbreaking artistic works versus the need for economic, commercial success. The symbiotic relationship between the talent presenting the theatrical works, the play selection process and the search for venue space all directly determine this final area of struggle. Significantly, one of the resounding characteristics that emerged during the study was the commonality of individuality; in other words, the city determines the fringe. Each of the fringe festivals

in the study learned early on to adapt to the needs and characteristics of their home city. This adaptation, more than anything else, is essential to the level of artistic and commercial success of each of these fringe festivals.

This investigation has been compiled through the use of literature specific to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the form of newspaper articles, academic studies and commemorative circulars. In addition, literature about fringe festivals from other parts of the world was reviewed and interviews were conducted by electronic mail with Cincinnati Fringe Festival co-founder Jason Bruffy and by telephone with New York City Fringe Festival co-founder John Clancy.

CHAPTER 2

THE EDINBURGH FRINGE FESTIVAL

At 11:00 PM on a Saturday night in August of 2005 in Edinburgh, Scotland at the “C” Venue, a converted multi-plex movie theatre, hundreds of patrons wait in four different lines (or queues, as the Scots would say) for a fairly wide variety of theatrical fare. One line awaits a British comedian trying to make a go of entertaining the usually-hostile Fringe comedy crowd. Another awaits a performance of Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*. A third line has the hottest ticket in town, a performance of *Citizen Walken*, a surreal comedy/talk show satire with an actor imitating Christopher Walken hosting a daytime talk show. (His guest for the evening is *M*A*S*H*’s Jamie Farr.) The final line, which has taken a good amount of jeering from the other lines, awaits *Star Trek: The Musical*, which turns out to be a biographical musical about *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenbury and his quest to make television history. As the line for *Star Trek: The Musical* shuffles into the converted movie theatre, the sounds of Alexander Courage’s immortal *Star Trek* theme music begins to play. Yes, it’s just another night at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the world’s craziest and most dynamic arts festival. For four weeks in August every summer, the city of Edinburgh becomes an arts Mecca. Festival organizers have estimated that over one million people attend the festival each year. But how did the festival begin, and how did it grow into the blueprint for an arguably worldwide artistic movement?

Part 1: An Opportunistic, Auspicious Beginning

To understand why the Edinburgh Fringe Festival became Ground Zero in the Fringe theatre movement, we need to understand that Edinburgh is essentially two cities

in one. The “Old Town” begins at Edinburgh Castle, the iconic twelfth-century fortress situated on a now dormant volcanic mound and extends down to the Royal Mile, a narrow, winding cobblestone street flanked by even narrower alleys and quaint shops of varying size and style. The end of the Royal Mile ends at Holy Rood Palace, the home of Britain’s royal family when in residence in Edinburgh. While the “Old Town” reflects an older, medieval age, the “New Town” is a study in Restoration city-planning, complete with rows and rows of elegant Georgian-style buildings and wide city streets. (Shrum 63)

Interestingly, the “New Town” in Edinburgh was literally built on top of the “Old Town,” which created quite a few dead end alleys, hidden tea rooms, pubs and closet-sized shops. In a way, the duality of both the “Old Town” and “New Town” symbolizes the personality of the city. Eleven months of the year Edinburgh is a quiet, lovely and provincial place. However, during the month of August, the city transforms into a vibrant, chaotic extravaganza of all things cultural, artistic, comedic and downright loopy. Or as *New York Times* reporter Karla Adams puts it:

For the month of August, the streets of Edinburgh transform into a blurry carnival of tartan, bagpipes and side-street acts below Edinburgh Castle, which towers dramatically over the scene. The city population more than doubles as tourists attend a variety of festivals, which, beside the Fringe, include the International Festival (the original arts festival that began in 1947, where the work is still by invitation only), the Book Festival, the Film Festival and the Military Tattoo. (*Adam 1*)

In 1947, Europe was still recovering from the devastation inflicted upon it by World War II. In an attempt to resurrect the cultural arts (and turn a profit from the lack of competition from any other city in war torn Europe), the city of Edinburgh held the first Edinburgh International Festival (EIF). The cultural board invited various opera, dance and theatrical companies from across the continent to perform in a taxpayer funded celebration. The city of Edinburgh had a lengthy history of hosting music festivals throughout the nineteenth century and seemed to be a natural home to the cause. However, there was an unintended consequence; eight uninvited theatrical companies arrived to try to participate in the festival. With no access to any of the traditional theatrical venues in town, the eight companies, not to be undone, improvised locations and accommodations and performed their plays, albeit to empty houses or pub crawlers on their way to or from the local drinking establishments.

The original eight groups to appear were the Glasgow Unity Theatre performing Gorky's *The Lower Depths* and *The Laird O' Torwatletie* by Robert MacLellan, the Christine Orr Players of Edinburgh performing *Macbeth* at the YMCA, the Edinburgh Peoples' Theatre performing the *Thunder Rock* by Robert Ardley, the Edinburgh District Community Drama Association performing *The Anatomist* by James Bridie, the Pilgrim Players performing T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* and *Murder in the Cathedral*, the Edinburgh College of Art Theatre Group performing *Easter* by August Strindberg and a series of short puppet plays performed by the Manchester Marionette Theatre in a restaurant next to a movie theatre. (King)

Another of the unsanctioned companies performed the medieval play *Everyman* twenty miles away across the Firth River in Fife at Dunfermline Cathedral. It is said that

one of the critics complained that the location of the play was on the “fringe” of the city. However, Alistair Moffat, one of the first administrators of the Fringe Festival, credited arts writer Robert Kemp with coining the phrase in the *Edinburgh Evening News* when he wrote, “Round the fringe of official Festival drama there seems to be more private enterprise than before...I am afraid some of us are not going to be at home during the evenings!” (Shrum 65).

In his book *Fringe & Fortune: The Role of Critics in High and Popular Art*, Wesley Monroe Shrum, Jr. quipped, “Edinburgh was thus spared the ear-scrunching label of ‘Festival Adjunct.’ The new term was quickly adopted by the media and used by performers by the end of the 1950s.” (Shrum 65) Interestingly enough, the name finally stuck because of *Beyond the Fringe*, a comedy show invited to the International Festival, which launched the careers of Dudley Moore and Peter Cook. Wesley Shrum explains why the name “Fringe” is perfect for the festival it enshrines:

The Fringe, which now dominates the festival it fringes, is better suited to the twisted passages and secret closes of Edinburgh’s Old Town than the planned Georgian magnificence of the new. Its name and concept reflect spontaneous growth, inconsistency, and a stoic response to the most excruciating artistic circumstances. Like the Scottish weather, there are no guarantees. You expect clouds, but when the weather breaks, the view takes your breath away. The first glory of the Fringe is the name. The multiplicity of implications reflects the diversity of the affair itself. Even the earliest groups of performers were welcomed and assisted by the city of Edinburgh, praised (on occasion) by the official festival, and reviewed

by the critics. Fringe has never meant outcast or pariah. As a modifier, it is wonderfully evocative, connoting creativity, scruffiness, oddity, scandal, frivolity, youthfulness, frothiness and frippery. It can be attached to all sorts of activities, from theater to sociology, making them marginal and secondary. But it is also a frontier, a limit, a periphery. A fringe is a border, but an ornamental one. Its threads may be straight or twisted. It is an area in which reception is weak or distorted. Finally, it is a benefit granted, over and above your wage. The Edinburgh Fringe is a postmodern phantasm. (Shrum 64-65)

In the years that followed those early adventures in theatre, the Fringe festival began to gain in both popularity and notoriety. While many in the artistic elite dismissed the outliers of the Fringe, more and more people started to come to Edinburgh specifically to see the Fringe. Shrum wrote this about the reaction to the first Fringe groups and the growing critical respect of the Fringe:

The “official” International Festival is upscale compared with its poor relation. Jonathan Miller, chairman of the Fringe Society, recalls the Fringe was condescended to, looked down upon, and rather hated by the organizers of the official festival, something which polluted the main event...By the late fifties, the contrast between the theatrical conservatism of the Festival and innovativeness of the Fringe was common wisdom. One playwright claimed that “Nobody in their senses would go to the official festival.” An actor griped that only at the Fringe could one find anything “virile and youthful.” (Shrum 66)

However, as the Fringe Festival began to gain its artistic respectability, there were problems inherent with its growth. As the 1940s gave way to the 1950s, more and more smaller theatrical companies began making a trip to Edinburgh each summer in hopes of finding venue space and an audience for their work. In her book *Theatre Festivals: Best Worldwide Venues for New Works*, Lisa Mulcahy chronicled the changing dynamics of the Fringe Festival during the 1950s:

As the fringe festival grew in notoriety, it grew in scope, and tons of would-be-ringers descended on Edinburgh. Not surprisingly, jealousy and competition reared its ugly head; sure there was room for everybody to perform, but arguments got pretty savage when it came to the fair way to organize and split up the now-sizable box-office profit pie. By 1954, conditions had deteriorated to the point that all of the participating fringe groups knew there was nothing left to do but give in and cooperate with each other. They met, and worked out feasible solutions for managing money and publicity. By the next year, Edinburgh University students were managing not only the fringe box office but a fringe café as well. The Edinburgh Festival Fringe was essentially born at this point (and was getting professional pretty quickly). In 1958, its constitution became official: The main point of this charter was the vow that there would be absolutely no judgments, vetting or limits placed on any artist's works within the festival. (Mulcahy 6)

With a constitution in hand, the newly named Festival Fringe Society was created and soon elected officers who “should oversee the running of a box office, produce a

programme brochure that would include every event that was not on the International Festival, and run a club where performers could meet, eat, drink until late, and generally feel involved.” (King) By 1962, the Fringe Festival had thirty-four separate companies all clamoring for venue space, publicity and profit. What the thirty-four companies didn’t want, however, was artistic restrictions. As stated by Fringe administrator Alistair Moffatt:

As a direct result of the wishes of the participants, the Society had been set up to help the performers that come to Edinburgh and to promote them collectively to the public. It did not come together so that groups could be vetted, or invited, or in some way artistically vetted. What was performed and how it was done was left entirely to each Fringe group. (King)

That artistic freedom, of course, held the most appeal to fledgling companies. By the middle of the 1960s, the Fringe began to develop a true artistic voice of sorts; the works of new playwrights began to spring up beside variations on the classics that had earmarked the Fringe fare of the earlier years. A generation of new artists were cutting their teeth in Edinburgh in August each year, and those new voices led to further expansion of the Fringe as the pre-eminent theatrical festival in the world. In a commemorative supplement in the *The Scotsman* newspaper celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Fringe Festival in 1997, Alice Bain wrote:

By 1965, *The Scotsman* was proclaiming that “Edinburgh – despised, provincial Edinburgh – is much more capable of supporting a dynamic, adventurous theatre than much vaunted London is.” It was true...As the Sixties spawned the Traverse Theatre, the Richard Demarco Gallery and

the early multi-company venues, it became possible to see theatre at all times of the day, a concept unheard of in earlier years. This was also the time that the rest of the world began to hear about the Fringe and wanted to join in. The Californians came first, followed gradually by the rest. Today, companies come from over 30 countries with Americans still the main foreign contributors. (Bain 10)

Inevitably, in a nexus of necessity and artistic expression, theatrical groups began to experiment more and more with not only the material for presentation, but with venue locations as well. In the early years, groups performed in churches, libraries, book stores and improvised spaces simply because there was no other place to go. But in the 1960s, groups began to choose to perform in an even larger and widening variety of locations for the simple pleasure of artistic shock value. “A Fringe venue can be an extraordinary place,” writes Alice Bain. “It can be a hole in the ground, a hole in a wall, an island, a church, a phone box, a park bench – in fact the Fringe has proven that it is possible to put on a show almost anywhere. The Fringe venue has always kept out of conventional theatres, it is usually temporary, and often relies simply on imagination and enthusiasm to create a stage and seating from scratch.” (Bain 34)

Again, it was the Fringe Festival Society that took the lead by sorting through the growing chaos of who gets to perform where and when. Fringe administrator, Alistair Moffat, discussed the need for organizing the performance spaces around the city:

We invented venue numbering. We had to do something to keep the Edinburgh map from looking like it had measles. I announced once at the London Fringe meeting, “You’re all keeping your numbers from last

year.” There was a riot. This very Shakespearean actor stood up in the middle of the meeting and said “I refuse to be No. 115.” I thought they were all going to run out. The Fringe was going to descend into utter chaos if we didn’t create the super-venues... (Bain 36)

According to Wesley Shrum, the performance spaces are the “key to understanding the phenomenon of the Fringe.” (Shrum 68). The flexibility needed to mount a Fringe production allows for a certain level of experimentation and creativity that a traditional proscenium stage would not allow. Shrum explains it this way:

The need to use available space and often eccentric performance spaces has been converted from a presentational constraint into an integral part of many productions. Shows have been held on buses that tour the city. An actor held individualized performances in a closet. One show was offered by reservation in the privacy of one’s own home. Another, advertised as “by invitation only” required the audience to call a special number to find out the location. Year round theatres like The Traverse with dressing rooms and permanent staff are a blessing and a rarity for performers who come to Edinburgh expecting confusion and unpredictability. The rule has always been to anticipate chaotic hardship. Woe to those who have not booked venue and lodgings in advance...However appropriate or inappropriate the space, Fringe style is in large part an ecological adaption that implies innovation, intimacy and often participation...The corollary of closeness is that player-spectator involvements have become characteristic of the Fringe...In this sense Fringe theater may be closest in

spirit to Tudor theatre where the stage was not clearly demarcated from the audience... (Shrum 68-69)

Because of the growing popularity of the Fringe Festival and the continued increase in ticket sales, by the 1970s, it was clear that the Fringe festival needed a chief administrator. The first administrator was John Milligan, a member of the Edinburgh Arts Council, who mistakenly thought the job would be on a part time basis. Milligan worked to create monthly communiques to help incoming groups and set up licenses for the venue spaces in the city. Milligan, along with Allen Wright, the arts editor of *The Scotsman*, created the Fringe First Award, which would be awarded to a show that all three arts critics at *The Scotsman* felt was worthy of special recognition. Of course, the Fringe First Award was also a fairly blatant attempt to generate publicity and the accompanying revenue. (King)

The next chief administrator was Alistair Moffatt, who took over the job in 1976. Moffatt really began the process of turning the Fringe Festival into a more profitable, commercial venture. He negotiated sponsorship deals with local businesses (especially local breweries) and created Fringe Sunday, which was held on the first Sunday of the festival and allowed performers to take to the streets of Edinburgh to “busk” their shows. By 1981, the Fringe Festival had grown to include four-hundred and ninety-four separate groups. Two years later, Fringe Sunday was moved to its permanent home in Holy Rood Park, where it attracted 40,000 visitors. Alistair Moffat was succeeded by Michael Dale, who oversaw the establishment of the super-venues: Assembly Rooms, Pleasance, Gilded Balloon and the Circuit. In addition, he revamped the appearance and layout of the

festival program and most importantly, worked to establish the Fringe Festival as “an integral part of the commercial and tourist life of Edinburgh.” (King)

Financial woes, ever-increasingly bizarre venue spaces and organizational adversities aside, perhaps the most significant problem Fringe Festival artists faced was also the very reason the Festival thrived: the rivalry with the prestigious and government-supported International Festival. While organizers of the Fringe Festival and the various venue managers, box office personnel and acting companies may have been divided by the various issues they all faced, they were all absolutely unified in their resistance to the Edinburgh International Festival. On his website chronicling the Edinburgh International Festival, Brian King describes the somewhat icy relationship between the EIF and the Fringe:

The Fringe has generally been something of a thorn in the side of the International Festival although the pain is somewhat imaginary and largely unwarranted. It tended to reside more in the minds of those members of the Festival board who dislike any form of competition. Fortunately, at the artistic level there was a much more *laissez faire* attitude towards the Fringe. (King)

Organizers of the EIF were quick to dismiss a proposal in 1952 to admit the Fringe as a part of the Festival itself. In the 1960s, Festival organizers even used their political clout to tighten licensing laws to severely restrict the venues being used by the Fringe Festival. *Beyond the Fringe* was initially commissioned as a work to satirize the goings on at the Fringe. It really wasn't until the 1970s that the Fringe started to gain the respect of the Festival and that the two organizations began to work together, albeit in a limited capacity. (Shrum 66)

Part 2: Fame & Fortune

In any given year at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival the number of independently produced productions and the variety of genres and styles is staggering. From traditional classics to avant-garde works, and from elaborate dance productions to pantomime performances, the Fringe can satisfy the artistic taste of everyone from traditionalists to the theatrically adventurous. Interestingly, despite the sheer number of performers, some of the past performers connected with the Fringe have managed to achieve quite a bit more in their careers. Despite its International Festival pedigree, *Beyond the Fringe* made household names out of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. Both credit the Fringe Festival for their popularity. *The Oxford Revue* introduced Fringe audiences to the talents of future *Monty Python's Flying Circus* members Terry Jones, Michael Palin and John Cleese. One of the Oxford Revue's writers and performers was none other than playwright Tom Stoppard. In 1966, Stoppard's seminal work, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*, debuted first at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The 1970s saw performers like Billy Connolly, Derek Jacobi and Rowan Atkinson appear at the Fringe and gain fame from their memorable performances. By the 1980s, with television promoting the various works at the Fringe Festival, future stars like Emma Thompson, Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie established themselves as faces to watch. (Bain 26-27)

About the issue of fame at the Fringe, Alice Bain says:

It's no Hollywood, dossing down in flats sardine-style, playing to an audience of five, spending all your money in the bar. What is an offer, if you're bright enough to take it, is a leg-up, a chance to improvise and subvert, and the opportunity to watch the professionals, who themselves

return sometimes for many years, just for the fun. For those who do have a personal, driving ambition to become famous, there is also the potential offered by the many talent spotters, television producers, agents and casting directors who have always turned up to watch who's going on at the Fringe. (Bain 26)

British comedian Simon Fanshawe describes what fame at the Fringe means to him:

As you begin to earn more money or get more successful, you realize that the secret of Edinburgh is to get fewer people in the show, fewer people in the flat and get a flat that is nearer to the venue that you're in, which is nearer the center of town. When you very first go you share a flat with 37 people, in a play with 6 people, and the flat is down Gorgie Road. What you end up doing is a one man show for one night, staying in a fur-lined Jacuzzi in the airport and you get driven in to do your show. That is progress. (Bain 29)

If anything, fame at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival truly resides in the productions and performances which stood out precisely because of the eccentric, controversial or ground-breaking nature of the show. T. J. Dawe, the "King of the Fringe" colorfully describes his theory on what is required of any artist seeking fame at the Fringe:

At these festivals, people were looking for new theater. They were looking for something experimental and accessible and hopefully funny, although it doesn't have to be. Most of the plays put on at a fringe are unpublished, never will be published, and probably will never be performed again. In most theater worlds, that's the last kind of stuff

people want to see, whereas on the Fringe, that's *exactly* what people want to see. Most theater patrons want to see something they know – they wanna see Shakespeare or *My Fair Lady*. But on the Fringe, if you're gonna do Shakespeare, you'd better fuck with it. You'd better cross-cast it or set it on a fire escape or turn it into a one-man show; otherwise, you're not gonna hold people's attention...It's probably the easiest way to self-produce theater, because they find the venue for you. And you're part of a festival context, so the press is automatically interested and the audience is automatically interested—in the festival, though not necessarily in you. It's still not necessarily easy – I had no experience as a publicist, as a producer, anything – and I just learned how to do it. The Fringe will give you forms, and walk you through how to do a press release if you've never done one before. And you see what works and doesn't work, and while you're touring you talk to other performers about how they're doing it. Everyone tries to be original. Everyone's trying to do something nobody else has, and yet be accessible, because everyone wants an audience and the only money you make is your box office. So you see people take wild chances in a way that they just can't when the stakes are a lot higher, when the superstructure's a lot higher, when there are a lot more people involved. There's no filter between me and the audience, me and what I want to say. I don't have to go through an editor or a board of directors or anything like that. It's entirely what I want to do, and in terms of writing

and putting on a play, it's instant gratification. I can have an idea, and six months later, I'm performing it. (Mulcahy 12-14)

That sense of freedom certainly draws performers from all over the world to perform in Edinburgh at the Fringe. In a way, the term "fringe" has come to mean something entirely different from its original intention. Whereas it was originally a derogatory term used to describe a production not officially part of the International Festival, "fringe" has come to mean a style of performance which involves experimentation and artistic edginess. Conventional artists need not apply to produce at the fringe. Lisa Mulcahy states it this way:

The most desired commodity to be found in the work at any festival today, as in the beginning, is originality. How many other forms of art can you say that about in today's crassly safe commercial world? Things just get more and more outrageously fresh as the years pass, too, so that the most out-there stuff is now considered the norm. In fact, artistic power brokers on today's fest scene actively compete with each other for the most exciting, outrageous, and artistically significant pieces of work. Artists are actually praised and rewarded in the fest world for aggressively pushing the envelope." (Mulcahy 14-15)

Wesley Shrum echoes this idea and adds:

The Fringe ethos of aesthetic egalitarianism is, more than anything else, its hallmark. Owing to growth by accretion and the absence of any official administration for more than twenty years of its existence, no means existed to apply criteria to filter the kind of performances that would be

offered. This historical contingency has become a bureaucratic principle, the One Commandment. The right of any artist to perform any kind of work, to solicit an audience, and to succeed or fail is important to the ideology of the Fringe...Any form of quality control is either by the artists themselves or their public, in a direct, immediate one-to-one relationship, with no middlemen. The essential quality of the Fringe is its spontaneity and complete artistic freedom. (Shrum 80)

The “One Commandment,” as Shrum calls it, is truly the heart and soul of what happens each August in Edinburgh. Fame at the Fringe is certainly not something which can be predicted or even properly measured. But as Fringe administrator Alistair Moffat states:

Many other highly successful performers 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...If you think about it, you come, vulnerable as hell, you don’t know whether you’re any good or not. You must be peeing yourself and you come into this incredible scrum of 500 groups or whatever it is. If you can succeed at the Fringe, you can succeed anywhere. (Bain 28)

In spite of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival’s growth into a respected event, the combination of artistic risk-taking and stretching of the bounds of genre, style, form and content make the festival still the most important theatrical arts festival in the world.

Fringe actor and playwright Richard Crane expresses it this way:

The secret of the Fringe's success is that it doesn't rest on its laurels or plan ahead. The Fringe should have no past and no future, but a bounding present that goes on and on...It is wrong to dwell on old Fringes. The day Fringe audiences develop memories, or even expectations, the Fringe will have become established, and a Fringe of the Fringe will become necessary to keep the thing young. (Bain 42)

CHAPTER 3

THE CINCINNATI FRINGE FESTIVAL

In 2003, Jason Bruffy moved to the city of Cincinnati in to work for the Young Company, an artistically-edgy, fledgling theatrical troupe connected to the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company. Relatively early on in his time with the troupe, Bruffy had a casual conversation with Nick Rose, the artistic director of the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company in a bar late on a Sunday night. The two discussed creating an “inclusive alternate theatre arts festival.” (Bruffy) According to Bruffy,

We were envisioning what we would do for the arts scene in Cincinnati if we had the means to do so. I pitched him this idea of an inclusive theatre arts festival. At the time not knowing the Fringe model, it was a festival built around supporting artists doing new works and works you could never produce during a regular season, for reasons of risk, controversy, untried territories and methods, etc. This was also a way of getting back to our roots of pure storytelling, without a lot of glitz and glam. (Bruffy)

Within a few months of that conversation, Bruffy was hired by Jay Kalagayan, the founder of the Know Theatre Tribe, a theatrical company known for staging cutting edge productions. An actor and director, Bruffy was hired as the assistant director for the Know Theatre Tribe’s highly controversial production of Terrence McNally’s critically acclaimed play *Corpus Christi*, a modern day retelling of the story of Jesus Christ living as a homosexual in Texas. In the politically and morally conservative city of Cincinnati, the production received its share of negative attention, particularly in the form of area churches protesting each performance and a letter writing campaign organized by some

of the churches in the city. Despite the old show business axiom notion that there is no such thing as “bad publicity,” the cast endured quite a bit of vitriol from some members of the community. As a result, Bruffy became an erstwhile protector of the cast. He explained in an interview, “Every night I would meet with the *Corpus Christi* actors at Milton’s Tavern up on Liberty Hill. I would lead the group down the hill in a single pack, past the protestors and into the theatre.” (Bruffy) Kalagayan saw early on that Bruffy had the strength and ability to impact the theatrical atmosphere of the city, and following the production of *Corpus Christi*, Bruffy was soon hired as the artistic director of the Know Theatre Tribe. He then set about his mission of creating what would become the first fringe festival in the city of Cincinnati. With the approval of the board of directors of the co-sponsoring Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, Cincinnati’s first Fringe Festival was held in the summer of 2004. Bruffy explains the creation of the first Fringe Festival:

In our first year I was a part-time employee with limited support from the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company staff. It was a group we now refer to the CineX crew that developed the festival and created what it is today. CineX stands for Cincinnati Experimental Arts, an umbrella organization founded by the first committee of the Fringe Festival to house the festival and other young fledging organizations or programs...In July of 2005 Cincinnati Fringe Festival (CineX Arts) and Know Theatre Tribe merged organizations and existing boards to create one larger organization now know as Know Theatre of Cincinnati. The easiest point of reference on how this relationship works is The NY Public Theatre and the NY

Shakespeare Festival. Know Theatre is a year round repertory company.

(Bruffy)

One key volunteer helped with the first Fringe Festival. Bruffy describes how a fledgling advertising and marketing company helped:

[A] few weeks after we officially announced the Festival was going to happen. I received a phone call from an advertising company. This gentleman had just moved back to town and was starting up a new ad firm here. He offered to help, and began working with me on the creation of all the fringe imaging and advertising for our first 3 years, all as an in-kind donation. (Bruffy)

Jason Bruffy's title with the Cincinnati Fringe Festival was Producing Artistic Director. He oversaw the festival in terms of its execution, secured venues for performance, created the performance calendar, managed the day to day work load, and oversaw the marketing and media relations involved with selling the festival to the city's inhabitants. Bruffy's role was instrumental to the success of the festival and he explained what the position of Producing Artistic Director meant to him:

With the duty of pulling together all of the elements that make up the festival into one, [the title of] Artistic Director would imply that we control or have input into the artistic process; we do not. We provide a place where artists can be free to play and explore new ideas. We provide them with all their essential tools, including festival marketing, technically equipped venues, venue technicians, full box office services and staff,

housing (for out-of-towners), etc. all at no cost to the artist. That's right -- no participation fee -- at all. (Bruffy)

As the Producing Artistic Director, Jason Bruffy learned there were considerable logistical challenges to mounting a fringe festival, especially in a city unfamiliar with hosting such events and with a reputation for having a large population with comparatively provincial artistic taste. As Bruffy notes, he had no working knowledge of the "Fringe" concept. He simply wanted to expand the artistic offerings in the city of Cincinnati and to broaden the definitions of what types of productions could be done in the city. In discussing the first year of the Cincinnati Fringe Festival, Bruffy spoke about what he learned about leading a fringe festival:

Nothing will ever teach me as much as the first Fringe Festival; lessons in leadership, in working with volunteers, in delegation and multi-tasking. I found that most of all you must be able to make sound decisions quickly, change plans on a dime, and keep your cool the whole time. Stressing over a finite detail loses time, wastes energy, and ultimately slows you down. That is not to say you must not be detail oriented, you are absolutely. Just be willing to change the details. (Bruffy)

As Bruffy became more knowledgeable about some of the various Fringe festivals in the United States, he realized that his festival was very similar.

My first fringe experience actually came after producing my first Fringe Festival, or I suppose then my own Festival was my first. San Francisco was my second experience. Since then I have been to Philadelphia as well. What I learned, what I picked up, is that we are on the right track. A

Fringe Festival is defined by the city in which it exists. Though we all share similarities, we must evolve and answer the needs of our particular communities. (Bruffy)

Nine months before the first Cincinnati Festival, Bruffy attended a conference with the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals (CAFF). At that conference he learned that to join the CAFF, the Cincinnati Festival would need to abide by all of the rules of the CAFF. Those rules stipulated the use of a lottery to select works for presentation and the mandate that one-hundred percent of the box office gross should be given back to the artist. A visit to the CAFF website further reveals some of the guiding principles which regulate the Fringe Festivals in Canada (the italics are mine):

In 1990 numerous Fringe producers began to meet annually with their national counterparts to talk about their respective Fringe festivals, swap ideas, and to share resources. As the years went by there was growing concern that *the ideals and principles that were originally inherent to a Fringe Festival were becoming more and more muddled by other theatre festivals that referred to themselves as being a “Fringe” but who chose not to abide by these principles.*

In order to preserve these “Fringe” ideals and principles these producers came together to form the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals and created the four guiding CAFF principles that are still in place today:

- Participants will be selected on a non-juried basis, through a first-come, first served process, a lottery, or other method approved by the Association.
- The audience must have the option to pay a ticket price, 100% of which goes directly to the artists (government taxes notwithstanding.)
- Fringe Festival producers have no control over the artistic content of each performance. The artistic freedom of the participants is unrestrained.
- Festivals must provide an easily accessible opportunity for all audiences and all artists to participate in Fringe Festivals.

On September 26, 1994 the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals was officially registered as a non-profit organization with the following mandate:

- To safeguard the integrity of Fringe Festivals as outlined in the four minimum criteria
- To recognize *that the health of all member Festivals is important to the Circuit and therefore the artists' health as a whole*
- To encourage communication and cooperation between member Festivals *thereby fostering the continuity of our guiding principles.*

In 1998 CAFF successfully applied to have the terms "Fringe" and "Fringe Festival" trademarked in Canada to ensure that any theatre festival in Canada who wishes to call themselves a "Fringe" would obtain

membership in the association and agree to abide by both the CAFF mandate and the four guiding principles.

Ironically, the CAFF seeks to create a unified Fringe Festival approach, going so far as to trademark the name “Fringe” to make a “one size fits all” out of festivals born of individual expression. Bruffy explains why he balked at the rules laid out by the CAFF:

One hundred percent of the gross ticket sale is a goal and a great idea, however, this is what requires all other festivals to charge a participation fee, sometimes an outrageous participation fee, as well as charging for housing or not providing one. Most other festivals have hidden fees at every turn, from box office to marketing, and from venue capacities, to housing. We have no hidden fees, and strongly believe in our model, as it works for Cincinnati. (Bruffy)

According to Bruffy, there was no plan to follow the Canadian Fringe Festival model for their own unseasoned organization. Instead, Cincinnati Fringe Festival joined with other Fringe Festivals around the United States to form the Fringe Festivals of the United States. The ongoing meetings held by the organization are more of a support system for Fringe Festival organizers than a governing body designed to impose rules and guidelines. Festival organizers attend the Fringe Festival of the United States meetings to share stories, best practices and ideas about every aspect of putting on a Fringe Festival.

Selecting individual pieces to be performed each year at the Cincinnati Fringe Festival is an interesting process. For starters, festival policy prohibits the Know Theatre Tribe from participating in terms of staging a play. Bruffy feels that it is “ethically wrong” for his company to participate, and in addition, he claims it is “just too much

damn work.” (Bruffy) Plays are selected by a committee of artistic leaders from the city of Cincinnati as well as from various regional organizations and agencies, including the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, The Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati, the Contemporary Dance Theatre, the Cincinnati Ballet, the University of Cincinnati Conservatory and Northern Kentucky University among others. The committee is charged with not only judging submitted pieces on their artistic merit, but also on the notion of being “fringe for Cincinnati.” (Bruffy) This again echoes Bruffy’s ideas about the Fringe Festival matching and serving the identity of the host city. The theatrical organizations who submit works are also fairly diverse; professional companies and university theatre groups all have been well-represented at the festivals. Bruffy estimates that approximately thirty to thirty-five percent of those submitting productions come from outside the Cincinnati region, from other parts of the United States, and from around the world. (Bruffy) In terms of using a lottery to select plays to be presented, Bruffy elaborates further:

We do use a selection committee as well; however, primarily this is to safeguard against this Fringe becoming a cheap way for someone to produce a production of *Seussical*, *the Musical* or *Our Town*, without rediscovering something new. The Fringe is a venue that should be presenting new ideas, new works and new concepts. In a city like Cincinnati, if we were to go to full lottery with no selection, one bad year, we fold entirely. I believe that completely. (Bruffy)

One of the most difficult aspects of hosting a Fringe Festival is the search for suitable venues for performance. Bruffy states that much of his time as the director of the festival is spent securing these venues, ranging from existing theatres to potential sites in

found spaces. He notes that in areas of the city that are undergoing redevelopment, many vacant store fronts and office spaces have been effectively utilized by various performing groups. Interestingly, some of those vacant stores and office spaces have gained permanent tenants after the respective Fringe festivals, in essence creating a symbiotic relationship of sorts. Statistics and numerous studies suggest that a thriving arts community leads to and helps create a prosperous community. But just as often, the landlords of the venues don't always fully cooperate. Many see no problem (legally or otherwise) changing the conditions of a lease or even pulling the lease three weeks out from a production. In one particular instance, a venue discontinued its involvement because of objections to the actual content of some of the works in the Fringe as a whole. In what can only be called a learning experience, Bruffy went to the press to try to force the issue of a legal and binding rental agreement, but never heard from representatives of the venue again.

In light of that situation, it is easy to see that the relative success of any Fringe festival depends on marketing and public relations; for the Cincinnati Fringe Festival, both traditional marketing techniques and newer social media have played an enormous role in getting the word out to the community. Predictably, print advertisements utilizing posters and postcards have, of course, been used. The Cincinnati Fringe Festival has also extensively used internet websites, social networking sites and blogs, to name a few.

Bruffy puts it this way:

Figure out where your audience is looking and get in front of them. From our site you can check out our official blogger, who is a well-respected blogger in the region. We also do radio, but it is the public relations in the

papers and on the television where we are the most effective. I believe that the old ways of advertising are no longer effective especially with the limited funds and resources that small and medium arts organizations have at their disposal. When was the last time you read an actual ad in the paper? It is time for us to begin to search for new means, and that is more than just a fancy website and an e-mail blast. Those were new and effective three or four years ago, but these days marketing trends and the online world are changing so fast, we have to find ourselves ahead of the trend or be left out in the cold. (Bruffy)

A visit to the website for the 2012 Cincinnati Fringe Festival offers links to the following options on Facebook, Twitter and Yelp, online application downloads and several video trailers on YouTube.

Running the Cincinnati Fringe Festival required a definite need for volunteers and staff members. According to Bruffy:

A team of 3 to 8 in our prime acted as the staff and governing board for the festival from year one to year four... This past season, our 5th anniversary, we employed 45 people in total to run the operations of the festival. By employed I mean anyone who received even a stipend, i.e. venue technicians, box office staff, interns, volunteer coordinators, etc. It also takes almost 125 volunteers to make the festival happen each year. Our staff and volunteers come from a myriad of backgrounds; college students on summer break, theatre professionals in the area, corporate

managers with a love of the avant-garde, young professionals looking for a social scene. (Bruffy)

In the weeks leading up to the first Cincinnati Fringe Festival, Jackie Demaline of *The Cincinnati Enquirer* spoke with Bruffy about his expectations and goals and published the following:

Fringe, which is about arts on the outside making themselves seen and heard in an urban festival setting, has been building across North America for more than a generation. It's finally reached Cincinnati, and it's about time, thinks Jason Bruffy, 26, producing director of Cincinnati's first Fringe Festival. It is, he's convinced, "exactly what Cincinnati needs right now." Which is why he devoted more than a year to bringing it off...The Fringe will hopefully be wonderful, awful, strange, obnoxious, electrifying, provocative - all of the above. At the very least, Bruffy wants everybody talking. "A thriving community is one that discusses" art and everything else, he says...In a metro region that's earned too many headlines for the steady drain of its young professional class, Bruffy believes the Fringe is a factor that works to reverse the trend and attract such people. He wants people coming downtown to experience what it's all about. "Passion," he says. "The passion between an actor, an audience and a piece of work." Bruffy's passion, a year of his life and \$20,000 of seed money (\$15,000 from Cincinnati Shakespeare Festival's Studio project funded by Cinergy Foundation and \$5,000 from local arts patron

Robert Therauf) will be sparking downtown north of Fountain Square.

(Demaline)

Demaline further discussed Bruffy's outlook on the first festival:

What you will see: Naked people (three, in *Time Outside My Body* and *Shopping and...*), as well as risk and experimentation. What you won't see: Crashing chandeliers and descending helicopters. *Phantom* and *Miss Saigon* this isn't - Fringe is by nature bare bones, seat-of-the-pants entertainment. In a town built on corporate research and development bent on finding the perfectly angled saddle shape for a Pringle, Bruffy wonders what could be more intriguing than witnessing the artistic process?... "It was the nature of the proposals," says Bruffy, who personally likes political, in-your-face theater, theater of the absurd and anything and everything "mind-blowing. I was wide open for everything," he says, but he's not surprised that the conservative nature of the city is reflected in what's on this first Fringe's schedule. Rather than "out there," a lot of the work is better described as "beyond the mainstream." "I feel an obligation to the artists and to the city," Bruffy says with fire in his eyes and his belly. "I believe in them." (Demaline)

Some noteworthy productions devised and produced at the Cincinnati Fringe Festival include *A Catholic Girl's Guide to Losing Her Virginity*, which went on to be optioned into a Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park production and possible feature film, *Don't Make Me Pull This Show Over*, which was also optioned by The Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati and *Calculus, the Musical*, which received critical praise from other Fringe

Festivals around the nation and toured educationally around the United States. The Cincinnati Fringe Festival has received critical praise from *Backstage Magazine*, the *Washington Post* as well as local praise from *Cincinnati Magazine*, the *Cincinnati Entertainment Awards* and *City Beat Weekly*. In addition, the production staff of the festival has been named as “Artistic Risk Takers” by the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and has been highlighted in the “Forty Under Forty Business Leaders” edition of the *Cincinnati Business Courier*. For Bruffy, however, there are also intrinsic rewards from producing the fringe festival:

The highlights for me come from the festival after festival of impressive work, new and engaging ideas, underdogs that fight to the top, and just the spirit in which artists and audiences come together. Most out-of-town artists come to Cincinnati, without any other knowledge of the city but either *WKRP* (does not actually exist) or our conservative reputation as a city. They leave loving the city, the community, and the festival for making it happen. We have been told time and time again by visiting artists how helpful the festival is, how inviting the audience is, and how wonderful this city can be. (Bruffy)

When asked to describe the community’s reaction to the Cincinnati Fringe Festival, Bruffy stated:

Positive mostly, every year it is the game of maintaining our audience base and spreading the word to the newcomers. It’s the battle of any small arts organization. We are slowly becoming a main staple of the community but it will take time to build. We have always had an amazing

network of supporting organizations - the press and most importantly our media sponsor *CityBeat*. When we came into existence young professional community groups stepped up to the challenge of volunteerism.

During Bruffy's time as artistic director, the Cincinnati Fringe Festival has seen a steady increase in the overall number of tickets sold and in the number of performances. It started out with approximately 2,500 tickets sold to 18 separate performances in 2004 and rose steadily to 7,000 tickets sold for 37 separate performances in 2008. Bruffy attributes the rise in ticket sales to his selling of multi-pass tickets, which in turn allowed more exposure to a wider audience of theatre goers. In terms of critical success, Bruffy has been pleasantly surprised by the variety and depth of coverage from both Cincinnati's *CityBeat* newspaper as well as the Gannet owned daily *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Both of the arts writers for these papers have fully embraced the Cincinnati Fringe Festival and have tried to review as many of the productions as their increasingly-depleted budget would allow. But the reactions to the Fringe Festival haven't all been positive.

As it is with any art that pushes boundaries, the Cincinnati Fringe Festival has received more than its share of negative attention from both the press and the community. It is notable, however, that Bruffy believes it is inherently positive to receive negative criticism. As Bruffy notes:

We also have a local right-wing ultra-conservative columnist, who writes for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Peter Bronson, who has graced us with his negative attention as well. I welcome his comments every year, for without dialogue comes the death of speech, without a right you cannot be left. First year I believe the column was entitled "You Keep the Fringe,

I'll Take *Oklahoma*". The now managing director of the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company wrote a wonderful retort that was later printed, condemning Bronson for his loose morals in supporting a devious show like *Oklahoma* full of violence, murder, rape, and sexual promiscuity. On a side note, *Oklahoma* was panned by the press of the time for being too "fringe." - the play that has defined musical theatre for over half a century. Ironic isn't it. (Bruffy)

Community support of the Cincinnati Fringe Festival has also taken the form of acceptance and some corporate financial sponsorship. Bruffy named individual patron Dr. Robert J. Thierauf as the "godfather of the festival." Duke Energy (formerly known as Cinergy) also made financial contributions early on, but their support dwindled when the company began investing in green energy initiatives. Most of the financial support has come from individual donors and several foundations in the city government of Cincinnati. The festival receives no money from the city of Cincinnati itself or Hamilton County, Ohio. As Bruffy notes, "The city and council do not give us any (financial) support and we have been told in the past by local council members that anything non-censored would not be considered a good safe investment to associate with." (Bruffy)

With city funding for the arts cut across the board due to the poor economy, that response from the city was entirely expected. Nevertheless, Bruffy does note that the tourism bureau for the city of Cincinnati has started putting the Cincinnati Fringe Festival in promotional materials. This free publicity indicates that, indeed, the Cincinnati Fringe Festival has made inroads toward mainstream and regional acceptance. When asked if

any of the productions sponsored by the Cincinnati Fringe Festival were considered too controversial, Bruffy said:

We have yet to have a piece that has been too risqué for our supporters, and have yet to lose a sponsor due to questionable material as some of my fellow fringe producers have. We have had to deal with a lot of sponsors and patrons who see a show or two that is not of a quality that they feel is worthy of producing. The constant re-education of the idea and ideals of Fringe has to continually occur to remind them of just why we do this.

(Bruffy)

Jason Bruffy managed the Cincinnati Fringe Festival for six years. In 2009, the Salt Lake Acting Company in Salt Lake City, Utah named him the Executive Artistic Director. Bruffy reflected upon his time in Cincinnati:

After 7 years at the helm of Know Theatre of Cincinnati and the Cincinnati Fringe Festival, as well as 9 years in Cincinnati; I felt it was my time to move on. The feeling came as a result of my own personal growth more than anything. I adore Cincinnati and consider it my second home; the home in which I learned what it means to be a professional; the home where I cut my teeth. For all of the “edgy” productions and work that I helped to guide and produce, I feel that Cincinnati embraced me both as an influential and as an arts professional. The year before I left I was named “person of the year” by *Cincinnati CityBeat Weekly*. My work was only more impacted by the strong foundation of amazing theatres in the city (Tony award winning Playhouse in the Park, Ensemble Theatre of

Cincinnati and Cincinnati Shakespeare Festival). I had grown a company from a small rental in the basement of a church to a 20,000 sq. ft. multi-use facility of our own in downtown. I grew a young company from a 60 thousand dollar budget to over a 700 thousand dollar operational budget. But further growth seemed to be far more difficult, sustainability was becoming the byline of conversation. In the end, no matter how much I loved Cincinnati, I never planned to be there for life. The early years of conservative backlash gave way to a progressive and dynamic city. A city that I still wish the best for and look forward to returning to. (Bruffy)

When asked why he was departing for Salt Lake City, Bruffy offered the following answer:

I was hired by the board of directors of Salt Lake Acting Company to helm a new phase in the company's 40-year history and I accepted. I had always kept my ear to the ground about new positions, and this was the first to take hold after many interviews. There is a life-span for Artistic and Producing Directors. This tends to be 8 to 12 years. The reasoning is for organizational growth and longevity and for personal artistic growth. Salt Lake in fact is a much smaller scene than Cincinnati artistically and theatrically. However it is a city that I fell for the first time I visited. The move was specifically to take over as the Executive Artistic Director of Salt Lake Acting Company. The opportunity to program a new works development company was the greatest impulse. This theatre had the money to commission writers, and pay actors actual livable wages, casting

both locally and nationally. This is also the company that produced an early production of *Angels in America* when people swore it could not be done in Salt Lake City, and sold it out. This was exciting to me. (Bruffy)

However, Bruffy's relationship with the Salt Lake Acting Company did not last very long. Bruffy explains his exit and how the conservative nature of the city of Salt Lake City might have affected his artistic decisions:

The leaving came from a difference in vision between myself, the existing senior staff of two and the board of directors. The initial hiring for me to create change leadership gave way to a desired status quo [sic]. It became apparent very quickly that we were not operating in the same manner.

After many long discussions about the future, a decision was made to part ways. This I still regret and wish I had had the opportunity to bring the full realization of my vision and aesthetic to Salt Lake, but it was not meant to be. Again, coming back to the conservative question, though I saw signs of it, the company was quite successful at providing the alternative.

Though I felt they were out of touch in terms of new works in this country, they were able to still push boundaries. Where they lacked was the embrace of diversity. I could say the same thing about Cincinnati. I have always been the odd man out in my dedication to artists of diverse backgrounds. In this case it proved detrimental to my position. (Bruffy)

Finally, Bruffy was asked to reflect upon his legacy in Cincinnati and the tension between artistry and its potentially oppositional relationship with economics, politics and social climate. He concluded,

I have no doubt that the Fringe will continue. Every city needs an alternative. The community embrace of the Fringe Festival in Cincinnati will forever speak to its legacy, and they will not let it die. I left the festival in the hands of a great producer who loves that crazy festival more than I do. [He was] hired as my associate a few years back with that secret idea in mind, that it would eventually become his. Ultimately it will always belong to Cincinnati. There will always be naysayers in the crowd and in the community, but the event has in nine years become a staple of the arts annual offering. [Between] the 150 year old May Choral Festival and the Opera Season, the Fringe Festival falls right in between as an expected and anticipated event that is not to be missed. Well, if you love the arts, it is not to be missed. I believe that in this country there must be a right and a left, there must be a Republican to have a Democrat, and there must be a fringe to have a mainstream. How we define our boundaries is only measured by those pushing them. Progress only occurs when people are willing to fail. (Bruffy)

CHAPTER 4

JOHN CLANCY & THE NEW YORK CITY FRINGE

John Clancy didn't set out to become a theatrical director when he was "kicked out of Southern Methodist University." (Clancy) He had met his wife (professional actress Nancy Walsh) in school, but left school and bounced around in Los Angeles trying to land acting jobs. But after realizing he didn't like the roles he was being offered, he started writing plays and ended up moving to New York when his wife was offered a fairly lucrative contract. Together they founded The Present Company in 1992 and soon Clancy found himself directing small plays in various theatres (legal and otherwise) in a variety of performance spaces in New York. In 1995, his collaboration with Brian Parks resulted in the play *American Absurdium*, a popular and critical hit in the lower East Side. As the play's production run was dwindling down to its final days, a cast member casually asked whether they should think about taking the production to Edinburgh for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. A quick calculation of the cost of bringing the close-to-impooverished cast, production staff and set to Scotland added up to over \$30,000, which answered that question. But the question intrigued Clancy. One of the habits he started while working in New York was to maintain a spiral ring notebook of names, phone numbers and addresses of theatrical artists. He leafed through the notebook one day and noted the various artists who he knew traveled to Scotland each August when he suddenly realized that he hadn't been asking the right question. Why were all of these artists crossing the Atlantic Ocean each August to perform in Edinburgh when we are already here? Rather than "Should we go to Edinburgh," the real question became, "Why can't we do this here in New York?" (Clancy)

Clancy contacted Aaron Beall, the artistic director of the off-off-Broadway theatrical group Todo Con Nada and asked him why there wasn't a New York City Fringe. When the two of them couldn't really definitively answer the question, Beall asked his friend Jonathan Harris, a co-founder of the Seattle Fringe Festival, the first such festival in the United States, to participate in the discussion. After several months spent trying to prove why it couldn't work, Elena Holy, the managing director of The Present Company who really understood the logistical financial nightmare of producing anything in New York, was brought into the discussion as to why it couldn't work. After crunching the numbers, Holy said that if there were participation fees from the theatre groups wishing to participate in exchange for splits on the ticket sales, it could work, but that it would require a great deal of hard work and a high number of volunteers. And so, a small notice was placed in *Backstage* magazine for a meeting at the cultural arts center on Suffolk Street. In a personal interview John Clancy explained, "We didn't even have enough money to run ad space." (Clancy)

Three-hundred people showed up at that meeting, completely overwhelming Clancy, Beall, Harris and Holy. While the four only had a vague idea and a concept, the three-hundred people started asking questions, wondering if there were going to be educational plays, or children's theatre, or outdoor theatre. And because there was no clear cut concept or even blueprint for success, Clancy explained "the people who asked questions eventually became the Fringe staff." (Clancy) Suddenly there was NYC Fringe Al Fresco, dedicated to outdoor theatrical shows and venues, the NYC Fringe, Jr., which drove the part of the festival dedicated to children's theatre and NYC Fringe U, which oversaw the educational component of the festival. Having had no prior

experience with any kind of fringe festival, Clancy sought out the advice of Laura Mackenzie Stuart, who happened to be working in residence at the Independent Theatre in New York at the time. According to Clancy:

When we were figuring out the first NYC Fringe – we didn't know what we were doing – we had a lot of shows but we didn't have a lot of spaces – we had to turn bars and churches into theatres. We were very lucky to sit with Laura, who gave us two pieces of advice. The first was not to follow negative energy. A lot of people are going to tell you it's impossible and that it's not going to work; just smile, nod and move on. It was good advice because that's all we were hearing - that it was never going to happen. The second piece of advice was that every city has to figure out how a fringe festival is going to work in their city. There is no one model for how to do it. Some cities you need to have a geographical center, others don't. Some cities need to have a juried selection, some do not. Some want the festival for four days, some want it in June, others don't. A fringe festival is, for lack of a better term, a party. You can't throw the same party in a different house. If you're having a party at my place where I am right now in the Poconos, well, we're going to barbecue, we're going to do this and do that. If I'm having the party in Manhattan, then it's a completely different kind of party... (Clancy)

Probably the most daunting task of running a Fringe Festival in the city of New York was trying to find venue space in the most expensive real estate market on the face of the Earth. Clancy discussed the search for venue space this way:

How hard was it to find venue space? In New York? (laughing) Very hard. Even the existing spaces were money. A couple spaces were legal, more than a few were not. Most of the store front spaces were quasi-legal – that was a risk. There was a bar called The Den of Thieves...an old synagogue which was falling apart...it was the lower east side in the 90s, which was a lot like the old Wild West. Cops were paying attention to the drug trade in the area and overlooking the other stuff – we were a bunch of white kids running around doing stuff and they said fine, just don't get killed. On the day after the first festival closed, our first office was a piano store which was a venue also. It's now a piano bar serving \$15 mojitos. Anyway, the fire department captain came in and said, "Hey, are you going to do this next year?" We said yeah, uh-huh, etc. and he said that next year, make sure everything is safe. The next year, everything was safe and legal. Fire department came in, checked it, we made sure everything was turned off. The city was great – even the sanitation people. That first June, we started to realize that it was going to be massive and started to meet with city people to make sure no one would get hurt. Sanitation realized there was going to be a lot more trash. The parks department was great; they asked if we wanted to have a parade. Everyone from the city was great, even if they didn't understand it all. In meetings, people kept asking (even after a few years) why are you having a French festival? The city embraced it and so did the audience. (Clancy)

With a lot of hard work and an almost religiously dedicated volunteer staff, the first New York City Fringe Festival was born in 1997. And without warning, it became a sensation. According to Clancy:

We had no idea it would be impossible; the first year we did 175 shows in 21 theatres over 11 days – 1, 200 individual performances, some starting at 3:00 in the afternoon and some ending at 1:00 in the morning. On weekends the shows ran from noon to 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. We felt it was going to be a massive street block party type of thing. The impulse was to try to harness some of this energy. There was a lot of great work going on – we said we have a stage, let's draw a circle around all of this and it will explode, which it did. *The New York Times* covered us that first year with one article two days before the festival; the next day we were swamped for tickets. (Clancy)

Of course, anytime you are successful, the inevitable question becomes, “Great! How are you going to top it?” The first New York City Fringe Festival took almost a year and a half to plan. When it was over, according to Clancy, it took almost three months for the staff to recover and to pay all of the bills. The second festival was going to be a lot harder because the staff had only nine months to pull it all together. But, Clancy notes, theatre people always seem to be able to make situations like that work in their favor.

Many artists came back for that second year and beyond. They became self-stylized Fringe artists. The neighborhood embraced us; it's a young person's thing – touring, living on a very small budget. Theatre people are

like Bedouins – it’s been that way since theatre started. You can see people and then not see them for a few years then see them again and fall right into the same conversations because of the mutual understanding – sharing the same stories and triumphs – it’s always the same story, a nomadic fraternity knowing the same people, sharing stories of experiences in the different cities. Extended family. (Clancy)

Running a fringe festival is quite an undertaking, and the toll it takes physically, mentally emotionally are significant. In 2000, Clancy finally attended his first Edinburgh Fringe Festival when one of his original cast members from *American Absurdium*, David Calvito, produced the play for the festival and wanted Clancy’s input. Clancy goes on to tell the story:

I flew to Edinburgh in August to direct it for the Edinburgh stage. Stayed for three days to see the insane, beautiful Edinburgh Fringe Festival...I sat in the theatre watching my show and looked out of the corner of my eye and saw all of these exhausted people running around and trying to get a fringe festival started and realized shit, that was me. I missed being in the theatre and just worrying about my show. I resigned from the NYC Fringe in 2001 and started Clancy Productions with my wife – a for-profit touring theatrical production company. We went seven or nine times to Edinburgh and to the Adelaide Fringe in Sydney, Australia. We even came back to the NYC Fringe in 2009 and performed. It was fun being told by production staff how to do things when we were the ones who set up the rules to begin with. I’ve become very tight with people who run

fringe all over the world. Each one is different by the city but a lot of the same names. It's a nice fraternity to belong to. (Clancy)

When asked whether fringe festivals and the works that are created for them help to revive the art form of theatre, Clancy had this to say:

I don't know. I think it's different than that, I think those artists who are regularly on the road performing in places that aren't home and taking the same show different places are keeping that show fresh. By being in different cities and venues, you, as fringe artists, have to listen harder to make the show work. When you are on stage – that is the constant – that is the only place in which you are truly relaxed, all the other time is worrying about where are we staying, where is the restaurant, the individual show gets better. I don't know if there is an artistic difference – a sedentary show or settled show versus a traveling show – the traveling show will be sharper. (Clancy)

Clancy has gone on to create the League of Independent Theatres, an organization dedicated to providing support for independent theatres. When asked if his involvement with the league was an outgrowth of his NYC Fringe experience, Clancy commented:

In New York, the Off- Off- Broadway is a sixty year tradition; it's become like the third rung of a ladder I'm not climbing. Like independent music or film, independent theatre suggests artistic-centered work – budget doesn't really matter. Nothing has changed in New York for the 22 years I've been here and that's ridiculous. Because we are, as artists, divided by space, budget, etc., we don't build anything that lasts; we don't

argue for anything collectively. During the first NYC Fringe Festivals, when we were all working together, we all saw each other and that made things work. The league, connecting all the artists, all the venues, is trying to create a collective articulation of what we want from the city: the unions, other artists, creating a contract code for Equity and the League of Independent Theatre fund to begin a real estate investment initiative.

(Clancy)

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

In comparing the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with the fledgling Cincinnati Fringe Festival and the New York City Fringe Festival, some significant and identifiable conflicts tended to have an effect on the overall potential commercial and artistic viability of each festival. The first conflict centered on the struggle between the involvement and development of local theatre companies, versus the invitation and involvement of outside theatrical companies. The Edinburgh Fringe in essence was founded on the outside companies foisting themselves upon the traditional festival. Later, the New York Festival took advantage of the wealth of available talent in New York to be far more “homegrown.” Cincinnati’s fringe festival seemed to rely on local talent but welcomed outside companies to bring new work and perspectives to a traditionally conservative artistic marketplace.

The second conflict focuses on the decision making process of how productions are chosen for the respective festivals, if at all. It seems that while some festivals may use a juried selection process, the true spirit of the fringe seems to dictate that those juries must be cautious not to inhibit the artistic inclinations of the theatrical contributors. Cincinnati Fringe co-founder Jason Bruffy certainly amplified that belief to make sure that the works chosen for performance were “fringe-worthy.” The sheer volume of the number of potential productions in New York, however, certainly led to the institution of a more structured selection process, minimal though it may be.

Of course, the overarching issue for all theatrical festivals is space. Location, location, location is an oft-repeated phrase in real estate, and it is the single most

important issue with which each festival must successfully deal. The logistical nightmare of putting together a festival falls first to venue space – where can theatrical productions be produced to maximize space and allow for artistic integration in the process? In addition, each festival faced the conflicts inherent in who would make the decisions concerning venue space. The Edinburgh Fringe certainly had its share of arguments amongst the festival organizers, venue operators and performance companies concerning venue space allotment. The Cincinnati Fringe’s venue issues fell into the realm of financial commitments and broken contracts, potentially stemming from political consequences of the works to be presented. The New York City Fringe took advantage of a neighborhood accustomed to dealing with artists, despite the dearth of legitimate venue space.

Another common characteristic of the three festivals involved labor. Each of the festivals depended on an army of passionately dedicated volunteers who worked throughout the year to get ready for the festival each year. These volunteers were not only tireless workers, but they also supported the festivals’ individual visions of producing and supporting new alternative dramatic works. The strategic challenges of organizing, funding, advertising, marketing, running and cleaning up after the festival were tremendous and involved a complex network of people who were both talented enough and crazy enough to do the job. In particular, those volunteers who were able to translate their festival’s vision to the non-theatrical governmental agencies whose approvals were needed to run such an event should be recognized as an astonishing accomplishment.

Finally, the remaining issue that all three of the festivals face is the ongoing struggle between the impulse to create groundbreaking artistic works and the need for economic and commercial success. Again, each of the festivals studied in this investigation seemed to find their own path to reach that artistic/commercial success. Edinburgh's Fringe Festival grew from the international interlopers who invaded the comfortable establishment. The New York City Fringe's co-founders sought to save money and take advantage of the talent in the neighborhood. The Cincinnati Fringe sought to carve out an artistic vision in an area known for relatively innocuous, safe artistic expression. Yet each festival came into its own by working through the hardships and growing pains it faced along the way.

If the concept of a fringe festival promotes the ability for independent theatrical works to be showcased, then it stands to reason that each individual festival has to follow its own path to success and that there are no real clear cut, guaranteed methods to insure success. Each of the festivals in this study all followed somewhat similar blueprints for success, but each altered those blueprints to fit their particular city's circumstantial situation. Given the sheer number of fringe festivals now held around the world, the evidence suggests that all of those festivals have also forged their own variations on this blueprint for success. Perhaps John Clancy stated it best when he said that a fringe festival was like a party and that what kind of party was being thrown was determined by who was throwing it and where it was being thrown. (Clancy) To put in a much more simplistic way, the city makes the Fringe, not the other way around.

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