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The Macro in the Micro: Using Theatre Festivals to Test the Temperature of the Industry

critical-stages.org/29/the-macro-in-the-micro-using-theatre-festivals-to-test-the-temperature-of-the-industry/

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Abstract

Theatre festivals are exciting, celebratory and communal experiences which, in many ways, could be said to be a micro of the macro. Using, as a case study, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival—the largest example of its kind in the world—the contention that the health and direction of the (in this case, U.K.) theatre industry can be measured through the prism of its festivals is examined. Several metrics are examined and contextualised, leading to conclusions which offer suggestions for further work to be done in order to inspire, create and sustain a theatre industry that is inclusive, equitable and truly diverse.

Keywords: fringe theatre, class, accessibility, change, inclusion

Edinburgh Fringe Festival: In Context

The Edinburgh International Festival began in 1947 “to create a lofty spirit of freedom and to blend a moral and intellectual guiding force in the future of the world” (Bartie 51); a laudable aim in the shadow of the end of World War II and an understandable artistic response to the horror of the previous decade. The Fringe Festival began in the same year when eight companies arrived—uninvited. These companies—Glasgow Unity Theatre, Christine Orr Players of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Peoples’ Theatre, Edinburgh District Community Drama Association, Pilgrim Players, Edinburgh College of Art Theatre Group and Manchester Marionette Theatre—were all rooted in theatre.

Comparable fringe festivals across the U.K. began much later. Brighton Fringe officially began in 2006 and is held in May, with its older sibling, Buxton Fringe (1980), happening in July; they are often seen as Edinburgh preview festivals. Camden Fringe (2006) runs through August and is pitched very much as a direct competitor.

The very beginnings of the Edinburgh Fringe were predicated on taking space, being present and responding, artistically, to the moment. It could be argued that this is the very essence of live theatrical performance—liveness and fearlessness in the face of the status quo; speaking truth to power, a place “where a living confrontation can take place” (Brook 122). The festival maintains this ethos to this day and, because of that, can also be seen as a barometer of urgent and/or contemporaneous theatre.

The following will elucidate suggestions of metrics by which this—and other— festivals can be seen measured and used as a basis for comparison of broader trends. That this festival takes place in one city for—what many participants will freely admit is—an intense four weeks situates it perfectly as a microcosm of the macrocosm. Will it be that trends in the wider theatre industry can be seen more readily in this concentrated period and geographic space? If so, is there a direction of travel that can be gleaned, new concepts, new ways of working and being? Or are customary ways of being, in the macrocosm, co-oping a festival founded on rebellious spirit?



A street performer on the Royal Mile at the Edinburgh Fringe. Photo: John-Paul Stephenson. CC BY-SA 2.5 DEED

In 2023, there were 3,553 performances, rising from 3,334 in 2022 (Walfisz)—this does not include the many street artists and off-Fringe events that attracted an audience. There were 288 venues, and performers from at least 67 countries in 2023, up from 63 the year before (Walfisz). After the aborted 2020 festival—cancelled due to COVID—countries represented have remained stable in comparison to 2019 data (Fringe Media Office), but there has been a dip in programmed shows and audience from the same year—3,800 and 250,000 respectively.

The trend for increase in audience size post-2021 is replicated in an increase in audience (as measured by ticket sales). In 2023, there were 2,445,609 tickets (Walfisz) sold, up from 2,201,175 in 2022 (Fringe Media Office). It could be concluded there is confidence returning to attendance of live events after initial hesitancy after the nadir of the COVID pandemic; albeit a cautious one.

Venues



Top left: The Edinburgh Assembly Rooms. Photo: Stuart Shepherd. CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED. Top right: Pleasance Courtyard. Photo: Richard Webb. CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED. Bottom left: The Gilded Balloon (Teviot Row House) and Bristo Square during the 2018 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Photo: Abi Skipp. CC BY 2.0 DEED. Bottom right: Underbelly, George Square. Photo: Abi Skipp. CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED

The “big four” venues—Assembly (established in 1981), Pleasance (1985), Gilded Balloon (1986) and Underbelly (2000), have been in existence for an average of 35 years. Interestingly, these venues were, and still are, renowned for their comedy programming, a contrast to the staunch theatrical roots of the eight companies that began the Fringe.

Getting onto the programme at these prestigious venues is a goal for many theatre companies but their (assumed) pre-eminence has been challenged in recent years by venues such as Summerhall who curate a specific and bespoke—mostly theatre—programme. They have built a loyal following, with audiences being guided by the venues’ programming choices for a marker of likely synergy with their predilections. The sheer choice available can be bewildering; a way to mitigate this is to rely on those who have a track record in programming work that is to one’s taste.

Many venues at the Fringe do not curate their programme in the same way as Summerhall et al. but operate on the capitalist model of pure finance—if you can afford to perform, they will happily take your money. This is not helpful for smaller, newer, companies who have little

experience in marketing and fully comprehending the sheer weight of offer.

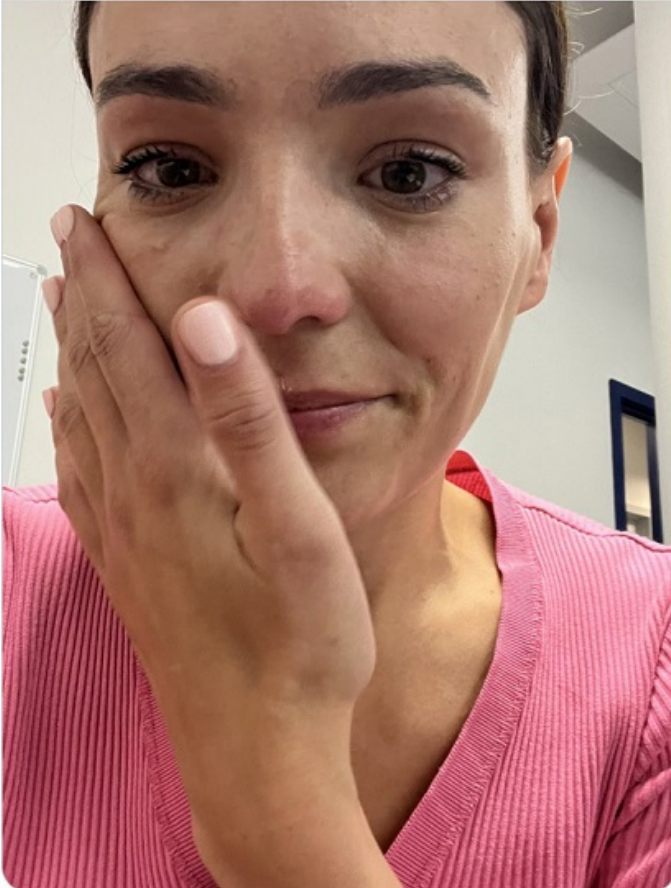
In terms relatable to the wider industry, a show that has played a West End theatre or a “prestige” venue in London is often seen as more valuable than those shows played in “the regions.” The term “the regions” is not helpful, as it serves to maintain the hegemonic hold over success perception in theatre and, consequently, is sometimes used as a pejorative term relating to quality. A show made “in the regions” is analogous to a show at an uncurated Edinburgh Fringe venue. Not being part of that system does not necessarily mean the art is not of sufficient quality, but it does mean that it is likely to be overlooked by audiences and reviewers, therefore concentrating the future of the industry into the hands of a few, mostly unaccountable, gatekeepers and gatekeeping organisations. If, however, a company has sufficient financial wealth and/or marketing nous, it can bypass this system as it will be able to get a slot at the festival and have the wherewithal to mount a media campaign that will allow it to be noticed—privileging those who are wealthy.

At the 2023 festival, one such campaign was mounted by performer Georgie Grier, who added a picture to social media of her teary face after having just one audience member for a performance of her show *Sunsets*, which was playing at just after midday in the Snug (capacity, 40) at Gilded Balloon’s Patter Hoose venue—the smallest venue capacity across the entire Gilded Balloon “estate” (the rumoured average audience size at the Fringe is six). The post went viral—possibly helped by venue prestige and recognition—with many famous faces sending messages of solidarity and support. The show went on to sell-out and gain a London transfer. The undercurrent to this story is that Grier had tried this marketing ploy the previous year, with the same show playing Greenside @ Nicholson Square, with nowhere near the same amount of attention. Tenacity and a level of chutzpah may not always level the playing field but can go a long way.

Georgie Grier @georgie... · 15/08/2022
Just had a cry because the only people who turned up to my first show were my parents. But when I had said cry in the bathroom, some other lovely Fringe performers gave me words of encouragement. And I guess two people is better than none? #EdinburghFringe



Georgie Grier @georgi... · 03/08/2023
There was one person in my audience today when I performed my one woman play, 'Sunsets' at #edfringe. It's fine, isn't it? It's fine...? 🙄



A composite of the two social media posts published by Georgie Grier in 2022 and 2023

At those venues that curate their programme there are, in the main, two types of financial deal, box office split or box office split with guarantee (for the venue). Those which do not curate, such as TheSpaceUK, tend to offer outright hire as a preferred option. These models of operation are used at other fringe festivals, such as Brighton, but the latter model appears to be used more routinely at Buxton and Camden. Both models put the financial risk on the shoulders of producers and companies.

Testing those two models with a hypothetical show will allow for this to become abundantly clear.

If a show was programmed at one of Underbelly's smaller spaces, say, the 60 capacity "Big Belly" at Underbelly Cowgate (the original home of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*), the first big test would be to ensure the application demonstrated our hypothetical show represented

“the best of new talent and new writing” and “suit [Underbelly’s] spaces and simultaneously excite and intrigue audiences” (Underbelly)—both highly subjective metrics which are not fully or expansively explained in available literature. From there, a box office split with guarantee would be worked out. The guarantee for this venue would work out at £2,371.20 (this is expanded on, helpfully, in detail on page 8 of the Performer Information 2023). A deposit of 50% of this total would be required, meaning before the show has even arrived, a producer will need to find £1,185.60. To simply break even on the venue deal, a show would need an average audience of 40% (in this case, 24), and with the rumoured average audience number of six, it does not take a mathematician to see the numbers are weighed against the producer. There is solace in the fact that the entire guarantee does not need to be paid before the run, thus leaving the hope and perception that it is in both parties’ best interest for the show to be a success and, given that this is a “prestige” venue, that is more likely than it might be for other venues.

If the same hypothetical show were to go to TheSpaceUK’s space@surgeons’ hall’s “theatre 1” space—also 60 capacity—the initial conversation would be solely capitalistic and nothing to do with the merit(s) of the show—a straight hire of space. This is a more egalitarian method; it could be argued. This said, there is no guarantee of quality. The prospect for those with the deepest pockets and shallowest imaginations to have a show at the Fringe increases exponentially, coupled with the vastly lower chance of the show being reviewed and/or awarded, makes this a difficult prospect for a new producer. The financial settlement varies but was in the region of £4,020 at the 2023 festival. From there a “first payment of 30% of the rental will be required on confirmation of the booking and return of contract, 50% by the 1st May and the remaining 20% by 1st July” (TheSpaceUK). In other words, the venue will have the full amount for rental in their bank account, and on their accounting spreadsheet(s), before the festival starts, removing any real impetus to look after the show as it plays in their space, outside of desire for repeat custom. At festivals such as those in Buxton and Camden, it could be argued that there is justification for this model due to larger general competition from other non-festival work and/or geographic restriction; the same cannot be said for Edinburgh where there is an annual influx of people specifically in the city for the festival.

Once the venue has been secured, accommodation will follow. “Fringe Festival accommodation prices are approximately 52 percent higher in August than autumn rates” (VanReenen), a truth acknowledged by Katy Koren, co-artistic director of the Gilded Balloon, who suggests that “landlords need to take less accommodation and venue rental . . . a coordinated approach [is] needed to make things happen” (Quinn). Considering that average rents are more expensive in Edinburgh than in the rest of Scotland outside of August, a comparison between London—the supposed holy grail for all theatre—and “the regions,” can be drawn. This will inevitably prove an immovable barrier to those who do not have the financial wherewithal to withstand such expenses.

The venue in both cases stands to gain, although the spreading of burden with the programmed model seems—if in nothing but reputational currency—to be less exploitative.

Reviews and Recognition

The Fringe Society openly acknowledge “[r]eviews are a critical tool for Fringe artists, for both raising their profile and encouraging audiences to seek out their work” (Fringe Media Office). A review can make or break the reception and feeling toward a show, and getting those reviews can be difficult. Engaging reviewers whose publications have “reach” is difficult. The coverage in bigger publications—*The Scotsman*, *The Guardian*, *The Stage*, *WhatsOnStage*, *List*—“tends to be more and more focused on big-name shows” (Sinclair), leaving many to find reviewers with smaller readerships who, nevertheless, are often dedicated theatre-goers and skilled critics writing for, and/or running, blogs. Not all reviews and reviewers are perceived as equal.

Producer Ellie Keel clearly articulates the importance of a good review, opining that one of the three shows she produced at the 2023 festival “has been selling out since a flurry of glowing reviews” and another receiving a five-star review in a national quality press title saw it have “full houses for the rest of the run.” This must be seen in the context that both of these shows had been programmed by new writing company Paines Plough, who operate a “sub venue”—Roundabout—which is situated in Summerhall, which itself, as previously mentioned, curates its offer and has a loyal following due to its reputation for “good” work.

Reputation, therefore, goes some way to attract reviewers in the first place. There is, however, a perceived hierarchy to the usefulness of a review. Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* (director: Matthew Dunster) was a commercial success in the West End in 2023. On press materials, it highlighted a positive review from review blog site “All That Dazzles,” which led established critic Mark Shenton to “fear that the future of criticism is now entirely in the hands of hobbyists,” thereby laying bare his perceived hierarchy of theatre criticism. That the overwhelming majority of reviews for Edinburgh Fringe shows come from blogs and not “professional” critics suggests this is a problem that will need to be contended with. The key question here is whether dedicated theatregoers sharing their ideas and viewpoints on what they have seen are a match for those who make a living from criticism. There are scant few accredited training courses and/or standardisation for critical reviews of theatre shows, meaning all reviewers were once avid unpaid theatre devotees. The reader of the review, ultimately, is the one who decides whether to buy a ticket, but that decision can and often is swayed by reviews—hence the foregrounding of a positive reaction by *The Pillowmans’* Olivier-winning producers, Empire Street.

Biases of the reviewer and/or publication often inform the review and can form biases in the potential audience. *The Scotsman*, which awards the Fringe First Award for shows that premiere at the Fringe, has run the award for 50 years; the awards “are the longest running awards at the Edinburgh festivals, . . . recognised all over the world” (The Newsroom). They are awarded to shows that pique the interest of a single reviewer, who recommends the

show to be seen by two more critics before a “discussion of its merits” prior to awarding the accolade. They are awarded weekly during the festival—a clear understanding of the importance of reviewers and visibility in order to sell tickets. This system is based on the biases of the reviewers.

In 2023, there were eighteen awarded shows. Of these, three were from the big four venues, five were from Summerhall, four from Zoo, two from Traverse, two from TheSpaceUK, with one each from Paradise Green and Army @ the Fringe. In this, there is clear bias toward venue. For all of the awarded shows to come from 2.7% of venues is analogous to the Oliviers. For an award that markets itself as “Britain’s most prestigious stage honours” (SOLT), Olivier winners can only come from a pool of 46 theatres which are all London-based. In 2023, all of the 27 winners came from just 12 theatres. The organising committee—Society of London Theatres (SOLT)—recognise 241 theatres in London, so even if these awards were, more accurately, marketed as *London’s* theatre awards, only 19% of London’s theatres would be eligible, with 5% taking the honours. To take into account all of Britain’s theatres, which Theatres Trust estimate to be 1,100, this eligibility drops to 4.1%, with just 1% taking the honours. Evidently—like the Oliviers—on this numerical analysis, Fringe First Awards cannot be seen to be representative of the theatre it engages with but directly analogous to the narrow(ing) hegemony of the “quality assurance” both awards could be argued to perpetuate.

Across the 2023 festival, *The Scotsman* published 10 five-star reviews; of those, only two were awarded a Fringe First, all other winners were rated four-star shows by the publication. This could point to a confusion of what a five-star show is, underscoring that reviews are personal subjective opinions, regardless of the perceived prestige of the publication and/or reviewer. In looking at the review coverage of these shows across the “bigger publications,” a mixed picture emerges. Three of the winners were not reviewed by any of the other publications, meaning critical balance cannot be established. Only two shows were reviewed by all publications, bringing into question the pervasiveness, range and knowledge of these publications. Notably, of the two reviewed by all publications there was agreement on the four-star rating, with *The Stage* proving the one exception offering a three-star rating. One winner gained three reviews and was given a three, a four and a five-star rating—for a widely read audience member, this could create confusion and “lose” the company a ticket sale.

The bias across reviews seems to play to a consensus of what is “good.” That “good” can be predicated on several things, but the venue, and its perceived prestige, seem to be a gateway to these reviewers being interested in the first place.

Inclusivity and Empowering Makers

Since 2018, Fringe of Colour has created and curated an open-source, community updated, spreadsheet of shows at the Edinburgh Fringe, listing shows “where 50% or more of the performers or speakers on stage are Black people or People of Colour” (Fringe of Colour)—there is, notably, not a version for other fringe festivals. Whilst it must be stressed the

database is “volunteer-run and community-dependent, relying mostly on crowdsourcing information” (Fringe of Colour), there are interesting trends and hypotheses that can be taken from the database which hold a mirror to the wider industry.

Firstly, the fact such a database is deemed necessary points to a lack of visibility for performers not racialised-as-White. There is a contention in its very existence that the festival is not diverse, something acknowledged by Chris Snow, the Fringe Society’s head of artist services, who said:

There has historically been limited support available for black and/or global majority artists taking part in fringe, and the Fringe Society acknowledges that this needs to change. . . . For real change to happen, it is vital that the Fringe Society, venues and producers . . . understand how we can all support the festival to become more inclusive and accessible.

qtd. in Morgan

As recently as 2022, director Emily Aboud opined:

Anyone who wants to come [to Edinburgh] to see work needs to have the money to afford accommodation and have friends here and I think every year it’s getting more and more inaccessible, and unfortunately that means it’s going to be the rich, white people who are coming here, making work, seeing work and reviewing work.

qtd. in Masso

This is not something seen *carte blanche* across the industry, especially with companies making work with, by and for those who are chronically under-represented, so seems to be a specific problem here; that she mentions the homogeneity of artist and audience highlights a problematic dichotomy. In a 2022 open letter, Olivier nominated theatre company Nouveau Riche said, “[a]s the theatre industry has slowly begun taking steps in the direction of inclusion and anti-racism, it truly feels like Edinburgh Fringe 2022 is at a standstill” (qtd. in Masso).

The same was highlighted five years previous by director Matthew Xia. In a year where there were “fewer than 100 shows from artists of colour among the 3,500,” he noticed “[t]he people handing out the flyers were, largely, white, as were the people they were giving the flyers to,” and because of this, he, as a Black man, was ignored. He points to structural racism, an accusation supported by the results of Rodgers’ survey which “revealed the institutional racism performers of colour continue to face in the pursuit of their careers” and, at the core of former Royal Shakespeare Company Artistic Director, Greg Doran’s ill-judged but, no doubt, subconsciously informed comments in October 2023 highlighting his knowledge of “male, white actors who are certainly finding themselves with very little work’ and hoping the pendulum of equality ‘will swing back’” (qtd. in Muir).



Fleabag. Photo: Raph_PH. CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED

The Fringe Festival is often seen as a cauldron of the new, a place where new forms, new voices and new stories are told in innovative, inventive and unexpected ways. The heralded success story of the last eleven years is Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*, co-produced by Francesca Moody and performed at Underbelly Cowgate in 2013, which divided major reviewers (five stars from *The Scotsman* and a Fringe First award, but only three stars from the *Guardian*). Waller-Bridge (from 2021, the Fringe Society's honorary President), is held as emblematic of what the Fringe can do for a career. A slight irony, therefore, that she was used to spearhead the "Keep It Fringe" initiative which offers "50 bursaries of £2,000 to individual artists or companies bringing work to the Fringe" (Fringe Media Office). Even in its publicity materials, it opaquely references the world that produced *Fleabag* is no longer in existence.

Not every artist has the same start in their career, but we believe that shouldn't prevent anyone having access to a stage to showcase their talent at the Fringe. There is no Fringe without artists, without risk-taking or experimentation. Rooted in our vision to give anyone a stage and everyone a seat, this fund sets out to protect artists' prospects by removing some of the growing barriers to performing.

Fringe Media Office

This is definitely a positive step, but the lack of acknowledgement that the dream that *Fleabag* and Waller-Bridge's subsequent career are used to represent is not as easy as getting a show to the Fringe is sadly not readily acknowledged or discussed. As already discussed here, a £2,000 bursary would be hugely welcome to many companies but, even just between venue costs and accommodation, will not go far enough to meaningfully facilitate those who are really under-represented at the festival (and the industry).

It has been argued there is little room for genre-defying, experimental theatre in festival contexts “unless it is also sensational or has sufficiently broad popular appeal to draw crowds and attention” (Knowles 186) due to the levels of competition to survive (or even thrive) commercially and, it could be contended, critically. William Burdett-Coutts, the founder and Artistic Director of Edinburgh's Assembly Rooms, has said that, “I do think that it's unfortunate in a way that the commercialisation of [the Fringe] has taken over from the ideas side . . . an awful lot of the Fringe has become pretty dog-eat-dog, fighting over what deal you can do with who . . . I don't think that's really what it should be about (qtd. in Nanjiani).

The counterpoint to this argument is venues such as Summerhall, who actively encourage companies to be innovative—this, however, must be contextualised through the prism of the curatorial programming practiced, and expected by audience(s) and reviewer(s). This move away from the experimental at the festival is felt by Aboud, who draws clear parallels to the wider industry which, she argues, is “becoming much more inaccessible, less experimental, in order to make money. I think that's industry-wide and it's pretty heartbreaking at the fringe” (qtd. in Masso). The recognition here of the tension between the need to make money and the will to make art is well articulated; it could be argued an audience does not know to like what it does not know to exist. Someone, somewhere—much like Francesca Moody—needs to take a risk to allow the new to be seen.

Class in theatre is a very live topic. The privileges afforded to, depiction and inclusion of the working class are brought into sharp focus at the Fringe. Comedian Tom Mayhew distils the major problems around class and the Fringe into three areas; “there are less working-class punters, less working-class reviewers, less working-class journalists” (qtd. in Young). Whilst talking specifically about stand-up comedy, these broad areas apply perfectly to theatre (and all performance at the Fringe). The Fringe Society, in launching “The Working-Class Producers Mentorship” in 2022, acknowledged this barrier also, but throwing small amounts of money on an all-consuming bonfire only serves to keep the bonfire alight, not change its composition. That this mentorship has now seemingly been subsumed into the longstanding “Emerging Producers Development Programme” by way of prioritising places “for producers who identify as disabled, working class and/or part of the global majority” says a lot about (lack of) commitment to, and fundamental (mis)understanding of, the different barriers to participation that those intersections will, and do, experience.

Recent research uncovers that creatives with working-class origins have reduced from 16.4% for those born between 1952 and 1963 to 7.9% for those born between 1983 and 1992 (Brook et al. 797); this decrease is to the detriment of the stories that we can (and do) tell and the representation that is available. Conflating these problems with those of disability and race masks a problem the industry has not yet gotten to grips with and/or understands. This lack of understanding may be precisely because those with lived experience are excluded at the point of entry. The Fringe heightens this genesis and the inevitable outcome.

The ephemeral nature of theatre is heightened beyond compare at the Fringe, but that ephemerality is often rendered meaningless when shows transfer to London ostensibly for those who didn't make the journey north—maintaining this journey as a marker of success. There is a maximum of circa 20–25 Fringe performances for any one show, creating scarcity and exclusivity, resulting in a buzz of excitement. COVID and “at home theatre” has offered the ability to see theatre on demand, inadvertently encouraging it to be thought of as a streaming service. The singularity that is theatre has been somewhat diluted. If we think of theatre as a form of communal storytelling, surely we should be encouraging this ephemerality. If theatre is to emulate life and life is transient, maybe festivals can play a part in recreating that spirit, maybe a Fringe *Only* award could encourage such ingenuity.

Access

In order to create theatre that can be experienced by the widest selection of the population, it is important to consider those who have additional access needs. These include, but are not limited to, Sign Language interpretation, subtitles, audio description and, at the most prosaic, physically accessible venues. This is clearly not just a consideration for festivals but for the industry more broadly, but, like many of the metrics looked at here, is brought into acute focus in the intense environment of the festival.

One of the biggest problems is the lack of a centralised database of accessible shows, so the onus falls on potential audience member(s). This will lead to several possibilities: a) the audience member conducts research and, ultimately, goes to see shows they know, which are more likely to have come from their communities; b) they go to a show in the hope it caters for them; or c) they do not attend at all. Fringe venues are increasingly highlighting their physical accessibility, but, from a company point of view, the cost of employing a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter and/or the logistics and equipment for subtitling and/or audio description falls on them and could contribute to making the costs higher, or necessitating artistic compromise, thus creating a(nother) barrier to participation.

Accessibility being seen and enacted as an add-on after the project has been created is a major problem—this is noted by Sage and Flores in their work on disability and rural events, with recommendations that inclusivity should be thought about, and worked with, from a project's genesis. Not doing so risks creating a sense of second-class citizenship for those who need accessibility in work they may wish to engage with.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/i2AeuBriTIA>

Promotional video from Ramps on the Moon Symposium, 2022. (c) Ramps on the Moon / Leeds Playhouse / Sheffield Theatres

In September 2022, the Ramps On The Moon consortium which exists to enrich “the stories we tell and the way we tell them by elevating the presence of deaf and disabled people both on and off stage” (Ramps on the Moon), convened a symposium at Leeds Playhouse called “Theatre for Change: Why Access Shouldn’t Be An Afterthought.” It was revealed by theatre-maker Chris Singleton from Brave Words Theatre Company that at the 2022 Edinburgh Fringe (where they took a show), there were only 92 shows across the 3,334 at the fringe which had a BSL interpreter and that that figure was “even lower” for audio described performances. Singleton discussed thinking about access as the show was being made and the difference between cost (only 7% of budget) and benefits—relaxed performances, for example, cost nothing and in integrating audio description new jokes were found. It was reiterated throughout the symposium that in thinking about access, more creative avenues were opened, more layers of story became present, and it took nothing away from those who did not “need” access; if anything, it make the experience richer. Accessibility, as elucidated in the symposium title, should not be an afterthought.

Conclusions

The industry, if viewed through the prism(s) presented, could be in better shape.

It is suggested there are four main areas upon which to focus: venues, reviews, empowering makers and access.

Venues need to take more responsibility for the work they produce and support. This responsibility should be financial, making clear routes for those without financial wherewithal to partake, as well as being more proactive in looking after the welfare of performers. This is something seen in the wider industry as more theatres work with well-being consultants and more take an active role in the procurement of diggs lists to ensure safety and security of their workers. It could be said those theatres who are proactive are akin to the prestige venues, but this should be commonplace across all venues, fringe and not. Curating a programme (or not) should not preclude a level of human interaction and care. A more equitable method of payment should be investigated. Having to commit to the entirety of the rental costs for a venue before the festival has begun, does not make for an equal and open relationship. Box office split and box office split with guarantee is more equitable but not equal.

An equitable way of disseminating reviews could be to have a specific day each week where all of that week's reviews are released. The hypothesised effect is that bigger shows with bigger PR budgets would not be able to gain advantage over smaller shows by having their shows reviewed and published first, taking attention away from smaller venues and producers without as much PR sway. This would necessitate reviewers and publications working together and, as we have seen, that they do not always agree on how good (or otherwise) a show is suggests that working together may be, at best, difficult. This would not, however, offer solutions or remedies for the biases of the reviewers themselves.

Empowering makers should be a multilayered pursuit. Firstly, there must a recognition of barriers many will face and the intersections of those barriers. This can only come from consultation *with*, as opposed to imposition *on*, those affected. Secondly, festivals within festivals could be championed, a collection of shows—across multiple venues—which celebrate a selected characteristic, promoted collectively. Whilst the idea of spotlighting inequality does not always lead to it being continually and proactively engaged with, it does give ownership to those who so often are not seen. If there is anywhere suitable to such a trial, it is the ephemeral festival context.

In order to work more coherently and with purpose with accessibility for shows, venues could use some of their profits to employ a team of BSL interpreters who could work on a rota to interpret shows in the venue. Technology such as The Difference Engine—a free-to-download app that facilitates both captions and audio descriptions to personal devices—could be used by venues and producers, with specialist consultants engaged in the creation of the work. These options could be made attractive via discounted venue deals. From a viewership perspective, the increase in sales and audience numbers over the past few years is to be commended, but if we look at those audience members who have been—and continue to be—excluded, this metric could be increased substantially.

There is more to do. The way to make change is to move toward it with sustained action; words and one-off schemes are not enough.

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