

Cultural Daily

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A Pie, A Pint, and a Play... Americans at Edinburgh's Theatre Fringe

Jenn Robbins · Thursday, September 22nd, 2011

My husband, Matt, and I were savoring our shortbread and “American coffee,” pouring over our show picks for the week, when The Scotsman headline slipped under our hotel room door: “LONDON’S BURNING.” The August riots, 400 miles to the south, lent a worldly context to our first visit to the [Edinburgh Fringe Festival](#). We were here to look at venues, check out the programming, and determine whether we would take my own WWI play to next year’s festival. Fringe [Guide](#) in hand, my husband and I joined forces, and headed for the Royal Mile.



The spirit of art, competition and Scottish-infused [friendliness](#) of the Fringe is experienced most dynamically on the Royal Mile. It is transformed into a marketplace of entertainment, an example of capitalism and marketing at work. The participants’ energy is frenzied, splitting their time between vying for audience and press and putting on their shows. The “get in/get out” time allotted at Fringe venues averages 20 minutes total. And if loading a production in and out for each performance feels for the participants rushed, exhilarating, and like every minute spent is precious...let me tell you, dodging flyers, fleeing comedians, locating plays and filing into makeshift spaces for the promise of great theater feels for Fringe visitors, and in our case, potential producers, very much the same. We needed a plan.



Matt and I decided to first seek out “smaller” shows to see how they fared. Rogue plays in basement spaces and hotel conference rooms did attract audiences (we were there), but the allure of the well-oiled machine of venue promoters like the Pleasance and its beer garden and their tremendous marketing was formidable. Reviews in the major newspapers, online publications, [EdTwinge](#), and blogs definitely aided the shows in audience development. For us, choosing what to see was determined either by where we were standing and what was on in five minutes, or by laboring over the Fringe Guide and the buzz on the street.

Each theater-going experience, from selecting it to seeing it, proved utterly unique.

Physical theater seemed to be king. We saw three such pieces, with and without puppets. The best piece of new writing we saw was a two-hander, which included some audience interaction, but not enough to make me leave. And it was instructive as to what really worked at the Fringe: a play in one act, with a tiny cast, no sets, no costume changes, all taking place in a basement. The

performance space was, you guessed it, a basement. Form and content, perfectly twined.



So, here was our question: will a basement venue and the Fringe audience support *The Smoking Boy*: my six-character, two-act drama about an upper middle class, American family in 1917? Did I mention the baby grand piano? Our answer came as we walked back along the Royal Mile. We were stopped by a nice looking college-aged kid with a terrific show flyer and a very bad American accent. We listened to his show pitch and American twang politely, then responded in our best California English, “Why the American accent?” He blushed, and admitted: “To get people’s attention. Obviously.” Indeed, there were not many American visitors to or participants in the Fringe.

According to a recent New York Times [article](#), theatrical productions from the United States accounted for only 188 of some 2,500 Fringe events. American participants whose goal was to make contacts and attract an international audience reported that they were satisfied with their Fringe investment. There is interest in American productions, and at least our accents would be genuine. Though participating does cost dear, this is the only place to reach so large of an international audience in so short a time.

As we boarded the train for what the Scots called the “less civilized” part of the island, we decided to go for it next year. By the time we reached London, the smoke from the riots had cleared, although tension echoed in the air. How *The Smoking Boy* fares in the “get in/get out” of the 2012 Fringe, remains to be seen, and it will have its own tensions, worldly and theatrical...I’ll most likely cut the piano.

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