

Theatre Shop Conference 2005

FRINGE FESTIVAL TALK:

THE RISK, THE REALITY & THE OPPORTUNITY

Miki Stricker: Edmonton Fringe, Canada

Wolfgang Hoffmann: Dublin Fringe Festival/Aurora Nova, Edinburgh

Steve Gove: Prague Fringe Festival

Mike Griffiths: Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh

MIKE GRIFFITHS: My name's Mike Griffiths. I'm from the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. We're doing a session this afternoon on fringe festivals. I have a very, very esteemed collection of people here to talk us through fringe festivals from across the world.

First on my left I have Miki Stricker, who is the director of the Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival. She's been the director since 2001. Since 2003 she has served as the president of the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, and is the chair of the Edmonton Festivals Consortium.

Next to Miki we've got Wolfgang, who I'm sure most of you know, who's first Fringe Festival we're at at the moment, but is also the director of the Aurora Nova in the Edinburgh Festival which he's run since 2001.

On the end is Steve Gove who is the director of the Prague Festival which is I think the newest of all the festivals. It's just had its fourth festival.

We're going to cover risk, reality and opportunity in these three festivals. I'm going to start by asking Miki to introduce us to Edmonton's Festival.

MIKI STRICKER: Thank you very much. It is absolutely my pleasure to be here with you today and to be able to hopefully sell you on the Canadian model of Fringe festivals. I have prepared an actual speech, so I hope that you will bear with me.

In the early 1980s the city of Edmonton was blessed with a city council that was forward thinking and appreciative of the arts. During that time the city council made a conscious decision to actively foster the growth of the arts in Edmonton, and created Summerfest. Summerfest's mission was quite simply to create festivals. In 1982 Brian Paisley was the artistic director of Chinook Theatre, a small theatre company that produced theatre for young audiences. Brian was asked by Summerfest to develop a theatre festival that was to be held in August on the city's south side. He was given Can\$50,000 and the simple instruction: Go.

He wanted to provide emerging and established artists with the opportunity to produce their plays regardless of the content, form or style. He wanted the event to be as affordable and as accessible as possible for the general public. He wanted to develop a theatre festival that empowered audiences with the ability to decide

for themselves which productions were great and which were, shall we say, gloriously disastrous.

Brian had visited the Edinburgh Fringe a few years earlier and had fallen in love with the concept of an unjuried and uncensored theatre festival where artists were given the freedom to let their imaginations run wild. So Brian wanted to bring Fringe to Edmonton, but he decided to add a uniquely Canadian flavour to it.

Like the Edinburgh Fringe, the Edmonton Fringe would accept applications from anyone who wanted to participate in the festival. In the Fringe's early years applications were accepted on a first come, first served basis. Also like the Edinburgh Fringe, the Edmonton Fringe would not keep any money from ticket sales. However, unlike the Edinburgh Fringe, where artists are pretty much left to their own devices in terms of finding venues, the Edmonton Fringe would provide artists with a bit of a safety net. Artists would pay a low flat fee to participate and in return the Fringe would take care of all of the aspects of theatre production that can serve as barriers that prevent artists from producing their own shows. Things like venue and equipment rental, the hiring and payment of technicians, and front of house and ticketing services. In short, Brian wanted to create an inclusive environment that was supportive enough so that artists who participated in the festival could concentrate on what they do best, namely, create art.

It's important to note that until 1982 nothing like the Fringe Festival had ever been tried in Canada or, to my knowledge, in North America. Until that point, very few Canadian artists had the financial means by which they could produce their own art. Canadian actors fought over the few roles that were available through the large regional theatre companies. Canadian playwrights had a very difficult time getting the artistic directors of these companies to even look at their work. Independent productions were a rarity. Those few independent productions that did occur tended to stay in safe artistic territory, simply out of the need to sell tickets to a general populace. Until the early 1980s, almost nobody in Canada was producing self-produced, experimental or even Canadian work for that matter. That all changed with the Fringe.

The Edmonton Fringe Festival turned the Canadian theatre landscape on its head. The Fringe demonstrated that theatre can be produced anywhere in found spaces, not just in brick buildings with cushy seats. The Fringe provided all artists, regardless of their experience or networking abilities, the same opportunities. The Fringe enabled artists who had been previously marginalised by the theatre community to develop their craft and bring new forms of theatre to life. By way of example, many internationally renowned Canadian artists including puppeteer Ronnie Burke, horror clowns Mump & Smoot, One Yellow Rabbit Theatre and playwright Stewart Lemoine all credit the Edmonton Fringe with giving them their earliest opportunities for creating their work. The Fringe proved that Canadian artists had voices that deserved to be heard. Artists immediately embraced the new forum for their work. Brian told me last Spring that he distributed a total of five applications for the first festival, but he received fifty in return.

So the artists bought in, but would audiences? You bet. Audiences came in droves, and they continue to do so until this very day. We are a truly populist theatre festival. In 2005 the Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival sold 70,205 tickets to indoor performances over the course of its ten days. In all, more

than 520,000 people attended the event. Our huge attendance figures are thanks in a large part to the outdoor component of the Fringe. We are fortunate enough to have our festival not just inside the theatres, but out on the streets as well. We shut down five city blocks and completely take them over for the duration of the festival. Our outdoor site features two outdoor stages, a gaggle of busking circles, dozens of arts and crafts and food vendors, and beer tents. Lots of beer tents. In fact, over the last 24 years our outdoor site has become so successful that ironically enough many of the people who participate in the outdoor scene have absolutely no idea that they are at a theatre festival. But we are working to educate them. We see our outdoor site as being a gateway to theatre. Our research has shown us that many of our indoor theatre audiences had never seen theatre before coming to the Fringe, and they likely would never have gone to theatre had they not first participated in the outdoor Fringe scene.

Our festival has been incredibly successful at finding audiences for artists. In 2005 each play sold an average of 508 tickets over the course of the festival, and when you keep in mind that some of our venues are as small as 78 seats, that's quite a feat. The average audience size per performance, and please keep in mind that our performances run from as early as 11 in the morning until as late as a quarter after midnight – so the average audience size per performance was 76 people. 19.8% - so nearly 20% - of our performances sold out. Our festival returned well over \$600,000 to the artists this year alone. So, anyone want to come play with us?

Our application and acceptance process is really very simple: artists submit application forms, and then we hold a series of lotteries to determine which groups will be accepted into the festival. Groups are quite literally drawn out of a cardboard box. Now I'll pause here and let you absorb that for a second.

I'll be the first to admit that this concept for a theatre festival is nuts. It shouldn't work, it really shouldn't. How do you know what you're going to get? You don't. You have absolutely no idea. Wonderful groups that may have gotten in one year may not be able to return the next. But that's what makes the Fringe wonderful. And it works. I couldn't tell you how it does, it just does. Over the years we've had so many incredible groups get their start at the Fringe Festival and then have taken on their shows to things after the Fringe. It really is a wonderful catalyst.

But, let's get back to lotteries. During the lotteries for regular indoor stage productions we select 100 companies for the 'in' list and an additional 100 companies for the waiting list. Groups are moved off the waiting list to the 'in' list as space becomes available. In order to best serve the artists, and to make our government funders happy, we have established ratios for the number of theatre companies we will accept. 50% of our companies are from the Edmonton area, 25% are from the rest of Canada, and 25% are international companies. We hold separate lotteries for companies that wish to perform in our venue that's dedicated for Children's Theatre, and for groups that want to perform on our outdoor stages. Between our 13 indoor stages, 13 bring-your-own-venue stages (which are site-specific works) and 2 outdoor stages, we are usually able to accommodate around 150 theatre companies each year.

As I mentioned earlier, artists have embraced the Fringe Festival. We annually receive more than three times the number of applications as we have available spaces. I like to think this is because the Edmonton Fringe model is the universal healthcare system of the Fringe world. We provide artists with a venue equipped with modest lighting and sound, a stage, masking, seating risers and chairs. Along with these venues, we provide the talents and expertise of two technicians. We schedule a set of performance times for each show with groups usually receiving six or seven performances. Artists are given a technical rehearsal, listing in our programme guide – which is quite beautiful, if I might say so myself – free pre-festival workshops, and assistance with marketing; we completely take care of front of house and ticketing services; we are usually able to provide billeting for out-of-town artists; and we return 100% of the revenue from ticket sales to the artists. Theatre companies receive all of this for a one-time application fee of Can\$609.90, which I know is just a couple of euro for you guys.

Of course, we do have some expectations of the artists. Since each regular indoor venue hosts 9 or 10 productions that are scheduled back-to-back, artists have to ensure that productions can be mounted within the festival's technical constraints, including having only 15 minutes to set up and strike their set each show. Artists must secure the rights for their productions if the play is not an original piece, and pay all associated fees themselves. Artists must also come to the festival with everything they need for their show. Props, sets, costumes, stage manager, any extra equipment like fog machines or projectors and so on. Fringe companies must also be prepared to promote their own shows. Since we are a non-curated festival, we must treat all groups equally, so we cannot promote individual shows, just the festival as a whole. We also expect Fringe companies to come to their technical rehearsals fully prepared, and to show up on time for their performances. They also need to set up and strike their own set. Although our technicians may be able to help, there's no guarantee that they will be. All in all though, it's a pretty good deal.

We keep the application fee low because we want the Fringe to be accessible for artists. In fact, accessibility is one of the major focuses for the festival as we enter its 25th year. We want to insure that the festival is accessible for artists and patrons alike, both in terms of financial accessibility and physical accessibility. We are constantly examining the way which we can remove physical barriers on site to help patrons with reduced mobility. Our outdoor site is free and open to everyone, and we ensure that ticket prices are affordable, so that that even low-income audiences can afford to come to the Fringe. The festival sets a maximum ticket price of Can\$10 for tickets sold at the door, and artists set their own rates within that limit. The Fringe does charge a Can\$3 surcharge on advance tickets which we retain in order to help cover the administrative costs of offering advance tickets to patrons. We hold at least 25% of tickets for sale at the door of the venue so that everyone can access shows.

Now I know that I'm biased, but the Edmonton Fringe is a really amazing event. I honestly cannot think of another event in North America that serves half a million people but still manages to be a grassroots organisation. Our community is so invested in our Fringe that any time we make a change to the festival, even if it's something as innocuous as changing an access route, we will be deluged with emails and there will be letters to the editor in the daily newspapers. Now, although

I'm being a little bit tongue in cheek the festival really is blessed for all the community support we receive. Edmonton Fringers are extremely dedicated to our festival. To Fringe is a verb in Edmonton. We actually sell our programme guide. You can't get a programme guide for free; you need to buy it. And people buy it. We need the assistance of more than 1000 volunteers in order to run the festival, and we get them year after year. We have literally hundreds of volunteers who actually take their vacation in order to volunteer for the festival. As I said, the Edmonton Fringe is a really amazing event, and I am so honoured to be a part of it.

Now the good news is, we're not alone. The Edmonton Fringe is a proud member of the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals. CAFF is comprised of 25 distinct Fringes, all of which adhere to the same principles we do, namely that the festival is unjuried, uncensored and 100% of the revenue from ticket sales is returned directly to the artists themselves. Theatre companies can literally tour across Canada and parts of the States for four months during the year by participating in the CAFF circuit. Now, of course you don't have to attend all of the festivals; you can attend as many or as few as you want. But if you're coming all the way across the pond you really should see more of Canada than just Edmonton. In an effort to help touring companies better plan their summers, CAFF is pleased to offer a touring lottery for groups that want to participate in five or more Fringes. Essentially, it's a one-stop shop. If you're selected in the touring lottery you automatically get into all of the festivals of your choice. The down side is that you have to be able to pay for all of the application fees at the same time.

Over the years there have been touring companies that have been able to find government grants to help them cover their costs. Other touring companies have developed co-productions with Canadian companies, which not only leads to some very interesting artistic developments, but can help to alleviate the financial risk by cost sharing. The Edmonton Fringe sends out invitations to artistic directors across Canada. There have been many examples of touring companies being booked for other opportunities thanks to the Fringe. For example, this past summer a theatre company from South Africa called Axe had amazing success with their show 'Bonhoffer' having sold out every single one of their performances in Edmonton. Thanks to the success they had in our Fringe, they are back in Edmonton this very week for a run at a local college and in the coming months will be performing in New York and elsewhere in the United States based on the success that they had in our Fringe. For many other international artists the CAFF Fringes are in themselves the main event. In fact, companies like Big Word Performance Poetry from Scotland and Company Seenana from Australia are so successful on the CAFF circuit that the money they make over the summer subsidises their work for the rest of the year.

Now I know that I've made the Canadian Fringe model and the touring circuit to be all fun and games and for the most part it is, but I have to be honest with you. Doing a Fringe tour can be very hard and at any one of the festivals you have the potential to lose your shirt financially. While Fringe audiences can be very sophisticated and will usually find the great shows that are out there, inevitably there will be a few gems that won't be found in the rough. In addition, even shows that do well at some of the Fringes won't actually make any money, simply because audience size is relative. In a community like Regina or Saskatoon 20

people in the audience would be considered a huge success, while in Edmonton or Winnipeg that size of audience would be considered disappointing. And keep in mind that you will have expenses to cover while you are abroad. You will have to pay for your own transportation to get to and across Canada. Although most Canadian Fringes can provide you with billeting, we can't guarantee that we will be able to find you a place to stay. In addition to paying your application fee you will also have to, like I said, make your own arrangements to provide for your own transportation and meal costs. The good news is that transportation and meal costs in Canada are quite cheap, especially in Edmonton. I've noticed this week that what I'm paying in euro for food is the equivalent in Canadian dollars. So take off 0.5. But yes there are absolutely risks involved in producing Fringe theatre in Canada.

Talking to artists who have participated on the Fringe circuit, they love it. Among Fringe artists there's a real sense of community that develops. They have this travelling city that goes from one end of the country to the other. This Fringe thing, it really gets in your blood. I hope that you'll consider letting it into yours. So for those of you who are interested in either the Edmonton Fringe or the CAFF touring circuit you can see me after. I know that there are application forms outside. I'd be happy to talk with any of you either today or tomorrow.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: Thank you Miki. I want to take up some of those themes with Wolfgang and Steve. The first thing really if you could just tell us a little bit about the festivals that you're running, and Wolfgang if you could tell us a little bit about Aurora Nova in Edinburgh. A little bit about the philosophy in how you select productions and companies to come to your festivals.

STEVE GOVE: Prague Fringe was set up by myself and two friends at that point based on an idea we got in a bar in Edinburgh during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. I was living in Prague and I just came up with the idea, and the idea was laughed at a little bit initially. I went back to Prague and started to make plans for the first festival that was going to take place in 2002. Quite a small festival: 12 theatre companies and 60 performances in total. We sold about 350 tickets for that. In its fourth year, which was this year, we've increased the size of our festival to about 40 show and about 160 performances, and we sold over 3000 tickets this year. So the growth rate has been remarkable. That's probably enough for the minute.

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: I came to the Fringe as an artist myself. I ran a dance company in Potsdam, Germany. We toured to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and to be honest I was shocked and appalled by conditions that we as touring artists had to go through to do the Fringe and sell our own show. Like no warm-up space – we had to warm up in front of toilets. But then we won a Fringe First and suddenly we were on top of the world and everybody was greeting us in bars and on buses and saying 'I saw your show, fantastic'. There was such a buzz that I hadn't experienced in any other festival before. I came to a conclusion, and I thought maybe we can marry the supportiveness of an international festival that has lots of money and the excitement and the buzz that a Fringe festival has. And basically started Aurora Nova, which is a festival within the festival in Edinburgh. We run a venue there where I select work. It's all visual theatre and dance, and always of a certain standard, of a certain quality. But the basic idea is that the

artists support each other, that they are making advertising for themselves. I myself always found it hard to brag about my own work – come see me I'm great kind of thing. Because I don't believe in anybody else who talks to me like that. So I thought wouldn't it be much more efficient if people talked about each other's work, because when somebody that I respect tells me 'I saw that show and it's fantastic, and you've got to go', I make it my business to go. It seems to work in Edinburgh as well. So I created that model together with a friend from Brighton where the company basically shared a certain part of the box office, so everybody benefits from each other's success. What it really does is that it brings the companies together, and artistic exchange happens, and people don't envy each other for their success, which happened to me the year before when I tried to make contact with a company and he went 'I wish I had your audiences'.

Basically that was in 2001, and Aurora Nova became a really big success. A lot of promoters come and see work because they find that a ticket there is not so much of a risk, you know. Then basically Vallejo who I met, and who ran the Dublin Fringe Festival, told me last year that his job was going to be available and I applied for the Dublin Fringe Festival. I thought that maybe this model in Edinburgh would work in Dublin as well on a much bigger scale with much more variety.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: So for you, in both cases, you're curating the shows coming in. Is that the case for you as well Steve?

STEVE GOVE: It is. Partially by going to see as many shows as possible in Edinburgh and spreading the word about our festival, and also receiving applications. We received probably about three applications in the first year, and this year already for next year's festival we've received 130. Which is kind of an amazing increase as well. That's how we select our shows. We're looking at applications that are coming in and shows that we see in Edinburgh and here in Dublin as well.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: Miki outlined quite a strong support structure in terms of finding venues, and giving people technical time and is quite well organised. Do you have the same sort of support, or what other support do you give companies coming over to Prague?

STEVE GOVE: We select venues. The festival itself rents those spaces and we program those spaces according to the needs of the companies. We have technical support there, so in a way it's similar I guess.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: Do people pay a fee?

STEVE GOVE: There is an application fee which kind of covers a very small percentage of the costs of those spaces, and some of our marketing costs. A nominal fee, depending on the size of the venue.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: So that's dependant on the size of the venue, there's not a flat fee?

STEVE GOVE: Yes, starting at around €300 for the whole week of the festival.

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: That's the same as Dublin. We revert the cost of venues to the companies. They have to pay the rent for the week and it's on a sliding scale. Also the registration fee for the festival depends on how many seats you have for your run.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: So in Aurora Nova it's a slightly different system?

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: In Aurora Nova it's a flat fee for everybody, and then there's this box office share system for the major part of the box office. It used to be the other way around because we are very driven by this idea of fairness, but it's very hard to be fair when a company of like 12 people from Russia who have basically risked their livelihood and they are depending on the success of their show, versus a company with only two people on stage, maybe well funded from Norway. It's just a different risk altogether. So we moved towards the model that it's a flat fee to all the companies and then they get the major part of the box office to themselves, and the minor part goes to Aurora Nova, and then Aurora Nova makes a profit that gets shared equally between all the companies.

But the Dublin Fringe Festival has a similar model to Prague, where each company is on its own, but what we do is divide between international and local work. There's a difference in cost, and also the value of exposure here in Dublin is different for an Irish company who obviously need to be seen in Dublin and be talked about by the newspapers, and the international work. We're trying to even the odds basically for incoming work, trying to pay for their venue, trying to pay for their flights and accommodation and then share the box office. They still have a risk since we don't pay fees, they still have to work on their own publicity and making themselves known, which adds to their engagement with the festival, which I think is a good thing. But it's not that they could go home and lose their shirt basically.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: In terms of companies that come to Edinburgh and Prague and Dublin and Edmonton there are obviously some cultural differences. Is there anything that you would identify for the Irish companies here today that might be worth noting before they applied or paid the money for the application, which might help them to decide?

MIKI STRICKER: Edmonton audiences can be very accommodating in terms of dramatic pieces. There was a show this year from England, 'Emily Dickinson and I' from Lynchpin Productions. It was their first time ever coming to Canada and their first time ever participating in a Fringe festival, and that was one example of a dramatic work that did exceptionally well. They sold out six of their seven performances and were held over for more performances after the Fringe. But for other companies that come for the first time it can be difficult to find an audience immediately if your show is a drama. Edmonton audiences like comedies a lot, especially at the festival. They really like sex, so if you have a sexy show you'll do quite well. As for cultural differences though, there are obviously just minor ones, but in terms of the artistic work you should be fine. Edmonton audiences are quite accommodating.

But if you do decide to do any shows in the United States you might want to be a little bit cognisant of your work. There is an example of a show from Edmonton that

was brought down as part of a let's sell Edmonton as a city to come to, to an audience in the United States and their show was a little bit risqué and they were almost booed out of the theatre. So careful down yonder in the southern states.

STEVE GOVE: Language is obviously an issue in the Prague Fringe Festival because, obviously, Czech is the language of the country. But despite that, a large percentage of our audience are made up from the huge ex-pat community that live in Prague. So actually it's not a barrier at all in fact. That's kind of a strange way of putting it. But I would say that shows that are less language based would appeal to the wider audience.

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: For Dublin I think that my objective really was that I thought the Fringe Festival would be an opportunity to bring work into the public awareness that kind of has a harder time the year round. So I kind of focussed on exactly the opposite of what Miki was just saying, so sex and comedy was kind of – you don't need the Fringe, and you can put that on every other time of the year. I tried to only programme work that I think I'd like. Also where I thought there can actually be an audience for it. So companies that would say that they want to challenge their own practice, want to try something new, try a new concept, speak in a different way than they would normally do, would be seen more favourably, because that's what we try to encourage. The new ideas. Put theatre on its head. Be as contemporary as possible, and mix medias, mix genres. That's what we want to encourage, that people are getting out of their box and thinking broader, wider, further. And yes, there is the opportunity to fail, or to become fantastic, do something brilliant.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: Miki, I think you've kind of highlighted the benefits that people can have, and also the high risk that's involved in terms of finances and bringing people over there. I think all three of you have identified ways of cushioning that. I think one of the interesting things for most people is why go to the festival, what's in it for them? What can happen for them if it's successful? What are the other fringe benefits that go with that? I think there's probably different ones in each of those theatres. Do you have any additional thoughts on that? What do you feel are the main benefits of going to a festival as an artist?

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: First, I think you have the opportunity of meeting other artists in a way that's different than if you were touring the international circuit. You often go to a festival, you play once or twice and the possibility of seeing other people's work is quite small then. In the Fringe Festival, because the shows are on at different times of day and you're there for a longer stretch of time, there is actually the possibility of real creative exchange, seeing other people's work and engaging with them. I think it's such a celebration of variety, of different expressions in art that really triggers and stimulates the artistic muscle really. Speaking as an artist that would be my main reason to go.

STEVE GOVE: That's true of Prague in fact, that our festival is quite intimate, so you can leave the festival having seen all the shows and remembering just about everybody's name that performed and took part in that festival, which is quite nice. The risk factors are actually a lot lower. You were speaking about cost of food in Edmonton. Thanks to Easyjet and Ryanair it's very cheap to travel around Europe,

so travel costs are very low to get to Prague. Also costs of living, accommodation costs are very low as well, so the risk factor is fairly minimum in that sense. Generally the mixing, meeting new people as well as promoters, other performers, and experiencing the beauty of Prague of course – I had to say that.

MIKI STRICKER: As Wolfgang was saying, the Fringe is an amazing opportunity to see a ton of theatre. In any one day, in any one venue there are nine to ten performances, so that's a heck of a lot of theatre to be able to see. You're able to see work that you wouldn't have an opportunity to see otherwise. There was a group that came this year from France with a show that took a junkyard theatre and did some really interesting things with it. We had never seen anything like that in Edmonton before, so it's a really wonderful opportunity for artists to see what each other are doing. And to make new connections. There's a company this year from the States that came with a show called 'Gloomology' and another company from Australia, and they've actually decided for next year to do a show together because they saw each other's work, and now they want to create a piece together. So there are all sorts of interesting collaborations that can come out of the Fringe festival. And really, it's just a lot of fun. Here you are at a theatre festival that's celebrating art. People are there, eating their little mini doughnuts and green onion cakes and all the other foodstuff, but they're talking about theatre, which is amazing.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: I think it's a good idea to open up the panel to questions from the floor.

SPEAKER 1 (WILLIE WHITE, PROJECT ARTS CENTRE): Just an open question to the panel, and I think Wolfgang alluded to it as well, about the idea of challenging your practice. Obviously the Fringe festival, since the idea of a Fringe originated over sixty years ago, has changed a lot. To what extent is a Fringe festival about young companies or companies who haven't quite yet made it into the mainstream? All the financial pressures there are to bringing work to a festival and even putting a festival on, how do you protect that space for Fringe in the sense of experimental or 'out there' work?

MIKI STRICKER: Well, in Edmonton, since we're run by the lottery it's sort of the fates that decide. The interesting thing about Edmonton, unlike other Fringe festivals in Canada is that Edmonton attracts emerging artists as well as very established artists who return year after year in order to try new things out and to be experimental with their work. It's relatively a low cost in order to take that risk and try something new, that they don't know if it's going to succeed or fail. Every year we do have really new and interesting and innovative things that happen, but because it's dictated by the gods of fate, we don't really know what we're going to get in a given year.

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: Well, I think first to encourage more risky work, and the other one is to, like in the curation process I really think that in a festival that has such a broad variety you have to have a concept that strikes people, that engages people's imagination. The more 'out there' concept can actually be more appealing in the fringe festival context. Especially in Dublin where, like sex and comedy is out. What else do you do to get your audience.

Rotozaza comes to mind, that would be a perfect example; somebody who says, we want to work with different actors every night who don't know the show, and they just listen to instructions and carry out instructions. That's like a concept that I think is really appealing, and people think, oh I've got to see this. But then it's also about – I don't think it's a free ticket to go wild and not care about the audience. I think a Fringe festival needs to address the audience more than other festivals, and I think that's a good thing too.

STEVE GOVE: In our fourth year as a very new Fringe festival we have a limited amount of space to house the shows that are applying to our festival. I guess what we are trying to do at the moment is create a flavour of what happens at other bigger festivals like Edinburgh and here in Dublin. On one page of the programme we have a puppet theatre show devised by local English speaking school children, and on the other hand the Police Pipe Band from Scotland. So we try to make it as mixed as possible to appeal to as wide a range of people.

I'm not quite sure actually how that's going to develop as the festival grows and as we're able to take over more spaces. I don't actually know the answer to that.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: I think from my experience in Edinburgh that there's a range of companies that are willing to try and experiment, new companies that come up and then move on. But there has been a number of companies over the years that have keep coming back to the festival, some of them for many years. They obviously find some benefit or some enjoyment out of coming to Edinburgh, either financially or artistically, which makes them come back, even though they are now more established. I think that also includes some of the Irish companies that have been over to Edinburgh on numerous occasions.

WILLIE WHITE: Obviously the Traverse, your venue Mike, and Aurora Nova are beacons in Edinburgh amongst the Ladyboys of Bangkok or the nth production of 'Oleanna' or something like that. So in a way, while the Edinburgh Festival benefits from the kudos of being an arts festival, a lot of it is muck.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: Well, a lot of it is about opportunity.

STEVE GOVE: Have you seen the Ladyboys of Bangkok? It's a great show.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: It's about opportunity, and allowing people the space, if they are willing to put something down on it. To take up the opportunity, and some people get very lucky and do very well out of it. But other people just have a really terrific time. I think it depends what you're really looking for.

SPEAKER 2 (JACINTA LYNCH, BROADSTONE ARTS STUDIO): Miki mentioned that your Fringe is quite populist. Steve mentioned that you think you're addressing quite an ex-pat audience. Wolfgang, who do you think your audience is in Dublin?

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: Good question. All I want is that there are more of them.

JACINTA LYNCH: You don't care where they come from. But when you're programming, Wolfgang, who are you addressing?

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: I think niche audiences – a lot of niche audiences, and different niches. But I think we were trying to really explain very much why we programmed the show, and what the show was about. It's very much special interests often. I think in a way we do everything but mainstream.

JACINTA LYNCH: So do you think it's a specialised theatre audience then?

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: Not really, no. I think this year we have lots of shows that are attractive to an audience that haven't been in the theatre before, and we're trying to kind of warm them up to the idea that live performance is something relevant to not only specialist theatre people.

JACINTA LYNCH: So would you mix a certain amount of specialist theatre with a certain amount of populist or something?

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: Yes. I mean, we have 'Rumble' that in my eyes is as close to commercial theatre as I would like to go.

JACINTA LYNCH: That's your limit.

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: In a way, yeah. And then there's a show inspired by car crashes where most people go, hmmm. And ticket sales are accordingly. But there are still people who are completely mesmerised by it, and it's very worthwhile for it to be there.

JACINTA LYNCH: Because that's always a consideration with, as Willie puts it, 'out there' theatre, that you have financial risks overriding the festival, so somewhere down the line of your curation, programming, you're saying I want my risk-taking theatre companies. But I equally have to make the show break even, or I have to do something with the festival, so we're not totally hugely funded to provide just risk-taking theatre companies. That's what I'm trying to get at, that as well as the curation, there's a certain financial thing going on.

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: Absolutely. It's a bit of an impossibility to get that kind of curation to work out. Even though we have like this year, we've increased our ticket sales tremendously, we still lose money on the international shows, so it's kind of very difficult to get in right. Also to go in so many different directions. We started a young fringe program this year where we encouraged work for young people or young adults, where there's kind of a different measuring stick put towards it. And go in all the other different directions as well, it has the danger of losing focus. But I think we're doing all right.

SPEAKER 3 (MICHAEL HAVAS, HEART OF EUROPE MEDIA): My name's Michael Havas from Heart of Europe Media in the Czech Republic. I guess in some ways this is part statement, and part question. I represent Czechomor which is a very successful world music band in the Czech Republic, and I'm asking about the relationship between theatre and music. I'm very grateful to be here. But when I hear somebody saying it's great to be here for a week and see all these different acts, it's financially impossible to break even. And the reason I'm asking is

because last night we had a very successful show, we had about 308 people which was great and in spite of that, we're going back home with €2000 and if we weren't one of the most successful bands in the Czech Republic we couldn't afford to do that. We did all our own publicity. We did a lot of work to get people to come to see our show, and I think we had a successful show. The people loved it. But we feel that we are actually subsidising the festival, and I'm just wondering because no one could be much more successful in the Spiegel tent than we were last night. How does this work for other companies?

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: I don't have the answer. It is a very clear, different model to the theatre work where everybody has a chance to play for a week, at the Spiegel tent, because we carry such a commercial risk on putting this tent out on the platform. We have to have a rotating program; two shows a night plus the club event. And we give everybody the deal of one third goes to the Fringe and two thirds of the box office goes to the company. But yes, like Camille O'Sullivan sells out, and it's just her and her band, and they're from Dublin, so there's no travelling costs involved, no hotel costs. And she's actually making quite a bit of money. We were trying to juice up the festival with international work, but yes, you are totally right. You are subsidising the festival and thank you very much for that. But yes, we have to work on models where that gets evened out, where international work doesn't carry that much risk. I mean we were trying this year with lots of work to approach embassies, and approach funding organisations so that companies don't work on that basis, basically.

MICHAEL HAVAS: Well, like I said we're very grateful to be here, we've enjoyed it very much. There was one comment on the panel about cheap air tickets. This has been up and down. I've been here from Prague for 2000 crowns, which is about €60 but this time for some strange reason the air tickets were about three or four times as much. They're very volatile. The prices go up and down without any apparent reason. I would imagine from the current political situation we can't really count on cheap air tickets in the future. I think they're going to be more expensive rather than cheaper.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: I think it's a problem that all Fringes have, and all companies coming to the Fringe have. It is for many companies a very large financial risk. But for some companies they see the risk as being worth it for whatever reason, and they continue to come. I think the evidence of that, along with the idea of having big events like festivals which encourages people to go to the theatre, to go to music events, and live art events sort of answers the question of are they worth having, and are they worth doing. I think the fact that Prague has become ten times larger than it was four years ago shows that it's still a growth industry, and there's still lots of people who are keen to perform in festivals across the world. If your model, Miki, is anything to go by as well.

SPEAKER 4 (TARA MCGOWAN, BLUE RAINCOAT THEATRE COMPANY): It's not really a question, it's just in response to the last speaker from the Czech Republic, and I think this is actually something that Wolfgang is maybe trying to set up. My name is Tara McGowan, and I work for Blue Raincoat Theatre Company in Sligo, and my idea is that if you're bringing international work to Dublin for the Fringe to find a network of venues in the country who are interested in taking on the work after the

performance in Dublin it could make it more financially viable, because there's bound to be at least four or five venues in Ireland who'd pay a proper fee, and I know that it's something that Wolfgang has talked about before as a potential project.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: Tara's talking about the possibilities of shows moving on after the festival, and there's opportunities sometimes that a successful show at the festival which might lose money at the festival has an opportunity to recoup money by it's success elsewhere.

SPEAKER 5 (JACKIE RYAN, Draíocht): My name's Jackie Ryan. I'm from Draíocht in Dublin. I wanted to ask a question of Steve which ties in with the man from the Czech Republic, the point that the further you come the more expensive it is. Obviously the Edmonton and the Dublin Fringe Festival are very important for promoting indigenous theatre, I just wanted to ask do you have a plan in Prague. Obviously you have a big ex-pat audience. Do you have a plan in the long term to work with Czech theatre companies, with new or emerging companies to help to use the Fringe Festival?

STEVE GOVE: Absolutely. Every year since we've started we've presented Czech companies in our program. In fact, as a result of that, last year a Czech company presented their work at the Fringe Festival here in Dublin. So yes. The quick answer.

JACINTA LYNCH: Again, just to pick up on Tara's point, I think it would be very good, because so many good companies come into Dublin for the Fringe, for the Theatre Festival, like our Czech friends here. I mean there's the excellent Theatre Handbook, and there's also the website. If companies from Prague were coming into Ireland, and they knew they were here for one or two performances it would be beneficial for the Theatre Festival just to hand them on that listing on the Irish Theatre website, because then they could contact venues and say, we're coming, we'll be here, and they might get some bookings. It would actually distribute some of the productions that come into Dublin further afield in Ireland. It would allow audiences in the West of Ireland, the South and so on to benefit possibly from what's actually here in Dublin.

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: Well we did that as a company. Four years ago we went with 'Hopeless Games' to the Dublin Fringe Festival, which didn't pay us much, or anything, I can't remember. But we also tied it into a tour of the whole country, like seven different cities and ended up in Dublin. That kind of worked out, just about. And we tried this year, but it's a question of resources and lead-in time and things.

JACINTA LYNCH: I think there's a lot of venues out there that would love to pick up on some of the acts and bring them to Ennis, Tipperary, Clonmel, wherever.

SPEAKER 6: Just following on from that point, I think it's quite difficult for things to follow on immediately. I think when you're at a festival it's about seeing work that you might pick up and start a connection with for the following year. It's not about, hey come to our venue next week. That's not going to happen because that's not viable.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: I think there's a distinction though. I think there's some companies in Ireland that use this as a showcase to get work taken both internationally and further afield in Ireland, but for the international companies, in order to try and make it viable for them to come over for more than three or four performances, there may be opportunities if it's done far enough in advance. Or as Wolfgang is doing by showcasing some work in Edinburgh and then bringing it to Dublin. I'm not sure if that helps financially, but I think it certainly doubles the audiences in terms of the numbers of people that can see it.

SPEAKER 7 (TANYA BANOTTI, THEATRE FORUM): I'm Tanya from Theatre Forum. It's really a question for Miki and Wolfgang. The issue of audiences has come up a lot obviously, and I just wondered about analysis of your audience year on year in terms of how many people are coming back the second year or the third year. If via your box office systems you sort of know that 20% of your audience are recurring audience or if it's all new every year and you're starting from scratch.

MIKI STRICKER: Unfortunately our box office system isn't currently sophisticated enough to give us that information. We're working on adapting a new box office system for next year that will hopefully give us that information.

In 2001 though, we had a research company do research for us to figure out exactly who our audience is. It's everybody. Because our festival has so many aspects to it, there's something that appeals to everybody. Our audience though, does tend to be more educated, but it covers every demographic and every social and economic background. We do know that once people have Fringed they come back again and again and again.

We also know that people tend to see – once they've Fringed for one or two years – they tend to see more shows. We sell a pass called the Frequent Fringer Pass and the Double Fringer Pass, which is a little bit of a discounted pass, and it enables people to see ten or twenty shows. We sell out of those passes, so people are seeing multiple shows. We know that they sell out because they've obviously used them in the past and know that they exist.

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: At our last evaluation is also three years old, but what we can say is that our audiences are also very loyal. Our main marketing tool is basically sending out the brochure to over 6000 people who then start to book before we do anything else. So it's very clear that our main audiences are coming back from last year. Then we try to do shows like 'Rumble', like 'Adrenalin' that attract an audience that aren't theatre-goers to widen our audience base for next year. But also we have a lot of multiple bookers. Once people get into reading the brochure they usually pick more than three shows.

MIKI STRIKER: Just as a little follow up: like Wolfgang we do try to attract new audiences. Over the past couple of years we've made a concerted effort to market to seniors as well as to families and children, because we do want to build our audience base. That's something else that we've done, we're trying to reach out to new audiences so that once they Fringe they'll continue to do so.

SPEAKER 8 (JACQUELINE MCKAY, NORTH EDINBURGH ARTS CENTRE): I'm Jacqueline McKay from the North Edinburgh Arts Centre. I just wanted to voice an issue that's alive in Edinburgh. Semi-political, in that certainly there are communities within Edinburgh who feel they are priced out of the festivals. They don't access it, or if they do it's one-off events. They're asking for the programmers, the funders to look at ways in which they can access a range of performances during the festivals in Edinburgh. Is that an issue in Edmonton, in Prague, in Dublin?

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: Did I understand it right? That the prices of shows are too high in Edinburgh so that people can't afford it?

JACQUELINE MCKAY: Yes. We're not just talking about a one-off performance but actually going to a menu of different things. I think what's been raised in Edinburgh is for Edinburgh people to have a type of pass so that they can enjoy what's there. I'm talking about people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and low incomes.

MIKI STRICKER: As I mentioned, in Edmonton we do make an effort to ensure that low-income families can attend the festival and that it is affordable. We do set our maximum ticket price at Can\$10, which is about St£5 or €7.50, so it is exceptionally affordable. Because we offer the Frequent Fringer and Double Fringer Passes as well that's a discount of about 20%. It also encourages people to see multiple shows and to take risks on shows that they might not have seen otherwise, which is why so much of our experimental work is so successful, because people are willing to take a risk because it's affordable to do so. At Edmonton we are very cognisant of the fact that we want our theatre to be accessible to everybody who wants to see it. We also encourage groups. Because the theatre companies set their own ticket price, we encourage them to offer concession ticketing as well.

WOLFGANG HOFFMANN: Yes, it's a big issue. It was a big issue for us this year in Dublin. In Edinburgh with constantly rising ticket prices, what we do is a loyalty bonus, and we sell five tickets where they have over 30% discount on each ticket if you book that many. £5 and £7 we have. Here for Dublin this year, the Dublin Fringe had a very strong policy on financial accessibility. So last year the ticket prices were like €10 and €12. I argued very strongly for making it more expensive. Not in general, but according to the production value of the show. But I think we settled for a happy medium, where we didn't go as expensive as the venues would be normally. Like going to places like Andrew's Lane, where they charge €25 normally for a ticket, and we're at €16 which is still substantially more than what it would have been last year. But yes, so it's according to the size of the production that we've changed the ticket prices. Still trying to keep it affordable, but also to be realistic, since we don't own the box office or most of the box office, it's the artist. Basically it's their bread and butter, so basically it has to be fair on both accounts. I'd love to have €2 million in funding and make everything free.

STEVE GOVE: Our tickets are €1.50. Even by local standards that's very cheap. That's about a quarter of the price of an average theatre ticket there. That's two beers or a packet of Marlboro Lights, depending how you look at it. So yes, it's pretty accessible. That's only on the first day. It goes up to €3 after that.

MIKE GRIFFITHS: I'd like to thank the panel for a very illuminating discussion.