

## The Fringe of the Fringe

By: TyLean Polley

Edinburgh. A decade ago, I had never been there. I'd never been to anywhere on the continent of Europe! All I knew about Edinburgh was what I saw on the Travel Channel, which often touted it as "the most haunted city in Europe" and a wonderland for anyone fascinated with medieval history. Naturally, this sparked an interest in Scotland's capital, and it wasn't long before I learned of the festivals that descend on the city every August. Amongst them was The Edinburgh Fringe, which instantly captured my fancy and imagination as something that breaks the 9-5 tedium of primetime television watching consumerism.

Great Britain is a far more accepting and less judgemental place than America. Trying to lead an alternative lifestyle in small town America will leave you feeling isolated. For teenagers, the pressure to conform is immense, and rather than accepting and indulging who they are, they may deny their own interests for fear of ridicule. For example, when I was 12, I discovered Type O Negative and became a raging fan; however, I listened to them only in secret and hid the cassettes and CDs when my best friend came around. Had he found out that I was in love with a Gothic Metal band, he would have repeatedly harassed and humiliated me. Needless to say, I also refrained from wearing the Gothic fashions I adored. I was 18 the first time I wore a fishnet shirt and black lipstick, and it was a truly liberating experience. The sheer thought of a city-wide event as accepting as The Edinburgh Fringe filled my heart with happiness. Sure, there were purely Gothic festivals, such as Wave Gotik Treffen in Leipzig, which also made me grin from ear to ear when I thought about someday attending them, but the all-encompassing reach of the Edinburgh Fringe would be a candy land of eccentricities.

Within months of moving to England, I started looking into performing at the Fringe with my dark and intense piano show. I believed my unclassifiable sound would fit perfectly under the umbrella of a festival which specialises in the obscure. The cost to register as a performer is very modest and reasonable, but one must also consider the cost of hiring a venue, travel, accommodation and promotion in an exceptionally competitive market before making a commitment to perform at any of the Edinburgh festivals. For four years, I fantasised about a sense of feeling at home amongst like-minded individuals looking to expand their horizons at the legendary Edinburgh Fringe. In 2011, I took the plunge and signed up for a two performance show.

Countless hours were spent on preparation and promotion. All you get for your registration fee is a listing in the official Fringe program and the "support" of the Edinburgh Fringe office. (Although, from my experience, the Fringe Office's "support" diminishes greatly after registration is complete and disappears completely for the bureaucratic aftermath in September). Success at the Fringe is impossible without a team of people dedicated to the same show, a DIY resolve of steel or a mountain of money for advertising and promotion. Luckily, I've always been a DIY kind of girl, because I had neither a team of people nor mounds of cash.

During festival season in Edinburgh, the prices of hotels and flats spike, charging extortionate rates of hundreds of pounds per night for even the worst hotels. My in-laws live outside of Glasgow, so my

husband and I thought we would be clever and save a small fortune by staying with them and taking the train into Edinburgh three days in a row, a plan much better in theory than in practice, as Scotland Rail is on par with that of a third world country at the best of times. Every other service seemed to be cancelled, trains were often stopped for exceptionally long delays (sometimes because of theft and vandalism on the railways), and the carriages were so crowded that standing bodies blocked the aisles and vestibules.

Competition is tough at the Fringe, and every day, flyers flood the streets and get pasted onto the previous hour's flyers until the paper is thicker than a brick wall. The day before my first performance, we travelled to Edinburgh specifically to flyer and promote the show. A few tickets had sold in advance, but nowhere near what we needed to make our efforts worthwhile. As we traipsed up and down the Royal Mile, holding attention-grabbing flyers at eye level and barking phrases like "come watch a truly alternative show," we found ourselves flabbergasted by the reactions of passers-by.

My flyer featured a photo of me standing with my back to a wall of sheet music, a straitjacket falling off my shoulders and my mouth gaping wide in a scream. I felt it was an apt photo, since I had titled my show, "Zero, Soundtrack to the Moment You Realised Everything's a Lie," and moulded the show to a theme of anger and frustration. I had aimed to attract people who had realised (or were starting to realise) that the trappings of social order and everyday life are constructed nonsense, or to put it bluntly: bollocks. I thought for sure that this type of person would be a dime a dozen at The Fringe. Instead, what I found as people passed by my outstretched arm, my hand a portable billboard, were looks of fright and disgust.

My flyer did achieve its goal in that it did catch the eye of far more people than the flyers of other poor souls in the same proximity. What I hadn't predicted was that the most common reaction I would hear would be, "that looks too scary!" I couldn't help but think, "Why are you here then?" Shouldn't these people be looking for something to take them well out of their comfort zone and challenge them? Over my three days at The Fringe, the answer became apparent; they were there, because the types of shows at the Fringe are anything but boundary-pushing and experimental.

The first indication that mainstream prevailed was the absence of certain fashions. I anticipated seeing a lot of varied groups of people who all have their own peculiar way of dress, but hippies and Goths stood out from the crowd just as much on the Royal Mile at the height of festival season as they would on the Tube during London's morning rush hour. I didn't let this small but obvious fact deter me though. Fans of my shows are quite often middle-aged people who don't bother making the effort to dress just-so.

The second and more alarming clue that uniqueness was in short supply was what constituted a successful show at that year's Fringe. The most abundant type of show seemed to be all male, gay a cappella choirs. I couldn't help but feel that the 2011 Edinburgh Fringe was a wasted effort towards LGBT rights, as there is nothing more clichéd than an all-male, gay a cappella choir. It's more prime-time television than risqué. I feel something like a play about a family with two Mums – because Daddy had a sex change – would have been far more boundary-pushing and on the fringes of entertainment.

My shows were on a Monday and Tuesday, both starting at 4PM and lasting for an hour. Because of the tight scheduling, I had no opportunity to see the venue until just before my show. I was performing at The Jazz Bar, a venue I selected specifically because it had a tuned baby grand piano. There's an irreplaceable aspect about playing a real piano, as I tend to feed off of the luscious sympathetic vibrations in the strings. In this particular instance, however, any enhancements and improvements to my show by the aid of a real piano were diminished by my being hidden behind the piano and unable to see the audience. The piano consumed the whole stage and was unable to be moved enough to allow me to be seen. This, along with the cold and sore throat I had contracted from the snivelling Scottish weather, were unexpected and unwelcomed obstacles, but I soldiered on.

Several press passes had been requested for my show, which are reserved for anyone in the industry looking to recruit or review. I was approached by a lovely woman from Montreal before my show. I had played Canada several times, but never in Montreal, so my eyes lit up when I heard her Quebecois accent. Unfortunately, she misunderstood the premise of my show and expected she was about to see a show of comedic value rather than an hour of human misery, anguish and rage. Attendance at my show was abysmal, barely into double digits. Fortunately, the majority of people who attended seemed to have a better grasp of what to expect than the French Canadian woman, and seemed grateful for a break from the ordinary. Interestingly, the only person in the audience who I would consider alternative was there with her grandmother, and they both enjoyed my show immensely.

The celebration of the peculiar that I had romanticised was a myth. My belief that people came to the Fringe to experience the most extraordinary shows on the planet was a fallacy. I would be a liar if I said I didn't have moments whilst pounding the pavement of the streets of Edinburgh where I felt like an isolated teenager all over again... still being criticised for being a Goth. I felt my show was a complete flop, but later learned that the average attendance of a show at The Edinburgh Fringe is a mere four warm bodies in the crowd! I suppose by those standards I did alright. No matter, I would have to be paid an extraordinary amount of money to ever consider performing at the Fringe again.

In hindsight, perhaps my first experience of the Fringe should have been as a punter rather than a performer. Perhaps I would have identified it as an orgy of mass production and abandoned my dreams of performing there. According to my Father-in-law, a Scot who has been going to The Fringe since before I was born, there has been a marked decline in the daring attitude of Fringes of yore. The Fringe used to be the festival that literally was operating on the fringes of the other Edinburgh Festivals. Unfortunately, as its renown for eccentricity grew, so did the audiences and it has become the predominant festival in Edinburgh. Where there are large audiences, there is money to be made, and where there is money to be made, things will quickly become commercially packaged for mass consumption and wide public approval. Now only "The Fringe" in name, the "main" festivals have become the true fringe.