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T s o u t h e r n *Theatre*

INSIDE:
2008
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Take it to the Fringe

*How to Produce a Show
at the World-Famous Festival*

40 Groundbreaking Playwrights

Names You Should (but Might Not) Know

From the Deep South to the

How to Take a Show to the Fringe

by the Miss Julie Project Company

So you're thinking of taking a show to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, commonly called the Fringe? You're not alone. This international arts festival is billed as the largest in the world – and is famous for the networking and performing opportunities it provides. Actors who have made appearances on Fringe stages include such well-known stars as Emma Thompson, Hugh Grant, David Schwimmer and Jude Law.

But who can take a show there? How much will it cost? And will it be worth it?

These are questions we had to answer when a group of students, faculty and staff from Birmingham-Southern College (BSC) in Birmingham, AL, decided to take a new play to the Fringe. In August 2007, we presented BSC professor Alan Litsey's modern adaptation of August Strindberg's classic, *Miss Julie*, in Edinburgh. What follows are some lessons we learned, both about the Fringe in general and about producing a show there.

What is the Fringe?

Let's start with the basics. The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is part of a month-long performing arts celebration held mostly in Edinburgh, Scotland, each August. In 2007, it included 31,000 performances of 2,050 shows in 250 venues. Held first in 1947, the festival floods the streets of Edinburgh with theatre, music and dance performers. It is a celebration of tried-and-true productions, as well as new works and world premieres. Productions are presented by groups of all types, from high school students to professional troupes, who hail from around the world. In 2007, theatre represented 31 percent of the productions and comedy another 30.5 percent, with music, children's shows, musicals, opera, physical theatre, dance, and exhibitions or events making up the remainder.

Birmingham-Southern College students Kate Jenkins and Mac Smith participate in a final dress rehearsal of Miss Julie before leaving for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The show had nine performances at the Fringe.



Matthew Mielke

Far North

in Edinburgh

Who can take a show to the Fringe?

Anyone can take a show there! There is no approval process that you must go through to participate in the Fringe. However, that makes it sound more simple than it is. To take a show to the Fringe, you have to locate and be approved for performance at a venue. Venues require you to make application and may ask to read your script. (*More on venues, Pages 10-11.*) High school students who take a show to the Fringe often go through the American High School Theatre Festival (www.ahstf.com), which selects 35-40 schools annually to perform at the Fringe.

How much will it cost?

It won't be cheap. It cost us a little over \$36,000 (including \$14,265 in stipends) to take six students and four faculty and staff members on a 15-day trip to the festival in 2007. (*See expense tally, Page 11.*)

Where can you find money to go?

Look for grant opportunities. Our production, *Miss Julie*, was funded for the most part by an Undergraduate Collaborative Research and Engagement Grant that was provided by the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS), a consortium of 16 colleges and universities in 12 states in the Southeast, and funded by the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation. This grant covered \$28,000 of our expenses. (Our college also chipped in \$3,500, and the remainder of our \$36,000-plus budget came from our department's production budget.)

We found our grant in an e-mail update sent by ACS. If you are affiliated with a college or university, stay in constant contact with the grants officer in your institution. Your state and regional arts councils also can be excellent sources for funding.

A good place to look for available grants is Illinois Researcher Information Service (IRIS) (www.library.uiuc.edu/iris), which has a searchable database available to colleges and universities for a nominal subscription fee (and free for the first month). Another source of information on grants available is www.grantstation.com – available for an annual subscription rate of \$89.



Photos by Diane Litsey

Top: The Miss Julie Project Company from Birmingham-Southern College poses in front of the gate at Holyrood Palace after arriving in Edinburgh. Back row (left to right): Michael Flowers, Nikki Craft, Patti Manning, Mac Smith, Matthew Mielke, Amanda Kramer, Alan Litsey and Kate Jenkins. Front row (left to right): Laura Spurgeon and Alex Brouwer.

Bottom: This street area is part of the Royal Mile, a major tourist destination where many theatre company members promote their shows.



The large "C" marks the site of the C-Venues' Soco location, which is where the Birmingham group performed at the Fringe.

Where will you perform?

Once you've made the decision to participate in the Fringe, you need to register on the Fringe website at www.edfringe.com to receive a guidebook and detailed information on the process. The Fringe provides a specific timeline that you need to follow. We

started the process in November and began applying for venues in January.

In Fringe-speak, a venue is a place of performance. It might be in a classroom, a warehouse or the attic of an old office building. It is almost certainly not in a purpose-built theatre. These odd spaces are converted into theatres and other performance spaces by an army of student volunteers. Floors are laid, light pipes hung, risers and seats brought in and lights circuted.

To make application to venues, go to the Fringe website, where you will find venue contacts listed. Click on various venues and locate those that meet your requirements for size, kind of programming offered and other details.

You will actually be making application to the venue company that acts as a producer in a particular location. Be sure that you apply to a number of venues. We applied to seven – and were accepted by one.

Venues vary in size, facilities and requirements. A larger venue company, such as C-Venues, might have five performance locations, with three to five individual theatres in each location and house sizes ranging from 30 to 350 seats.

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Cost Breakdown: Birmingham-Southern College's Trip to the Festival Fringe	
ITEM	COST
Travel	\$8,909
Lodging	5,225
Set/Lights	807
Props	691
Costumes	841
Faculty/Staff Stipends	10,500
Student Stipends	3,765
Venue Fee	4,245
Shipping Costs	1,376
Miscellaneous	1
TOTAL COSTS	\$36,360

What should you look for in a venue?

There are several factors to keep in mind in applying for a venue.

One key is to secure a venue that is as centrally located as possible, because many theatre patrons are overwhelmed by the opportunities in the most central venues and don't leave these areas.

"The major venues – e.g., Assembly Rooms, Pleasance, C-Venues – eat up so many first-time Fringe visiting audiences," notes Gordon Parsons, a drama lecturer in the United Kingdom who has directed, performed and reviewed at the Fringe for many years.

Nancy Lipschultz, associate professor of theatre at Indiana University Bloomington, who has taken a number of shows to the Fringe, also recommends a central location as close to the Fringe box office as possible.

"The more central you are, the better your ticket sales," she notes. "For example, a larger venue that has many offerings brings people in the door and, after they see one show, they may just stay to see another, and that one might be yours."

She recommends the Festival Club (located on the street directly behind the Royal Mile, Edinburgh's major tourist destination, where many troupes market their shows) or the Bedlam (just off George IV Bridge).

"These places are both an easy walk from the main box office," says Lipschultz.

For our production, Designer/Technical Director Matthew Mielke submitted applications to seven venue production companies that were appropriate to our play. Some asked to read the script, while others

did not. Eventually, we were selected by the C-Venues Company (www.cvenues.com/venues/home.html) for its Soco location. C-Venues is the second largest venue group on the Fringe, with over 150 events taking place every day. The C-Venues Soco site had a 58-seat, black-box thrust space that was very suitable for our show because of its similarities to our own black-box theatre at BSC. Because it was similar in size and layout, we had to do only a minimum of reblocking/restaging when the show was transferred from BSC to Edinburgh.

Several factors made C-Venues attractive to us:

- **Size of the company**

Because we were interested in attending as many other shows as we possibly could while we were in Edinburgh, a large venue such as C-Venues was a good choice for us. The C-Venues offer free tickets to other C-Venue company members, so we were able to see many other shows free of charge.

- **Opportunity to meet other company members**

The C-Venues sponsor meet-and-greet parties that suited our mostly college-student company.



Photos courtesy of C-Venues Press Office



Above: This space in a C-Venues theatre is similar to the location where BSC performed Miss Julie.

Left: Theatre patrons line up for tickets in the C-Venues main lobby.

- **Location**

The C-Venues has many venues, most of which are centrally located in the heart of the primary Fringe district.

- **When is the best time to perform?**

Steer away from the key 7:30 p.m. slot, because there's too much competition then, recommends Gordon Parsons.

"Mornings (with breakfast!) and between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. are a good time as increasingly groups have left those times free," he says.

- **How much are tickets? And do you get to keep the gate?**

The price of tickets varies. Ours ranged from 6.50 pounds to 8.50 pounds. We also released half-price tickets daily for sale at the Half-Price Hut and gave away complimentary tickets.

You will get some money from ticket sales, but don't plan on making a killing at the box office. Each venue takes a percentage of the box office revenue – C-Venues typically takes 40 percent – on top of the charge for the performance space. After C-Venues deducted its charges, we took home \$444.32 from ticket sales.

- **What's required on the technical end?**

Technical equipment provided by venues varies

greatly. Because of this, it is important to connect in advance and keep up a strong dialogue with the venue company.

In our theatre, there was a tiny booth in the house that accommodated the light board operator, the sound operator and the stage manager. There were no headsets for calling cues.

- **What about props and scenery?**

Keep them simple! Use as few props as possible to cut shipping costs – or consider buying furniture and other props there.

Many productions at the Fringe use little scenery or props. Storage is *very* limited, and you may not be allowed much time to set up or to strike your show. Venue storage spaces are often very small and set-up time between shows was limited to five minutes.

We shipped three pieces of furniture from Birmingham for our set. These were collapsible and easy to set up and store. Our shipping crate and contents weighed 289 pounds and cost \$1,335 to ship to Edinburgh. This covered all fees and other costs. (*See sidebar at left for shipping details.*)

Due to the vagaries of customs regulations, return costs may be higher than out-bound costs. We chose to leave our furniture in Edinburgh for that reason. Because of the shipping costs, some theatre companies purchase any furniture items they need in Edinburgh and leave them there after the production. There are a number of furniture shops and department stores accessible by taxi in the city.

We also brought a few hand props from Birmingham. We stored most of our hand props at our flat and transported them to the theatre each day.

- **How do we handle lights and sound?**

Plan ahead for sound and lighting before traveling to the Fringe. Because venues range so widely, our experience may not be what you would find at your venue. Here are the issues we faced and how we handled them.

- **Lighting**

Like many venues at the Fringe, the C-Venues had a very specific light plot pre-set when we arrived. Knowing this, we arranged our theatre's light plot at home to match the one at the C-Venues exactly. When we arrived, we just had to program the lights at C to match our previously planned light level set from school. We were allowed to hang three specials, but we were not permitted to change any colors or positions of the other lighting instruments. Be sure to copy your light plot onto a backup thumb drive

How to Send Scenery to Scotland

If you decide to ship items, you'll need to build a shipping crate for them. The British shipping rules require a crate made of pressure-treated wood.

To find an international shipper, check the Yellow Pages under "shipping." Call around to find a shipper that will deal with inexperienced people and that has agents in Scotland.

We chose the Jensen Shipping Company, Inc. (P.O. Box 11146, Birmingham, AL 35202), one of the few listed in the Yellow Pages that were not copy centers or mailbox locations. Jensen provided excellent support. They understood our utter lack of prior experience and explained the process and asked the right questions so we could make the best decisions. We asked them for a single "no surprises" price. They made arrangements with each of the companies/governmental bodies that handled a portion of the shipping process: trucking to Atlanta, air freight to Manchester, customs and import duties and then trucking to Edinburgh.

Two cautions:

- Some shipping companies will quote a lower fee and not mention additional costs such as customs charges, storage costs and cartage fees. Find a shipper that can offer an all-inclusive "door-to-door" fee – picking up at your door and delivering to the door of your Fringe venue.
- As you make plans, allow for the shipped items to be "lost in customs" for a couple of days. This was our experience and also that of organizations that we contacted for advice.



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For notes, blogs
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BSC's Fringe
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<http://bsc-fringefest.blogspot.com/>

and bring it with you, just in case the cues are lost in the pressure of the venue having many shows in one performing space.

• Sound

Sound levels were set at the technical rehearsal and written down by the sound operator. During our five-minute set-up time, the sound operator had to re-set the board levels as well as complete the sound check. We transported all of our sound cues on a compact disc. Also, we made copies and gave them to the stage manager and director in case of any problems with the original compact disc.

How should we handle costumes?

Try to minimize your costume needs because secure storage space probably won't be provided, dressing rooms are typically limited and, of course, you have to get the costumes there!

• Getting costumes to Scotland

If you can, pack them in your luggage to ensure they arrive safely.

• Getting costumes to the Fringe

Plan to bring your costumes to the theatre daily and take them back to your lodging after performances. This can be a bit challenging if the weather

is bad. On rainy and windy days, we rode the frequent buses down the street to the venue. One actress used a small rolling suitcase to transport small items and emergency supplies to the theatre.

• Changing costumes/applying makeup

Plan ahead for limited resources. At C-Venues, there was little dressing room space – and it was located in the basement of the building and not even available until a few days into our run. We had our actors arrive at the theatre in full hair and make-up, so that we had to use the dressing rooms or restrooms only to change into our costumes.

• Cleaning costumes

Depending on where you stay, washing machines may or may not be available, so be sure that you have supplies for hand-washing costumes. Although we had washers and dryers at our flat for larger loads, we typically spot-cleaned or rinsed costumes and hung them in our kitchen to dry. We were able to borrow an iron from our host.

What publicity/marketing is needed?

Because there are so many productions at the Fringe, you need to develop a strong marketing strategy for your show.



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- **Bring flyers and posters**

This is a staple that you will need. Just about every company brings flyers and posters to advertise its show. We printed 500 posters and 5,000 flyers. Although we did not use all of these, it was smart to have them available. The C-Venues required us to include particular venue information on each flyer, so make sure that you check with your venue for their stipulations. We had all of our paper advertisements printed in Edinburgh at Dupliquick (www.dupliquick.com), which saved money and effort. Our venue hung our posters in prominent locations within the venue and in the city to encourage ticket sales.

- **Utilize T-shirts or sweatshirts**

Print your production information on them!

- **Sell your play in the official Fringe Programme**

Be professional, and don't emphasize the student angle if you are from a school or university.

"You can always credit your college ... in your free programs," says Parsons, a Fringe veteran. "Be as *useful* as you can in the Fringe Programme description. Silliness on the whole doesn't pull audiences."

- **Do publicity on the streets**

Hand out flyers everywhere you go. We kept

several in our pockets at all times, which we handed out as we met people throughout the city. We also offered them to strangers — anyone who would take them! We also accepted flyers from other productions, which we looked through each day in order to help us decide which shows to attend.

- **Perform excerpts**

If appropriate to the style of your piece, perform short excerpts on the street.

- **Offer treats**

Some popular shows offered chocolate, breakfast or drinks during their productions. Who wouldn't want to enjoy hot chocolate while watching a great show?

- **Give away free tickets**

This is one of the most effective ways to attract audiences to your show. C-Venues gave us several comp tickets for each show (but we had to ask for



Posters are critical at the Fringe. Tracy Thomas, BSC's associate director for publications, designed the Miss Julie poster (above).

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The Exeter University Theatre Company displays a large banner to attract patrons to its production of Julius Caesar at one of the C-Venues locations.

them). We then stood on the street corner of our venue about 30 minutes before show time and offered them to potential audience members.

• **Invite other companies from your venue**

This was also a very effective way to draw audiences. Our company members hung out around our venue and talked to

other performers. We then went to see their shows and invited them to see ours. It allowed us to have personal contact with potential audience members, as well as support other performers in our venue.

What about lodging?

Contact the staff at the Fringe and at your venue for help with lodging choices, but also network with colleagues. We found our lodging – at Edinburgh First (www.edinburghfirst.com), which is affiliated with the University of Edinburgh – through a Clemson University professor, Mark Charney, who stayed there when his school took a play to the Fringe in 2006. The location is central, everyone had his/her own bedroom, and each suite had a communal kitchen. We were just a 15-minute walk from our venue, and the rooms were clean and comfortable.

What should we know about food?

One key note: It was hard to find a place to eat after 8 p.m. With our performance at 5:15 p.m. every day, that was an issue. We found that many restaurants transitioned to bars that would not permit children after 8 p.m., and some of us had children along on the trip. It also took some time to figure out how the restaurants operated. It seemed unusual for them to seat large parties, and they would not split the tickets. We found it easiest to have one person pay with a credit card and then have everyone else reimburse him or her with cash.

Do we need special clothing?

Be sure to take rain gear, galoshes and a heavy, winter jacket. We were informed that it was usually rainy and cold. We lucked out, though, because it only rained two days during our two weeks there.

What should we do before leaving home?

Allow your company enough time to prepare. Taking a show overseas, especially a new production, is challenging. You can eliminate unnecessary stress

when you feel confident that each team member clearly understands his job and is able to perform it even in his sleep.

Our *Miss Julie* rehearsal process began in early May. The company met to discuss the details of our trip, including our production schedule. That afternoon, the entire company sat for the first read-through. The script was almost complete. The playwright received additional notes from the company, completing the final draft in mid-June. The company began a three-week rehearsal process on July 9, 2007, meeting each weekday from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m.

Many companies choose to run performances of their shows before they take them to the Fringe. However, if you choose, as we did, to give your show its first run at the Fringe, we suggest holding a preview performance for a select audience before you leave.

Six days before we left for Scotland, we presented our work-in-progress to a small invited audience. This was our first opportunity to receive audience feedback as well as our last chance to rehearse with our props and furniture before shipping our crate.

Was the experience worth all the effort?

The Fringe journey was invaluable to us on many levels. Our entire team learned the true meaning of collaboration as we worked closely on every aspect of the production process at home and at the Fringe.

“We toss around the word ‘collaborative’ a lot in the theatre, but I learned a great deal about collaboration through this close exploration of a new play with such a talented group of students,” says Michael Flowers, professor of theatre at BSC. “We were a real team (faculty, staff and students) who not only put together the play, but worked in unison as we executed all aspects of the entire experience.”

We also were challenged to respond to the unexpected on an almost daily basis.

On top of all that, we were inspired by diverse productions from around the world – people reinventing what the theatre can be – and meeting fascinating people. As student performers Amanda Kramer and Kate Jenkins wrote on our blog, “Scotland Rocks!” ■

The *Miss Julie* Project Company included the following Birmingham-Southern College faculty, staff and students: Alex Brouwer, senior theatre major; Nikki Craft, senior theatre major; Michael Flowers, professor of theatre; Kate Jenkins, 2007 theatre graduate; Amanda Kramer, junior theatre major; Alan Litsey, professor of theatre; Patti Manning, costume designer in residence; Matthew Mielke, professor of theatre; Mac Smith, sophomore theatre major; and Laura Spurgeon, sophomore theatre major.