

**“Fringe theatre is struggling”, so says Guardian theatre critic, Lyn Gardner, in one of her recent blogs. Do you agree with Gardner’s assessment? What do you think constitutes a healthy state of fringe theatre and why?**

**Introduction:**

What constitutes fringe theatre and what is the fertile ground for its existence? It is a complex question that perhaps runs deeper than mere ticket prices and saturation of product and social media behaviour. That is not to discount the influence of economics on the fringe, but that any analysis of its health ought to delve deeply into the socio-political world of a nation and its history and culture. In the 1960s, fringe theatre in Britain was fuelled by discontentment with leaders, masters, and authorities in the broadest sense – namely, as Billington (2007, p.162) states: the new Labour government of 1964 for its perceived failure to deliver change, and the nation’s subornment to the United States over the Vietnam War. Ironically, it was the United States, specifically New York in 1965, with its experimentation in film, theatre, visual arts, music, and lifestyle that ignited London’s fringe theatre scene later in the decade, according to exponent of London’s early fringe, Roland Rees, (1992, p. 16). Tradition, it was understood, could be challenged.

According to Peter Ansoerge’s comprehensive account (1975, p. 1) of fringe theatre, going against the grain of naturalism and a refusal to work within the context of conventional theatrical environments were two of the basic tenets of the early fringe. New writing, transit theatre, rough, inexpensive, experimental, political, inventive devised work, arts labs, touring, community, pub, demographic theatre (women’s, ethnic/racial, and gay) became synonymous with the fringe. Ed Burman’s Lunchtime Theatre was particularly representative of that period, while the People Show performing in the basement of Better Books in Charing Cross Road typifies the fringe’s ingenuity and challenge to the traditional notion of stage and venue (Rees, 1992). As Goffman (1959, p. 32) states: ‘All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify.’ Ansoerge (1975, p. 79) claims

that the dropping of censorship in 1968 allowed the fringe's 'fascination with violence, perversion and [its] concern with a society... moving towards a total irreversible breakdown,' to be realised on stage. Howard Brenton's *Revenge*, (1969), explored public and private violence, and illustrates how shocking audiences through the exploration of taboo subjects was becoming a key element of the fringe scene.

Part of fringe theatre's remit is its capacity to reach new audiences in unconventional spaces inexpensively. Is it reasonable to argue that for there to be a truly dynamic fringe theatre scene, society itself must be in a state of economic and social decay or disharmony? Prosperity can stifle fringe theatre for a very considerable reason: the financial scale of productions increases. With gentrification comes compliance, and detailed discussions of insurance and health and safety requirements have become the norm. In this way, a more upwardly mobile society inflicts greater bureaucracy and administration demands on theatre practitioners. By contrast, according to Bradwell (2010, p. XV) 'In the first two years of its existence (1972/73) the Bush Theatre mounted seventy-seven productions with a combined artistic, technical, and administrative staff of just two.' Bradwell makes the comparison (2010, p. XV) that in 2010 the Theatre Royal in Stratford East had a full and part-time staff of close to ninety, not including actors, writers, or directors. The question of how fringe theatre can survive in the contemporary economic environment or evolve given the current level of compliance and expectations regarding non-creative personnel will be an important examination here.

Finally, an exploration of what constitutes a healthy state of fringe theatre needs to examine the properties of fringe theatre. Does fringe simply mean an 'out there' idea, a lack of financial muscle to sustain quality work, or an arbitrary preach to a converted room of lefties? Is it a lot more? And if so, if fringe theatre is struggling, as Lyn Gardner suggests, might it be a simple case of the exhaustion of possibilities? The dropping of censorship may have opened the gates in 1968 – but what are the taboos, if any, nowadays? Is it possible that society has, in this sphere at least, come full circle, and that a less vibrant or radical fringe theatre scene is due, at least in part, to the fringe having educated the establishment?

## **Yesterday:**

For many, the early fringe represented a chance to explore theatre in a physical, non-naturalistic, and non-textual fashion in a way that was mutually creative and explorative. Mark Long, one of the founding members of The People Show, in an interview with fringe pioneer, Roland Rees, (1992, p. 30) stated: 'I only want to work with people who contribute to... creating a piece as opposed to being told what to do...' It was a fight against dependence and traditional avenues that led to theatre, an alternative to the stricture of perception in theatre and art that gave rise to hierarchies, and a complete reappraisal and expansion of venue, stage, or theatrical site. More specifically, as Rees suggests (1992, p. 19) the early fringe beat against specialisation, which it saw as the domain of the mainstream. It was a versatile, multi-skilled, multi-disciplined theatre – and with its capacity to reach a lot of people through touring to a diversity of sites and spaces, challenged the establishment's building-based mentality. By coming to the people, it in turn attracted those who, in other times, would not have participated: people not drama school trained, or those of minority and ethnic groups (Rees, 1992). The fringe empowered diverse voices, and with a predominance of these voices engaging audiences away from traditional sites, experimentation was permitted on a broad scale.

Despite the growing interest in non-text based theatre, the early fringe also saw a surge of new writing that carried with it the sentiment of challenge. Ansorge (1975, p. 2) makes the point that since 1968, Portable Theatre founders, David Hare and Tony Bicat, launched more new writers than any equivalent established or underground theatre organisation.

At the 1971 Edinburgh Festival Portable had three companies running concurrently. Chris Wilkinson's *Plays for Rubber Go Go Girls* was a comic strip investigation into *News of the World* style sex and violence, while the second company's group consideration of an incident of fellatio on a motorway, entitled *Lay By*, could easily be linked to Snoo Wilson's preoccupation with

murder and insanity in his *Blow Job*, Portable's final contribution to that eventful Edinburgh season. (Ansorge, 1975, p. 2)

Ansorge (1975, p. 2) points out that Portable presented audiences with a view of a morally bankrupt England that was obsessed by violent perversions and bent upon self-destruction. All Portable shows, suggests Ansorge (1975, p. 10), were designed for touring; they were relatively short, economic in design and tailored for immediate presentation in any number of empty spaces across the land. Looking from the inside out, Hare's contributions, as Ansorge (1975, p. 11) illuminates, exposed the self-made neuroses of the fashionable left as much as they attacked the values of the hard-line right. *How Brophy Made Good*, from 1969, is an example of Hare satirising so-called progressive values, while *The Great Exhibition* from 1972 explores class-entrapment, (Ansorge, 1975). Everything was up for grabs in the new theatrical territory.

Howard Brenton's plays of this time show a deep interest in public and private violence. The criminal loses his central place in the naturalist theatre in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century; Brenton brings him back and thus attacks the conventions of the naturalist stage, (Ansorge, 1975). Ansorge (1975, p. 3) claims that Brenton's protagonists in plays such as *Christie in Love* (1969), *The Education of Skinny Spew* (1969), and *Wesley* (1968) are failed heroes, frustrated not by the judgements of their societies – but the lack of any definite moral code of justice. The use of site-specific and found environments has been a trademark of fringe theatre; but – as Ansorge (1975, p. 4) contends – in Brenton's case such venues served to shape the specific style, which he had chosen for writing his most successful work. The fringe theatre of Hare and Brenton was the kind of theatre that rattled the cages of the establishment. It challenged all notions of venue and naturalism. Moreover, it was an inexpensive, prolific theatre: a place you went to change your mind.

It was an exciting time for theatre in the early 1970s, but towards the end of the decade and throughout the 1980s Margaret Thatcher brought with her an unofficial censorship. Howard Brenton reflects in Rees (1992, p. 13): 'We got so worried about

the position of the company... this worry took over all the theatres, the RSC, the National, the Court, and you end up worrying more about the grant than you do about the audience.' Professor Trevor Walker (2012) suggests that 'a fear of losing grants brought about politically safer material from the likes of *Theatre de Complicite*, *Moving Picture Mime Show*, and *DV8*.' New cabaret also came into vogue, and although much of it was political – singing, dancing and laughing about political issues made it more palatable in the eyes of the establishment. This came to dominate the Edinburgh Fringe of this time, not least because it was a cheap form of theatre. Walker (2012) makes the point that 'Thatcherism produced a business-like organisation to the theatre environment.' By the mid eighties, companies had become savvy compared to what they were in the 60s and 70s. Economic rationalism came with obvious disadvantages, and meant that theatre was becoming less about the work itself. Theatre administration began to boom, and money started pouring into non-creative roles within theatre companies. Bureaucratisation of the theatre industry was burgeoning to include a professional class of designers, and other careerists: a high cost expectation in theatre from which the design versus essence argument took root, and as Walker (2012) points out – 'we are yet to recover.' With this form of gentrification, the political aspect of the fringe took a further hit, as the left began to lose its identity in becoming slightly more comfortable, and slightly less angry and less militant in its attitude towards the establishment. Ansoorge makes the vital argument (1975, p. 81) that writers, actors, and directors were left with little choice but to work in *theatre* as opposed to sociology. Long – from Rees (1992, p. 35) – adds that money dampened experimentation, as the risk of artistic failure increased. The conflict over staging new work versus staging one's career also led to fewer risks.

### **Today:**

Perhaps the most interesting observation to make about fringe theatre today is the amount of conjecture over the state of its health. Steve Bell of Berkeley Walk as recently as April 2010 described fringe theatre as 'a tired old joke, a pile of

compromises and mediocrity playing to two people a night in a nasty room above or behind a pub' (Bell, 2010). This is an unfair assessment, given the many examples of fringe theatre success – not least *The Mountaintop*, first staged by Theatre 503, that won the Olivier Award for best new play in 2010. Matt Trueman, posting on *The Guardian* website, nonetheless shared Bell's view at the time; namely: 'the fringe has given up its former radicalism and become little more than a showcase or a subsidiary of show business' (Trueman, 2010). Trueman's view perhaps reflects the state of major fringe festivals that are now geared more towards product than experimentation and new work. Fast-forward to January 2012, however, and the same theatre critic claims that London's fringe theatre is 'as robust and vibrant as [he's] known it' (Trueman, 2012), given the success of fringe venues at the 2012 Off West End awards. Bernadette Hyland, writing for *The Northerner* (July, 2012), contends that the regional fringe theatre scene is flourishing, and cites The 24/7 Theatre Festival in Manchester and a revival of small, local theatre venues as strong evidence. National Theatre director, Nicholas Hytner, on the other hand makes the point that twenty-five percent of regional theatres will disband in the current economic environment (Higgins, 2012), as they did in the years: 1979-1992. The fringe is certainly more aware of itself nowadays, and many fringe venues take greater ownership of the artistic product that they are programming in an attempt to maintain audiences. Greater specialisation has resulted. On this matter, Lyn Gardner herself, in September 2010, posted that fringe theatre was in good shape: 'The Union is doing seriously superior work with musicals, and the largely unsubsidised Finborough and Theatre 503 are giving established and well-funded new writing houses a run for their money.' (Gardner, 2010). Gardner's conflicting opinion on the state of the fringe suggests there is a fine line between thriving and saturation, and that fringe theatre is in a constant state of flux.

Lyn Gardner's view may have changed in light of austerity. The suggestion that economic unrest equates liveliness and virility in fringe theatre warrants caution. Matt Trueman, however, does make the argument in his January 2012 *Guardian* blog that the recession is having positive consequences on fringe theatre:

Even at the best of times, the theatre industry has many more potential employees than jobs. And it's noticeable that established talent is now working on the fringe: the Print Room, for instance, has recently enticed Michael Pennington, Iain Glen and Penny Downey, while the Union frequently hosts West End regulars, as does east London's Arcola (Trueman, 2010).

However, it is also possible to consider that more than at any time in history, money determines a nation's artistic output. The implications for society are twofold: is society being nourished in a way that reflects a balanced artistic diet; is society being conditioned against what is not available to it artistically? The argument can be made that it is now much more difficult for individual, shoestring or self-funded projects to exist. The new Conservative government brought a thirty percent cut to Arts Council funding across the board in 2010 (Higgins, 2012). Reduced funding of this scale, contingent upon only a fifteen percent cut on readily funded or 'frontline' arts organisations, means that new, one-off, individual and experimental projects are in serious trouble (Higgins, 2012). The new environment is one in which the organised, the recognised, and by and large those established in large buildings will stand a better chance of survival.

Although some make the valid point that contemporary fringe theatre lacks a radical core, there is perhaps an equally plausible contemporary explanation. Fiona Shaw as Galactia, challenging the centre then being absorbed from the fringe in Howard Barker's *Scenes From an Execution* is a contemporary example of the conventional journey of the fringe and its players. Shaw, as an actress, has chapter and verse written about her early exploits as a fringe representative – yet it would have been almost impossible for her to have performed, at times semi-naked, on such a national, mainstream stage in the 1960s. One might argue that the role of the fringe is to make the centre 'ready' and 'able' to deal with riskier or hitherto unpalatable material. Howard Barker himself, in a long and distinguished career, is now – from 2012 – a National Theatre playwright. Why it has taken him so long to achieve this feat is open to speculation and suspicion, but on a recent BBC Radio Four

programme he mentioned that his failure to write for audiences has put his work outside the establishment's view of a safe commercial bet. Barker states (1998, p. 13): 'It is not to insult an audience to offer it ambiguity.' *Scenes From an Execution* appearing at the National Theatre in 2012 is clear evidence of maturation, even education, of the theatre establishment, its politics, and the public. In a similar vein, Stephen Rea – in Roland Rees' account of the fringe (1992, p. 40) – observes that as an actor in the 1960's and 1970s 'the journey between the fringe and the Royal Court was quite a big journey... Now there is no gulf at all.'

What cannot be disputed is that fringe theatre and the associations we make when considering the fringe have changed over the decades, and there is a blurring of the lines between fringe and mainstream as Stephen Rea suggests. Mark Shenton from the *Sunday Express* described Beckett's *All That Fall* as 'The fringe theatre event of the year' (Shenton, 2012) – given the association of Gambon, Atkins, and Nunn (Michael Gambon, Dame Eileen Atkins, and Director Sir Trevor Nunn) with the eighty seat, Jermyn Street Theatre production. It was a reading of a radio play that needed to look and sound like a radio play. There was the perception of something slightly unfinished, perhaps rough and dangerous, and certainly live (actors read from scripts). Although the Jermyn Street Theatre is a noted fringe venue, and the production of Beckett's play was by all accounts extraordinary – is this really fringe theatre according to the values of the fringe from decades past? The event's pricing suggests otherwise. If anything, one might argue that the show represented the antithesis of fringe theatre given the fringe's historical link to accessibility over elitism. An event of this kind that involved famous names and a notoriously tricky estate would have required substantial production and economic muscle, given the rigorous economic, technical and legal issues that are associated with reproducing Beckett's work. Is it customary for genuine fringe theatre productions to receive five star reviews from *The Guardian's* Michael Billington? Perhaps society, as Guy Debord suggests (1994, p. 12), has moved in a direction where a bit of rough equates coarse perfection, where 'all that was once directly lived has become mere representation,' and authenticity (the art of being) has declined into a state of having. Perhaps it is



simply that the fringe has repositioned itself to be more inclusive of artistic possibilities in the present climate.

**Tomorrow:**

It is fair to suggest that the conditions of the late 1960s and early 1970s will not be repeated, as the socio-political and financial world has irredeemably shifted. Barker (1998, p. 17) rues that 'the accountant is the new censor.' The Left has been largely gentrified, and the only hope we have is if tenets of the fringe, as discussed in this paper, continue to inform and educate the present mainstream. With the blurring of lines between fringe and mainstream and with the critics, themselves, in a state of ongoing debate as to the health of fringe theatre, including attendance and participation rates – it is difficult to reach a complete view. Clearly, there are still examples of artistic and political questioning, risk, accessibility, and experiment taking place in theatres, devised spaces, and site-specific venues. The Courtyard Theatre in Hoxton has managed to maintain its five thousand pound award for new writing for the tenth year in a row, while Paul Burgess' devised work for Daedalus Theatre is an example that carries the flame of non-text based, political challenge. Equally, the fringe of the past has opened the doors of diversity, with – for example – all black performances of Julius Caesar at the R.S.C in August 2012. However, an assessment on the state of fringe theatre being based on how many awards fringe shows win is not a defining yardstick of its health. The question of what constitutes a healthy state of fringe theatre also needs to be considered through an examination of society. The information age has, in a way, made us particularly demanding consumers. We expect choice. It is arguable that the abundance of choice, or the perception thereof, has made us less curious. By extension, it is perhaps interesting to consider whether the reliance on technology and the ensuing movement away from the organic has made us more risk averse, less spontaneous, and less conscious about what moves us. One can reason that theatre nowadays is a more defined product, as opposed to a step in a process or an experiment. The saturation of images has ensured that we, as individuals, are more inclined to take control in a

private, individual-consumer sort of way. The concern is that saturation does not whet the appetite, and fringe theatre has always demanded a curious viewer. Fringe theatre ought to have a dangerous, even volatile core, and to reach people it requires ongoing participation from a wide range of sources.

Perhaps a way of closing is to offer a split vision. Debord's theory of the society as spectacle was in clear evidence during a production of Artaud's *Jet of Blood* in 2008 at a plush venue in St. Kilda, Melbourne. Suffice to say that in such a well-heeled site, there was a distinct absence of rotting meat under the seats. Nevertheless, it was billed as a fringe event. Immediately it became apparent that the erosion of taboos pertaining to sex and violence presents considerable dangers when attempting shock by drawing on the past in a non-contextual, arbitrary way. It is interesting to consider to what extent fringe theatre has damaged the perception of the fringe with its determination to shock for shock's sake. Perhaps a further question is how much the fringe of tomorrow will merely ape the fringe of the past. By comparison, I witnessed what promised to be a more conventional theatrical experience of a conventionally structured language-based play. To be immersed in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, removed from Melbourne theatre's conservative heart, in a garret (indeed, someone's living room) with twenty-five shabby lounge chairs in Chinatown, watching sheets as staging and having actors at your feet is something that I'll long remember. It was poorly advertised; it was undersold. I had to seek it; I had to be curious. None of the actors bore familiar names, but for fifteen dollars I became educated on that night of menacing violence as to what is possible in theatre – yet everything about the production suggested the shambolic (it would be interesting to contrast the two productions in terms of cost, compliance, and non-creative personnel). If theatre is the only artistic medium that cannot be truly replicated, genuine fringe theatre takes this magical maxim to the extreme.

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