



## Edinburgh or Bust: Getting to the Fringe Festival

by Shelly Gilbride  
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There are Fringe Festivals in almost every major city in the US (I've counted 16) and in many countries across the world. These theatrical extravaganzas celebrate unbridled creativity, uninhibited performance, endless opportunity and democracy. Genres explode, disciplines cross, humor abounds, and performative risks are taken. I have experienced Philly Fringe, San Francisco Fringe, Boulder Fringe and New York Fringe. And what I love about Fringes everywhere is the air of possibility--of experiencing performance greatness or bizarre oddity or even shows so terrible that they are funny.

But there is only one Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It is the biggest, most established, open-access, performing arts festival in the world. For the month of August, the city of Edinburgh, Scotland opens its proverbial doors, windows and streets to performers of every artistic genre (and those whose talent cannot yet be categorized) who flock there from around the world to share in the Fringe experience. Any artist who can find a venue to host their show can perform, given they can finance the trip. According to the official 2012 Fringe program, this year promises to be the biggest festival ever, with 2,723 shows in 279 venues across the city.

Most artists come to Edinburgh from around Europe, but this year, 164 shows are crossing the Atlantic from the US including 3 from the Bay Area. 2 of those 3 shows were developed at Oakland's Kinetic Arts Center, a circus arts school that is gaining the reputation as an incubator for physical theatre talent. This is where I disclose my incredibly excited and clearly subjective perspective: I am performing in one of those shows, *Fragment*, by dance and live music ensemble, A Mused Collective, in residence at Kinetic Arts Center. And that brings me to the practical question that I asked myself and other performers who have been or are planning to go. Why Edinburgh? With so many festivals in the US, why travel over 5000 miles and raise (spend) thousands of dollars to produce your own show in an unfamiliar and overcrowded performance marketplace?

For many performing artists, Edinburgh Fringe is the stuff of fabled childhood dreams. Jaron Hollander, the Artistic Director of Kinetic Arts Center and one of the creators of *The Submarine Show*, a hilarious, two-man clown romp says "I'd heard about Edinburgh Fringe when I was young. Performers that I admire made their names there--Monty Python, Rowan Atkinson. It has this mythical appeal." Hollander and his partner-in-clown, Slater Penney, want to count their names among those legends. The *Submarine Show* won "Best of SF Fringe" last year and the duo decided that performing at "the biggest and the best" is the next logical next step.

Hollander and Penney are performing what they define as their "a-capella, foley mime duet" every day for the entire month-long run of the Fringe. Most shows run for at least two weeks, if not the whole month. The extended run poses an interesting challenge and opportunity for many US-based performers who travel to Edinburgh. For Rain Anya and Sarah Bebe Holmes of the *Paper Doll Militia*, this extended run was a test of stamina. They performed their warped, aerial fairytale *This Twisted Tale* 26 times last year in Edinburgh. Holmes said, "the show was able to grow and get better and tighter. We learned so much about our own show and own work." The opportunity for work to develop in front of an audience is rare in the US where dance and physical theatre is often presented for a single weekend, or two if lucky.

In many ways, Edinburgh Fringe represents a rite of performance passage that tests the mettle of the participants. Abby McNally, the Artistic Director of A Mused Collective joked that this experience has forced her to apply her professional skills as much as her creative skills, and the company hasn't even arrived in Edinburgh yet. From the application process to creating a "photo call," a Fringe ritual in which performers stage interesting performance "stunts" for local press, to mastering a 20-minute load-in, Fringe is a jam-packed learning experience. "It is important to me as an artist to step beyond my comfort zone" says McNally, "I want to be challenged professionally, and I am also interested in gaining feedback from other artists and industry professionals."

McNally alludes to one of the key elements of Edinburgh Fringe, the convergence of so many artists, arts managers, booking agents, press people and presenters. It becomes a representation of the field at large. And while that presents incredible networking opportunities for individual artists, it also presents a broader opportunity to consider arts policy and management issues. If one can step back and take a broad view of the festival, it's like a crystal ball of what is happening and what is about to happen in the performing arts world. That prophetic view into the fringe world can give one the ability to effect change.

There is no better example of this than Jodi Kaplan's work at the Fringe. A few years ago, Kaplan, a spitfire dance agent based in New York, noticed how small the dance community at Edinburgh Fringe was. Less than 5% of the shows (106) are categorized as dance/physical theatre at the Fringe this year. More specifically, Kaplan recognized a dearth of American dance at the festival. She began the *BookingDance Festival*, a festival-within-a-festival to spotlight American dance talent. Going on its fifth year, *BookingDance* has given American dance a broader platform in the European arts market and has developed into a premiere Fringe event.

Kaplan bucks many Fringe trends; she stages a showcase format featuring 8 dance companies on a single bill; she presents the show for just 4 days of the Fringe, and the show is generally family-friendly. Kaplan presents her American companies in a very American format, and that is unusual and risky in Scotland. *BookingDance* is continually successful at the Fringe because Kaplan builds local connections. With an internship program with two Scottish universities, educational outreach to local Scottish schools and dance studios, panel discussions and professional development opportunities for her dance companies and any others, and a discount program for children and students, Kaplan has created long-lasting connections in the community that has led to a repeat, local audience.

Kaplan has seized an opportunity, deeply inhaling that air of possibility that is so inherent in the Fringe atmosphere. She is blowing goodness into that air as well. Kaplan's success helps position dance as a more prominent art form at the Fringe, and that benefits all of us artists who create and communicate through movement. As I continue to talk with artists about Fringe, that is what strikes me most. Despite the massive workload, the stress of fundraising, the tangle of logistics and even the competition for audience and press; the overwhelming sentiment is one of creative community, collaboration and solidarity.

I can't wait to feel that teeming artistic energy that I imagine infusing the city air as performances pop up in bars, gardens, store windows and street corners at all hours. This will be my first time at the Edinburgh Fringe, as it will for all of Bay-Area performers who are traveling to Edinburgh this summer. And as a performer in my thirties who, like every member of A Mused Collective, has a

career outside of my performing life (not a day job, but a career), performing at Edinburgh Fringe is a lifelong dream on the verge of fulfillment. And while I can justify the trip with all of the practical reasons that I have laid out here, ultimately I am going quite simply for the creative experience, and that needs no other justification.

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