

## Live Art in Scotland: Ira Brand

This interview was conducted online via Zoom on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2021 as part of the Live Art in Scotland research project at the University of Glasgow.

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Stephen Greer (SG): I've been trying different approaches to starting these conversations, but for the last few I've been asking people to think about their first encounters with performance, whether it was seeing or studying it. I don't like, or I'm wary of, the origin story, but I do like the idea of first encounters. So, maybe we start there.

Ira Brand (IB): It's funny because I thought about this actually and I am one of those people who wanted to be an actress from the age of five, so I have no idea what my first encounter was, but I know it was a presence in my life from a really young age when I was performing in front of family and neighbours and enrolling all of my friends to be in the play that I'd written, which I'm sure were terrible. It was definitely a desire to work in theatre from a really young age. For me the crucial thing was that I tried to go to drama school so I applied for acting BAs at Central and RADA and these kind of places and I did that for two years and I didn't get in anywhere. I also wasn't sure about context, and I'm probably retroactively putting some of my political, ethical reflections [laughs] over that experience, but it was of course, incredibly competitive and the process of auditioning for those schools did not produce a lot of good vibes. Then I went travelling for a year and I'd always been a performer, but also a writer, and so when I was away I thought I'd look instead at universities where I can do some kind of theatre and writing thing together. I applied for a bunch of places and then more or less had it narrowed down to Royal Holloway in London or to Dartington College of Arts. This was really the big decision that completely shaped the

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way that my practice developed. At that time, my observation was that I could go to Royal Holloway and do a much more academic study of theatrical history and practices, or I could go to Dartington and make, basically. I was going to say fuck around in some fields.

SG: [Laughs].

IB: You know, I went to the audition there and it was very strange for me at that time. It was not what I knew of as theatre, but it was being presented as such a practical programme. I thought if by the time I graduate I want to be making things, this is the place to be. Then I went to Dartington and that blew my mind. I think I spent the first six months having quite a conflicted time. I didn't recognise a lot of the work, there were a lot of things I didn't like. The positive aspect of it was that it really broadened my sense of what theatre or performance could be and I just completely fell in love with it. It's funny because Dartington had, at that time, one of the highest drop-out rates in the country [laughs], partly because it was a very small school so when ten people leave that's twenty per cent. But also, because it was so particular and I think a lot of people studying there, because it was so practical, were thinking they were going to some kind of acting training, which it really wasn't. I think people either fell in love or hated it.

SG: Or ran a mile. What kind of work were you being introduced to at that point?

IB: Companies like Forced Entertainment, Robert Wilson, Robert Lepage, also Stan's Cafe. I mean that's already quite a broad range, but more work from the seventies and eighties from the avant-garde performance scene and then contemporary companies I suppose. They were also quite good at inviting artists to come and work with us there. I remember companies that I think don't really exist any more, I can't really remember any of them, but contemporary companies that did workshops but I don't think are around any more. But also, for example, I remember watching *Goat Island*, this for me, was one of the transformative experiences. Every week or every two weeks, we would have a session where we would watch video documentation of works. We'd watch these terrible quality recordings of Robert Wilson on a projector in a theatre space and you're not really receiving any of the qualities of that work really. I remember watching video documentation of *Goat Island* and just being so bored and confused and then they came to Dartington and they did a live show and I was completely blown away by the experience of it. I still thought it was

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strange. I didn't know that I had an experience of understanding it in the way that I had previously thought one was supposed to understand theatre.

SG: Would that have been *The Lastmaker*? I can't remember what the one before that would've been.

IB: They did a piece called.. I don't think it was the last one because I saw the last one at Battersea Arts Centre. I want to say.. I don't remember what it was called.

SG: Maybe it's not important. I'm struck by the encounter of their work through documentation versus the encounter with the live work.

IB: Yes. I think for that work especially, I had this effective, beautiful experience of being in the space. I guess because so much of their work is about repetition and bodies and exhaustion. All of that stuff felt really important and effective when I was watching it live and totally arbitrary and strange when I was watching it on a recording. I think the other thing I remember about Dartington was a lot of the teachers were also artists. So, Sue Palmer, I don't know if you know Sue Palmer, but she was one of my teachers; David Williams; Paula Crutchlow, there were a lot of people who were practitioners and I found that super inspiring. The course was called Theatre, but there was a big focus on working collaboratively and cross-disciplinary, and not having to be a performer or a writer or a director but getting to do all of those things. It totally changed my sense of how live work might communicate, or what it might be trying to do. I have a very vivid memory of doing a site-specific module with Sue Palmer. I think one of the crises I had when I went to Dartington was, am I still allowed to perform, because it was really not acting and so much of what we were being shown was not acting, but I loved acting and I wanted to do this authentic thing that was being taught and I didn't want to have to play down everything all the time, I suppose and not use those tools. I remember doing the site-specific course and I made a strange solo piece that was performed on the bonnet of a car and in my feedback, I remember Sue Palmer saying to me you're such a good performer and it was really addressing that quality and I felt really excited and validated and okay, I can make this contemporary work and I can take pleasure in performing. I think that was one of the things that was a bit unclear to me somehow.

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SG: It's really interesting to think about that register of performance, of that not acting, does that mean not character? What's the "not" in that? I think that is something we encounter with that body of performance, of people going is it just deadpan irony, am I allowed to invest in this in a different way?

IB: Yes and I think it's funny because now when I watch companies like Forced Entertainment, they're very skilled performers, it's not that they're not doing anything. I think at that time I was having to learn what that meant, or how to work through that. I don't particularly play characters in my work now. I think that this was incredibly empowering actually. The main thing I learned from Dartington was that I could make my own work and I didn't have to wait for somebody to cast me in a show [laughs], which is what I thought was going to be my life before that.

SG: It feels like a lot of your shows, maybe it's all of them, do have a sort of personal thread or a personal starting point. It's not work which is necessarily autobiographical or biographical, but it does start from a personal starting place. Is that fair, does that work as a characterisation of the process?

IB: Yes, absolutely. I think again, that was something we learned there because we were writing and devising and generating so much material from our own experience. We were told that that was interesting and valid. The other thing that happened was I was in a company. We had to make a collective work in our final year, so that meant when I graduated, I was in a collaborative theatre company and I think that was really important. I think without that, I might've given up, or got lost. Because there was this group and we were touring the work and making new work and that's actually how I started the relationship with Forest Fringe, was through being part of this collective. So, that peer support structure for the first three years before I started making solo work was really crucial. That work was personal but it wasn't autobiographical because of the way that we were collaborating. When I started making solo work, my early solo work was much more explicitly autobiographical. I don't really call the work autobiographical any more, but it's always beginning from something that I care about or that I'm interested in.

SG: I suppose maybe that links to what we were already talking about, that register of performance where you are performing but you are also present as yourself, or another version of yourself rather than as a character. Maybe we can touch on a few of those, I was

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reminding myself of some of the shows. I don't think it was one that came to Scotland or toured to the Fringe, but maybe you can correct me on that, I think *A Cure for Ageing* was the first one that I'd heard about perhaps so maybe you could tell be a bit more about that work.

IB: Yes, *A Cure for Ageing* was the second solo show I made. It's a good example in terms of this relationship to personal material. It came from the fact that my grandfather was dying, he was getting old and we were going to spend time with him in the care home that he was living in and I just became fascinated by the impact of his ageing and decline on all of the people around him; the way it was affecting my grandmother and my mother and the way it was making me think about my ageing. So then I had the idea to make a work about ageing, about the experience of getting older, but I think that work is more about how we talk about getting older, or how we think about it, rather than what it is really like to age. It includes video footage of my grandparents, it has an interview that I did with grandmother, it has some letters that my grandmother wrote to my mum, but it also was a process of trying to open up to a more accessible question around ageing because I did a bunch of interviews with other people who were not family members who I accessed through some volunteering that I was doing. I did quite a bit of volunteering in care homes, so I did these research processes of trying to talk to people. In the work there is verbatim material, interview material, real life and also personal artefacts, but then there is also a motif of a jellyfish and visual language, there is movement and dance.

SG: I mean that's one of the things that maybe sort of interesting to me, is those relationships between, or movement between, different registers. There is documentary material, there's the movement and dance sequences or register, and then there's also the signature presence of the microphone and of having the microphone onstage. I feel like there is a PhD to be written about twenty years of contemporary performance using a microphone onstage. The first two chapters are how Forced Entertainment uses microphones and then it blossoms from there.

IB: It's funny because the most recent show I made was the first show I've made in which I don't use a microphone [laughs]. Miss it, man, it's hard.

SG: Maybe we'll come to that now. Is that *Ways to Submit*?

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IB: Yes.

SG: Let's chat about it now. I know that obviously touring, like everything else, is on pause, but you've also been working on a distance or a digital version of it.

IB: Yes, well actually, the work was already touring, but then things got cancelled, so it has been in the world for some time. I moved to Amsterdam to do a masters at DAS Theatre, formerly DASArts so I went back into a process that was more research-focussed and I suppose, about approaching my work less from a product-making orientation, although we were making work. I guess I had this utterly luxurious experience of having two years to reflect on practice and making and research more than career. I made a show previously called *Break Yourself* which was around gender, sexuality and power dynamics, and the relationship between these things. So, following on from that work I was still really interested in power dynamics and this was a large part of my research at DAS. What it culminated in was this work where I started looking at notions of dominance and submission more specifically. My process is always one of maybe having a very personal experience, then I go out and I'm like okay, the work is about ageing, or it's about gender, it's about a huge topic and then it's going back in to figure out what the question is or how to make something addressable and tangible. I started researching dominance and submission and looking at practices that make consensual use of dominance and submission. So I was researching and working in some kink practices and also martial arts and fighting practices, so these spaces where we have very clear parameters, and we agree to engage in power play in various ways. And so, *Ways to Submit*, the form of the show is an invitation to the audience to have a physical fight with me. There's text in it, but it's really quite a different work for me in that it's participatory. I would say the majority of the work is in this encounter with the audience and that means it's different every time. There's a structure and a really simple but quite robust frame in which I make an invitation to the audience. Within those compartments, in theory anything can happen. Although there is some guidance as to what it is that might happen. I didn't set out to go, I want to make a work that has participation in it, a lot of my work has had participation in really small ways. Even *A Cure for Ageing* has this small moment where I pick on somebody in the audience and I ask them some things about their life and then we do this interactive calculation about when they're going to die and when I'm going to die and which one of us is going to die first.

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So the work has always had address to the audience and these small moments that we might call interactional participation, but *Ways to Submit* is the first work where that is the work. I didn't set out and say okay, now I want to make a work with participation, that was the right form and the right framework that came out of the research and out of the practice, because I started doing this fighting practice and then I thought that has to be the show. *Break Yourself* also, which is a show I made before is a drag show and I didn't set out to make a drag show, but that form came out. I call *Ways to Submit* a kind of loose work in the sense that the previous work I've made has always been scripted. Like you said, it doesn't take script as a starting point but text is written and it's talking directly to the audience. It's often quite informal but there is a sense of that text usually. In *Ways to Submit* the relationship to text is also much more like a practice, so I have this repertoire of material and reflections and things that I can draw on, but what I talk about or what I address is kind of responsive and isn't set. In the show I'm trying to inhabit this looseness, that's the best way I can describe it, of being okay with not knowing what I was going to say. There are nine fights and I'm the constant in them apart from right at the end where I ask somebody in the audience to stand in and then we watch two audience members fight each other. So I'm getting increasingly exhausted obviously. A thing that has been in all my shows, but again in small compartmentalised ways, *A Cure for Ageing* has a bit where I'm dancing on a bit of soil and it gets very slippery so I lose control slightly in that, or *Break Yourself* has a physical dance sequence. I guess I see these curiosities that have become much more central in this work. It's also about building a structure in which I can be less in control, or that's the premise or the attempt. I get exhausted and I'm interested in putting myself in that state and then through that, my performance of the text and the way I address the audience, everything gets hazy like when you're a bit drunk.

SG: In an altered state with the work. There's sort of a paradox that it's a carefully controlled and structured dramaturgy or framework designed to give you less control over everything that you're doing.

IB: Yes, and actually these days I think that is the thing that I've always been trying to achieve in my work somehow. The very first solo show that I made was about fear and anxiety and it had this sequence in it where I drank lots of coffee and did some vigorous exercise. This was actually the first show I did at BUZZCUT.

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SG: Okay, great.

IB: I wore a heartrate monitor and I was trying to get my body to mimic a fight or flight response. Looking back, it's very obvious, but it was because I was making this work about fear and I wanted to show the fear and put the anxiety onstage. It's impossible. Everything I planned to do to access that part of myself in that controlled framework fails on some level because I know it's going to happen. And so then there was this thing of I'm going to try and mimic this physiological experience. Anyway, I just think it's interesting. Right now I'm making a new work which is also sort of about control and I feel like I'm always butting up against this thing of making work in performance spaces, or in the framework of performance, which in a way has this idea that it's live so anything can happen, but also has so many conventions and parameters and even if it's really actively against those things, the entire nature of making a work and preparing a work pushes against this.

SG: It's so interesting. I'm curious about the spaces or places, both literal and figurative where that kind of experimentation, or that kind of risk-taking becomes possible. So both as you're describing it broadly across the space or the idea of what theatre or performance is and literally, in the sense of curatorial frames. You've already mentioned BUZZCUT and maybe this is where we start to edge towards Forest Fringe, but spaces in which you can engage with those registers of risk or possibility that maybe if you were in a more conventional studio theatre it becomes even harder to push against that making safe sense. So maybe the question here is about your experience of BUZZCUT as a space where over the years, there has been a really wide range of work at different stages of development. Sometimes it is work-in-progress fragments, stuff that is deliberately and consciously raw, but then there's also work that is really quite polished and sometimes from very well-established artists and that work is sitting next to each other. What was your experience of BUZZCUT as a space for taking work in development.

IB: I'm pretty sure this is right, I performed in the first year that BUZZCUT existed. It was when they had the space at The Glue Factory, a big, old, freezing, horrible room [laughs].

SG: Yes, that's The Glue Factory.

IB: Maybe they used that space for a couple of years, but certainly the first year I went, which I think was the first year the festival happened, almost everything was in that space,



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maybe that was the whole location or site, I don't exactly remember. I did a piece *Keine Angst* and it was a fascinating experience because I think definitely BUZZCUT was more live art than I had previously positioned myself. I've always made work in theatre spaces that is theatre, it's not conventional theatre but it's contemporary experimental theatre but then has these reaches for things from the world of live art perhaps: an interest in exhaustion, the body, and these registers of real activity. We could talk forever about what real means in this context. It was interesting to be at BUZZCUT because, certainly in that context, there was amazing body-based work happening in that space and things that were really not the kind of work that I was making, but I remember feeling very pleased to be there and to have my work be allowed to exist alongside those works because I think there is such a connection and I think I'd always felt like I wasn't live art enough to access some of those things. The other thing that was kind of interesting about it was because it was not a theatre it was probably one of my early experiences of putting the work into a space where it was like, you've got two lights and there's no glass in the windows and you can't rely on, not that you rely on them necessarily, but there aren't these more theatrical frameworks. I think that has been quite informative for the work that I've made. I think about *Ways to Submit*, now it has a lighting design, it has a sound design and it's made for a theatre space but I've also performed it in spaces without any of those things. I think certainly that has generated for me an interest and a desire to think about the things that the work needs in terms of those theatrical apparatus. Being at BUZZCUT was amazing, there was such a big audience, for me anyway. I'd been performing in London and doing shows at Camden People's Theatre which I love but there are only ever twelve people. These days I'm sure that's different, but at that time they really struggled with audience. Even Battersea Arts Centre struggled with audience. I guess there was a real buzz [laughs] around BUZZCUT and I met lots of really great people. I think it was just really interesting to position the work both physically in a different space and sort of in this community of these other artists.

SG: I'm interested in how you're describing how being at BUZZCUT sort of re-framed your work, or gave you a different sense of your work in relationship to this thing called live art. I'm interested there in your sense of the curatorial frame or just the bringing together of people through Forest Fringe was also doing. That's a festival, or just in the various different iterations of what Forest Fringe is, and that has, for me, brought together a pretty wide

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range of things. Maybe not as many works from a kind of body-based performance art tradition as BUZZCUT but still a broad range of performance works and modes of performance and different kinds of artists. Maybe the question is about what your experience of Forest Fringe was at the start and then as you became involved with it as one of the directors. What's your sense of the scope of Forest Fringe in bringing together different kinds of artists?

IB: The way I got involved with Forest Fringe was that this company that I was in when I graduated from Dartington, we were called Tinned Fingers, and our graduation piece went to the National Student Drama Festival and at that festival Andrew Haydon saw our show and it was I think the second year that Forest Fringe was happening, so I think it was the first year that Andy was involved and collaborating with Deborah on programming it. It wasn't a platform that had lots of high demand yet and they were programming the second year and Andy was friends with Andrew and had had a conversation with him and Andrew said I saw this great company at NSDF, you should have the show at Forest Fringe. Then Andy reached out to us and we were a year out of graduating and super energetic and enthusiastic and still had a lot of hustle in us [laughs] and we couldn't do the show that we had collaborated with because one of our collaborators was travelling to America, so were like we'll make something new in two months and we went to Edinburgh and did a show that was not very good I'm pretty sure. We did two nights or three nights in the space above The Forest Café. I don't really remember so much about that first year actually.

SG: Had you been to the Fringe before that point?

IB: Yes, well stupidly I'd already been going for years. When I was in secondary school I went three times, once with a school production and twice with a friend of mine who is a playwright. It was this really grim experience.

SG: No audience, no money.

IB: No audience, no money. Bad reviews. Juggling on the Royal Mile to try and get people to come and see your Brecht puppetry adaptation, it was not great. So I do remember that it was kind of a revelation to go to Forest Fringe and to have this feeling of being in that vibe and all the energy and meeting people and the excitement and buzz of that festival, but not having to pay for it, not having to do stupid fundraising activities, not having to market

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ourselves really, there were people there. I think in those early days for a company that nobody knew, it was still not an amazing audience, but it was just easy, they made it seem easy.

SG: I suppose it was an audience that cared. My own experience of the Fringe and a lot of other people's experience is that hard slog of getting an audience and one of the hardest things about it is that even when you do get that audience in through the door, there are twelve other things that they're seeing over the next few days, they're not especially interested in seeing you.

IB: Yes, absolutely. We just made a lot of great friends. Again, it was another moment of opening up. I can't remember exactly who was there that year, but Tinned Fingers performed at Forest Fringe for another three years I think and through that process, started to become friends and meet people like Action Hero, Jo Bannon and Search Party, and the artists who I now consider peers even though they were probably a few years older than us. That was how we got connected to all those people. I think Third Angel were there or Chris Thorpe, companies and artists who were a little bit older again. It's not all about age, but companies who had been doing the work a little bit longer and I think I remember that being quite inspiring, breaking down some of those barriers to being able to talk to those people, those established artists. We did that for three years and then I was doing some work as a producer, I had a day job as a producing assistant for an events company in London and I'd done an internship with Fuel and then thought how do I get more experience doing this producing work. I thought rather than do another internship for a company who can't really give me anything meaningful to do...

SG: The choice is they either give you something meaningful to do and it's even more exploitative than a regular internship is, or they're having to invent something for you and it's therefore not that substantial.

IB: I just had this sense that I'd done a three-month internship at Fuel and I didn't think I'd learn anything from another experience like that so then I reached out to Andy and Debbie and was like hey I'd rather work with you guys, can I give you guys some time and in the first year they asked me to be the volunteer manager. This was in 2011, is that right, it must've been 2010. I went up and I worked as a volunteer manager and then of course, actually this role as a volunteer manager was running Forest Fringe with them [laughs] because they

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were such a tiny team and because that was always the nature of it, even when we'd been there as artists we'd been volunteering on the box office and as front of house. I think it's also in my nature, if I see that something needs doing and I think I can meaningfully useful then I'll go there. I just sort of fell into collaborating with them and quite quickly they asked if I wanted to come and help curate and be one of the co-directors with us. I can't remember what your question was.

SG: No, you've answered it perfectly. I guess the next thought in my head in response to what you were describing is in that shift of becoming one of the co-directors and starting to curate it, I'm also conscious that the Edinburgh Festival was one part of a larger programme of stuff. I suppose this is when Forest Fringe was starting to do the micro festivals in other places. I'm interested in that approach to curation. What kind of conversations were you having about the kinds of work that you would sustain? I've spoken to Andy lots of times about Forest Fringe but recently about making a space for work that couldn't be homed elsewhere, but also not just responding to a lack but a desire. There were artists and work that you wanted to see in the world and that was a mix of professional and personal connections perhaps. Let's just start with that first question which is about the curatorial approach maybe of the Forest Fringe.

IB: Yeah I think one of the things is that Forest Fringe's curatorial approach was influenced by the way that it was born out of The Forest Café. If you've spoken to Debbie then you'll know this anyway, but she was given that space for free but there were some expectations around not charging audiences for tickets and making the space free for artists and these kind of things and of course that massively defined what made Forest Fringe a different or unique space. The things that became really important ethical points about how we wanted to operate later on were born out of that. There are practical things that also have a relationship to curation. Because there was this idea of making it possible for artists to go there who wouldn't otherwise be able to go there, then thinking about forms. I think that has changed in Edinburgh now, but it seemed like there wasn't much possibility to do anything other than an hour-long black box studio show. Also, to be responsive to and realistic about the space that we have, which we haven't always been great at. I think that's something we've really learned. When we work internationally, there might be amazing artists we love who make very high-tech-spec black box studio shows who we would love to

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host and would love to have as part of our curatorial vision, but they shouldn't bring their work to us [laughs] because it's not the best thing for the work. Even from early on at The Forest Café, there was one big space and there was one smaller space so it was like, okay what things can happen in the toilets.

SG: In the stairwells and basement spaces.

IB: The curatorial conversations, they're always super challenging and I think it got incredibly hard once around 2011. 2012 was the year that we didn't have a space, but between 2011 and 2013 Forest Fringe became a place that artists wanted to show their work and I think in the first year, Debbie just said yes to people who wanted to show their work and then suddenly there was a moment where we had to make decisions and that was super hard. They were always long conversations about trying to balance certain things like forms; types of work; also maybe not so much in the early years, but in the later years thinking around diversity and gender and who we were giving space to, that became really important; and also practicality. It was often a big conversation around can we give these artists what they need. I think that was often the hardest thing for us. We had one year where we took on too much and it was horrible. We were running several offsite venues, this was when we were already at The Drill Hall. I guess what I'm saying is I'm struck by how much the process of curation is not just what do I like and what do I want. It was also a lot of having to reign things in and be like, this is too much, we can't do this. I think we definitely made mistakes, we learned through some mistakes in that way. I think certainly in the later years, we got much better at being honest with ourselves about where we could give somebody a useful experience.

SG: There's something interesting there in the sense that saying yes is not necessarily an act of generosity if you can't give the artist or the work the support it then actually needs.

IB: Yes. I think another thing we were really conscious about was as Forest Fringe developed a reputation, there had been a pretty big group of artists who had been involved in a number of years either in Edinburgh or in projects elsewhere, so this sense of a community that started to build around it. We were really clear that we wanted to be able to continue supporting people because we loved the work and because they were our friends and we were all working for free or very little, so it was part of the decision making process, like who do we want to spend two weeks with. It wasn't the only thing, but it was a factor.

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SG: Yes, absolutely.

IB: How do we make this a nice time for everybody and how do we give value to that social factor and the community building as well. Perhaps because of our own developments as artists also becoming aware of the pitfalls of having emerged and not being able to get support any more or show your work at platforms any more. We wanted to be able to continue to build relationships with companies like Action Hero, for example, who were no longer an emerging company. At the same time, we wanted to be able to give space to new makers and younger makers and I think that was quite a tricky thing because we couldn't do both all of the time.

SG: Was that a little bit to do with the scale of your desires but maybe also the scale of expectations slowly kind of taking over what the resources surrounding Forest Fringe were able to offer, whether in terms of money or just in terms of energy?

IB: Yes. One hundred per cent. I think we felt a lot of obligation to a lot of people. I think we didn't want to be cliquey or exclusive, and we wanted to maintain a community and I think that's a really hard line to tread. I think there were people who thought we were cliquey or who were like I don't know how the hell I get in to Forest Fringe and that makes me really sad.

SG: I suppose that relates to what you were saying earlier about that tipping point where suddenly you have to make difficult choices because you can't say yes to everyone. The cliché is to become a victim of your own success and I don't like that as a cliché. One dynamic that's maybe interesting that came out of another conversation and I don't know whether you'd recognise it or not, is that there's a moment where fringe or marginal or experimental spaces become successful and the possibility of taking risk in that space changes because programmers are turning up, reviewers are turning up and looking at that work and judging it in a slightly different way. I don't know if that reflects what Forest Fringe was like?

IB: Yes, absolutely and I think that was also really important because that's part of why people wanted to go there because we did have a really great audience a lot of the time. International programmers would come to Forest Fringe in Edinburgh. A lot of the artists that we worked with would, not just through us, but would benefit from that and would

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start to show their work more internationally. I think that was a conversation a lot of the time, particularly with younger artists, it's also not right or fair maybe to expose them to that. If I think about Tinned Fingers when we went, it was fine to go with a slightly rough around the edges show we'd made in three months in the early years, but it would've been really counter-intuitive and problematic for us to go and do that in the later years of Forest Fringe because it would've been damaging. I like to think that artists are not only as good as the last work that they've made but I don't think a lot of programmers necessarily agree with that. I think we also had to be a bit real and honest about that, but it's tricky because of the reputation that Forest Fringe had as a marginalised place, as a place where you could go if you couldn't get into the other spaces, as the people who were willing to take more of a risk and programme more challenging things, so then I think maybe some people started to feel a bit let down by it because they couldn't get in there either. It was super interesting in the few years that BUZZCUT ran a programme in Edinburgh, we were really delighted. I think although there is a lot of overlap, I actually think the curation is quite different, but it was so great to have another space that some of those artists felt that they could be at home in.

SG: Maybe that speaks to what's needed in the broader ecology. If there are only one or two spaces then as they become established, as they become successful, the pressure on them is so phenomenal.

IB: The last year we ran a venue was 2016, which I can't believe is already five years ago. The last few years we were in Edinburgh, Summerhall became a go-to place for the more contemporary work or the more performance art, experimental work that would previously have gone to Forest Fringe. I think that was really interesting because it was on the one hand, great that that space is there. I do think it's great that that space is there, but also, I shouldn't speak for the others, but I certainly also felt some conflict around that because I knew that artists were going there and getting shitty financial deals still. We also ourselves had worked with Summerhall one year and it was not a good experience in terms of how they managed that relationship and how they took care of the artists. I think it's also different people running it now so it's not a comment on how they're programming or operating now, but it was a bit of a funny thing. I think it's good that there is this space

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SG: To take it away from the specific example of Summerhall, but if all of the structures that go with it, which are about particular financial models, if they don't change then...

IB: Yes and I think you can really see that and there are some artists whose practices can cope with that, perhaps because they also have work that they can sell a bit better. Then there are still some artists who can't go to that space because even if the work is amazing, they probably won't sell out, the work is not as easily sellable. Maybe that's unfair.

SG: It's complicated. I do remember seeing *DollyWood*, the Sh!t Theatre show, which has a running joke in it which is that it's their 'big crossover hit' and it's a good joke and it's a great show, but I always think about crossing over from where [laughs] and it's crossing over from that Fringe space or that live art space, or from that small venue space into a show which will get reviewed in *The Telegraph*. Maybe I'm imagining whether it did or didn't get reviewed in *The Telegraph*, but will be able to get a more mainstream audience and I think they as artists are totally aware of the complicated dynamics of that, which is why there's a joke in the show about it.

IB: Yes, and I think also this question of who needs the space. I think this was always very complicated with Forest Fringe because we would get so many requests for artists to show their work, from your graduating company up to Forced Entertainment. Then there's this question of who still needs this space and who needs this support. Arguably, Forced Entertainment definitely don't need Forest Fringe, but they are a company whose work we've presented at times. I think in those situations, for us it's also coming back to this community and exchange. We did *Quizoola!* in the studio at The Drill Hall and that was because we loved that show and we wanted to have them in our space and we wanted to have them around and have them meet the other artists. There seemed to be in value in that in other ways for them to be part of that community and also bring an audience, all these other complicated things. We definitely had many conversations where we were like yes, it feels like this person doesn't *need* to do their show. I think also, in a way, because we were often working for free, there was an extent to which we were working with these other principles of collaboration, generosity, resourcefulness, community. For us a lot of it was about if we're not salaried, we're not getting paid a curator's fee to do this thing, so we want to be still learning things and still having other valuable experience. I think sometimes that was a way to address that question.



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SG: And even if you are potentially getting paid to curate a festival further down the road, that's always just a future promise. The work you're doing in the present tense has to be...

IB: Yes it has to be giving us pleasure. I don't know if pleasure is the right word, it is pleasure, but it has to be nourishing us somehow. It has to be teaching us something or maybe it's also developing our connections, I don't know. It feels like such a complicated set of decisions and I think sometimes the fact that we weren't getting paid was almost a bit of an excuse. I don't know if I think that just because somebody is on a salary they have any more obligation. I guess it's about what your remit is as an institution and what you're there for.

SG: And I suppose, again maybe thinking about the space of Forest Fringe and BUZZCUT in the wider context of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, it's like you're being asked to do the job of sector development when that wasn't ever part of the imagined remit you had for yourself at the start.

IB: Absolutely. I think we also talked a lot about the things that we were willing to do in the context of Edinburgh that we weren't willing to do elsewhere. I think finance is a big thing around that. Within the context of Edinburgh, working for free, asking people to show their work for free, and sharing the work for free feels like a sort of radical statement or political gesture, and in other contexts, that same thing can feel just exploitative.

SG: I remember reading, I think it's in the Forest Fringe book, that you talk about the Forest Fringe as a collision of circumstances in which I guess, as you're describing it, you've then got to try and position yourself or make good of those circumstances or work out how to respond to them. As you've just described it there, that decision to work for free is part of a response to those circumstances.