

Live Art in Scotland – Ryan Van Winkle

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Stephen Greer (SG): The question that I've been asking people at the start [of these conversations] has been about their first encounters with performance or theatre or live art and asking them [about the relationship to those] fields [when] they might not actually be they might not think about themselves as 'performance people' in the first instance. And I know that, obviously, at the moment, you are a writer-in-residence [at the University of Edinburgh] so that maybe you come from a writing practice and that's where you're rooted. So I don't know if we start there? Where do you feel like your roots are artistically, creatively?

Ryan Van Winkle (RVW): Yeah, interesting question. I've definitely been thinking about that, it's something that's interesting to me my whole life, so we can definitely talk about that. I think I always conceived of myself up until [...] 2010 – I would have said, I was a writer and my bag, my practice was writing. And I think working backwards, through my experience and the luck I had to see a lot of what the Forest Fringe was programming that gave me some ideas and some opportunities to do some stuff and let me think about how to perform poetry in an interesting dynamic way that wasn't just a person with a microphone up in front of the stage reading poems to people. I don't know. I think I personally like a library reading, you know, and going into that awkward, not very well-lit room, and uncomfortable chairs, and there's a lectern, you know. I like those and I can definitely get some inspiration from them.

But I know that they're not for everybody, and definitely in my life as well I've kind of fallen asleep and tuned out. And trying to think about how you can make poetry more engaging for people was

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definitely something that was in the in the back of my mind as I was kind of coming up and practicing. So the Forest had a big impact on that because I was just lucky enough to be around there.

And then going back in time, just kind of being aware that there was a whole other world out there, so I think my first.. I don't know what my first theatre experience was. I'm trying to think back, I know my parents were very keen for me to be exposed to this stuff. I know at a very young age, they took me to see a chorus line in New York on Broadway, so that have been some time in the 80s When the first big run of that show was. But I remember it was very bawdy, and I was hearing things I didn't think I should have been allowed to hear and that was very exciting, for me, as a young guy. [laughter] And I remember going to see Tolkien, I think it was it The Hobbit or something which I didn't really understand or enjoy, but I really liked seeing the people manipulating the puppets in black. There was something about that, seeing that and understanding that there was somebody manipulating things and seeing a little bit behind that.. I don't know. That really sticks in my mind, watching the puppeteers moving those things. And I remember my dad telling me at some point, like during the intermission, we'll go down and we'll see the magicians. The magicians are in the in the pit where you can't see. And I got really excited because I really liked magicians when I was a kid. And then we went down to see the magicians and turned out, they were just people who play violin and piano and drums and stuff and I was incredibly disappointed.

SG: [laughter] Like figurative magicians!

RVW: Not people pulling doves out of hats or anything, it's just like people playing music. I miss heard him saying.. I thought he said magicians and he said musicians, and I misheard. But there was something about that [which] really sticks in my mind. So those are my early experiences with theatre and I was delighted by it. I guess I always knew that poetry in its bare [form] – live literature or whatever, I don't know if that term was around when I was starting in the early 2000s - but like just poetry readings in general, [it was] fair to say, they could be a little bit boring, you know.

SG: And it feels like there is a tradition of spoken word which is really vibrant but also sometimes at a bit of a distance from poetry reading or literary readings.

RVW: I think with spoken word... you saw that spoken word was very popular certainly in the early 2000s and remains popular and is really dynamic and engaging and exciting, but I couldn't do that stuff. People ask me what kind of poems I write, and I'm like I write the boring kind [laughter] that don't

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rhyme, and when I read I don't move my hands around. I didn't feel comfortable with that. I was personally searching for another way to kind of present poetry, that didn't require those kind of skills on a microphone and writing the kind of poems that you would need to write to communicate directly with an audience.

SG: You mentioned 2010 as a key moment. What's 2010 to you in that timeline?

RVW: I think 2009, 2010 would have been before my first book. November 2010 was [when] the first book came out. 2009 I believe was the first ever Hidden Door festival. I remember, [the organisers] came to me looking for just anybody wanting to do poetry stuff. So they were looking for writers and the remit at the time was that you have to collaborate, if you want to be part of this festival, it has to be interdisciplinary. And I had some poems kicking around that I had had a friend put to music, and so we had this kind of CD project going, this audio project going, and then with that kind of impetus from Hidden Door, I went 'there has to be a performance and I want to do performance thing', and I wanted to add visual.. they wanted to visual arts, to have as much in there as you can. So that's where I created 'Red, like our room used to feel', which was a one-to-one performance where I invited somebody into a bedroom, and I read them poems in the bedroom. And as I read the poems to them, they would lie on the bed, I gave them a cup of tea, I would give them some cherries, maybe some biscuits, a glass of port as well. Tea or port. And I crammed the tiny little room full of all the stuff that was in the poem so ultimately the effect I was going for was [that] you just start seeing all the little things: a little paper bag of hair, the postcards, the photographs, the Christmas tree, the fairy lights, all this stuff was in there, so that if they were looking around the room they'd get little pings of like resonance coming in from it. And so that was 2009 [...] I think I did 2009 Hidden Door, 2009 or 2010 or 2011 August for four days at Forest Fringe or something. A really short run, and then I think I did it [in 2012] at Summerhall for a full proper fringe run. So that piece was like a culmination of all that type of stuff I had seen at Forest Fringe. For instance I was at [one of their showcases] at the Battersea Arts Centre and I remember a piece [that was in a basement]. I remember being in a room and it was just like ten people. It was a little performance for the five or ten of us with somebody on a bed and I was like okay, I could probably see myself doing some version of that with poetry.

SG: I'm just thinking about some of the different threads of what you were just describing there and thinking that.. was [Forest Fringe] still at Bristo Place or was it down at the Out of the Blue space?

RVW: No, we were at Bristo Place. My main time with the Forest Fringe was at Bristo place.

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SG: Maybe that's a good point to go into that a little bit more because I have my own memories of that space, of being in there, because it was directly across the road from the student theatre where I'd spent so much of my time as an undergraduate.

RVW: Right, the Bedlam.

SG: So that neighbourhood I knew really well. But until Forest Fringe set up, I had never been into the building across the road. So I don't know - what's your memory of that space, both of the cafe and of Forest Fringe?

RVW: Oh wow,. I mean there's too many.. there's too many memories. I miss it, I thought it was a great space, we were very, very lucky to have it. That's not really answering the question of what's my memory of it. My memory of it was [that] we were just managing chaos, you know, and we were really, really lucky to be there. And my memory is that we were doing everything we could all at once, and just trying to say.. I think I think our philosophy at the time was try to say yes, just try to say yes to as much as possible. And my memory is that, like anything could happen, and it could be a boring evening or boring afternoon, not much happening and then somebody could get on stage or some bands you never heard of showed up and then all of a sudden, the place lit up. You just never knew what was going to happen, and it was super exciting and you always knew that you could show up and you'd have your friends there, you'd have some people that you knew there. So that's my overriding memory [and] feeling about it. I think i'm pretty nostalgic, I mean there's an element of burnt-outness. I think we were all very tired and very stressed, all the time. I mean, it's a volunteer run collective that's trying to let as many people do as much as they want at all times... it was pretty stressful!

SG: I suppose that the absolute joy but also the sharp edge of that 'unconditional yes' it's that is so extraordinary enabling in what it makes possible and what it allows to happen. But it's all consuming, and that means it can consume *everything* and [then] that's the burnout moment of you wanting to say yes to everything.. I mean, maybe i'm describing my own habits as much as anything else, and it becomes really difficult to then maybe start saying no or saying yes less often.

RVW: It was so much a part of our core system, we felt obliged to say yes to everything because of the nature of what we were doing, which was not paying anybody, you know, all these people are working for free [so] we need to give out opportunity. I think the motto became 'we work for free, so you can

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play for free' and that was our sort of like explanation for why... I guess maybe this is a good time to back up to the origins of the Forest because it really starts with that with August and the festivals, which is the founders - and I'm not one of them – the founders were living and working in Edinburgh and studying in Edinburgh and I think they found that the fringe and the festival was getting more and more inaccessible for regular starting artists right. You had to pay to perform is how it was becoming, more and more, and you're losing that vibe [where] you can just show up and anything can happen. And so they just opened Forest. I think they all put in 500 pounds and they opened up on Westport. They opened up a little cafe and they thought, okay well for August we'll sell some teas and cakes and some food, and we'll have an open performance space and anybody wants to come in and perform can perform and we're not going to charge any money from people but we're also not going to charge them entrance. So that was always the kind of the trade-off: you're not going to have to take any risk in performing, you can do it for free, we're not going to charge you but you're not going to be able to charge [for] tickets or anything.

SG: And then so that model sort of becomes the basis of the free fringe and the free festivals?

RVW: I don't know. I can't speak for how PBH [Peter Buckley Hill] went with it, if they were aware of what we were doing or not, I don't know. But certainly for us, that was key to the whole thing. But I guess that is kind of what they were saying with the free festivals too, you're not going to lose your shirt on this.

SG: Exactly yeah.

RVW: Because it's a pretty hard month to get through financially for a lot of people. So that was the kind of deal, and so they just started programming stuff. They didn't intend for it to last forever, they didn't intend for it to be a volunteer run organization. It was five of them, they were going to run it but then people came in and they were like 'hey I'd like to help out how can I help out' and they realized oh, we can get some help here, stay open longer later, not kill ourselves. And then they closed, I think, in September, October, the first year so that would be September, October 2000. And then they were able to renew the lease and they got a little bit of grant money from maybe the Prince's Trust or some weird thing like that. And from then on, it was kind of open all the time. They definitely closed for a little while. But that kind of feeling of.. nobody pays to play but nobody pays to come in. And the labour of the volunteers pays for that possibility because we're selling teas and cakes and food and beer and stuff so that people can come in and have access to the space, and we can buy the kit and do

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other things. And then that, extrapolated, leads to Forest Fringe and the limitations the collective would have put on that enterprise. I can talk more about that if you want or...

SG: You said you weren't one of the founders: when did you first get involved with the Forest, then?

RVW: I was there opening night and then I got involved later on, I want to say it was 2001 so probably a year after.

SG: But from early days then?

RVW: Pretty early days, and then I got in, and I was asked to do some kitchen managing and I had had some experience. I had some credibility because I had worked at the Bongo club for a little while in the early 2000s, which was another great Fringe [venue], an amazing space especially in those times when it was all part of the artists'.. they had the artist studios upstairs and then the nightclub and the art gallery downstairs. It was a really special time. So I ended up kind of managing the kitchen probably about 2001, 2002.

SG: How or when did you meet Debbie Pearson? I'm guessing that must have been 2006 2007 because I know she was over [from Canada] studying and I think she said to me she was volunteering, maybe.

RVW: She was definitely volunteering. I've definitely got photos of her volunteering. We moved in 2005, so I would have been in Westport. 2004 was a weird year and we ended up in Wilkie House for a middle year and we ran two venues. And then we ended up in Bristo Place [in] the fall, I believe, certainly for 2005 which was our birthday and so you're right, I would have met her.. I don't think she's on the... we have a 2005 poster where somebody photoshopped all our heads on different bodies. I don't think Debbie's in that photo so I'm going to say 2006 is when I met her.

SG: Do you remember how that conversation came about? When.. I guess it's like the 'mythic birthplace' of what would become Forest fringe.. this invitation for her to maybe work with... I don't know what the invitation was, to start putting together a programme?

RVW: Right yeah well that's the collective, and I was working in the kitchen a lot but also just there all the time. And it was a collective and so we'd have loads of meetings, and you know so everybody was always doing stuff and I was always very interested in 'how do you plug somebody into this thing.?' A

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lot of times people would come into volunteer and if you weren't paying attention, they could just come in and just make nachos for four hours, and you might never see them again. And for me it was really important that they get to do something else, something artistic, something fun, something they want to do, whether it's making posters or getting involved in music, you know, we had so many different tendrils. I always was trying to plug people in, so I would have probably learned early on that Debbie was interested in theatre and was making plays. I had been through what five or six fringes at point, having had my first fringe in 2000 so I had done reviews and I probably seen a lot of theatre. And I started getting.. when we got the big, big showcase building in 2005, the following year, we would have been getting a lot of emails. I would have started to get a lot of emails and I know I was feeling both out of my depth and [that I] just couldn't judge stuff.

SG: So you mean emails from..?

RVW: From performers in the UK. I can remember distinctly it would be stuff like 'hey I've got a show about NHS: the musical' and I'd be like, I don't know, this doesn't sound good and we've got this free [space]. Maybe this is about what you were saying about saying no as I started to realize there needs to be some boundaries here, we're going to have to decide, we don't have an infinite amount of space. We do have space, but we don't have an infinite amount of space [so] how do we decide what should be going in? Obviously, people who were from our collective, they were volunteering, you want them to have space to do what they're interested in. We didn't have a whole lot of theatre people, we didn't have a lot of our own people who were really interested in making theatre: a lot of them were interested in making music or books or records or whatever. So I just knew we needed help. I knew that if we weren't careful we would be overrun with mediocrity [laughter]. Maybe that's a shitty thing to say. But it seemed like there were a lot of people who were [doing] not that interesting stuff. Even in six years, I was like I'd seen this before, I'd seen this kind of stand-up comic before.

SG: I was going to say that was the frame that was offered by Debbie when she was thinking about [the Forest as a venue], that there was a real disinterest in creating another space for more stand-up comedy.

RVW: More stuff that you could see [elsewhere]. So that invitation would have been 'I'm getting all these emails, I know I need help, we need help to decide this [so] do you want to be more involved? Can you help with it?' I think the rule would be 'you can kind of do you want' but the general collective vibe was.. things that are happening here.. if we're going to give this space away, which we even at

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that point knew was valuable because people are coming to us and offering us money so we knew we had something valuable, if we're going to give this space to somebody to people for free, they have to be doing something they couldn't do elsewhere, wouldn't be doing elsewhere. There was some kind of language like that.. we don't want to be another stand-up comedy venue, we don't want 'blank the musical'. So there was this feeling.. I didn't know what it was [and] I don't think the collective knew what it was, but you put that little parameter on it. And then I can't remember what the time.. and then Debbie said yes! [laughter] And so here we are today. But that was very much the founding impetus and then within the same rules of it's got to be free [and] we're not going to charge anybody to come in, we're not going to charge tickets, we're not going to be part of the fringe festival, we're not going to have a fringe number on the building. So there's some rules like that that were happening in the background that were all part of that initial thing and then very quickly, it was like, how can we be good at this? We struggled with the idea of fairness, I guess, or whatever that is, in the sense that people are doing something cool and it's hard to make it but how can you do it for them. So we ended up finding accommodation for performers and stuff like that, and I think that's... Again, going back to the idea of 'you're not going to make money on this, but you're not going to lose money'. I think what we worked out as a collective - sorry this is like a lot of memory [of] hundreds and hundreds of hours of collective meetings between all the volunteers that were working there - I think what we worked out was the same offer that we'd offer a volunteer who was working in the kitchen. You're going to get a free meal, you're going to some of your expenses. If they were coming from whatever, Penicuik, to work, we pay their bus fare. There was that kind of idea of [that] we knew you were volunteering, but we didn't want you to lose money in the endeavour. We wanted you to have good experience and enjoy yourself, a chance to explore and be creative, have a chance to contribute in any way you wanted. So then I think that's how we ended up with the Forest Fringe, and I think the first year, the second year we were kind of getting free places for them to stay and doing some of that stuff. Sorry. I'll apologise after every answer.

SG: No that's perfect! Well I don't get to tell you what you should say or feel but.. so much of that resonates with conversations I have had with Debbie and then with Andy and then later Ira, and I think Debbie maybe emphasized just how much of the values of the early years of Forest Fringe had its roots in the ethos that you just been describing there. And I think, maybe, as Forest Fringe as an organization evolved and then eventually became more independent of the Forest, that lineage went with them [and] became transformed [but] so many of those values were there from the start. I think she was pretty candid: I need to look back at transcript [but I think she was] quite explicit about saying that's where it came from, those are the terms that we worked with and we carried them with us.

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RVW: I can remember it was hard to explain at the time. It was like ‘do we really not charge [for] tickets?’ you know, and I remember we had a big debate about whether or not they could even have a bucket [for collections of donations] and whether or not they should shake the bucket or if they could just stand there. We didn’t let the performers pass the hat or anything. And a lot of this seems dated to me now but we would always say ‘free means guilt free as well’. We wanted people to be able to find it accessible, not even have the implication that there was a barrier to entry for customers. I’ve, definitely been to free fringe shows where the show finishes and you didn’t buy a ticket, but you don’t feel like you can leave there without putting money in the pot.

SG: It’s so interesting to think about that detail of whether there is a bucket that gets passed around or shook at the end of the show, and if there was a broad or common base between what Forest Cafe was doing and what the free fringe or free festival movements were doing. That’s a really interesting tipping point or distinction, about whether there is the implication or obligation, implied or explicitly stated, to throw something into the bucket at the end.

RVW: I don’t know, there must have been a radical roots thing or.. I don’t know how we came to that. Sometimes I think maybe it’s a gen X thing, it’s a really gen x-y kind of thing. I’m not sure but maybe that’s something that will come through with the project.

SG: One of the other things that’s occurring to me, listening to you talk about paying for people’s bus fare and making sure they’re not out of pocket if they take a part.. one dynamic that I think Forest Fringe – so Debbie, Ira and Andy – experienced later on was when Forest Fringe became really successful and had a real cachet and profile to it within the live art and performance sector across the UK. And this is me summarizing maybe some of what they said.. I think they recognized that that the opportunity to volunteer with them had an incredible value attached to it because suddenly you were networking with a lot of really significant, well-placed artists, you’re potentially meeting producers or programmers, just through the dint of being able to volunteer. And I think they were very sensitive – and have spoken publicly about being sensitive to how the people who were most able to volunteer were people who already had existing structural privileges of one kind or another. So it was a lot of white middle class folks who were able to take a few weeks off, and pay their own way to come to Edinburgh. [And they then started taking steps to try and challenge that]. And I think that’s maybe a different dynamic to the volunteers of Forest, which sound as though they were very like locally

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situated. But I don't know if you ever had those conversations about that dynamic where, perversely, the opportunity to volunteer becomes rarefied in some way.

RVW: Like internships and anything like that, absolutely. I think more and more. It wasn't so present in our early days, you know, but I think overall there was an understanding that was happening, that that's possible. And I don't know... I guess, we didn't last long enough to enter into that world. Certainly, like you say, with the Forest in general, it was local folks, it was community folks, it was students. But still, somebody taking four hours meant that was four hours they couldn't be doing another job for pay. So there was an exclusiveness to it in a sense, I mean hopefully not. Hopefully, you want to hope that it was accessible to as many people as possible, but certainly there are probably people that would have liked to have volunteered but just couldn't find the time within their own lives.

SG: And it's a real double bind because it's not as though there's a pure place to stand.

RVW: You know, it stinks. I think certainly the mega venues that are in the fringe should not be operating with volunteer labour, the BBC shouldn't be running on interns that kind of thing. I don't think the forest would have started without it. And I think the Forest Fringe were right to recognize that there's something unfair but how do you overcome that? That would have been a really interesting challenge to take on overall. Forest has kind of lost its physical form [but] that would have been an interesting thing for us to deal with over the coming years. I think it's a lost opportunity that we didn't have that conversation earlier when we were at our peak because I think we would have had a more interesting solution to it. We definitely had people volunteering in the collective who would be considered working class or would consider themselves working class. But they weren't in the majority, you know. It would have been interesting: we would have been open to hearing that conversation and hearing more. I'm sure we would have had some of these conversations, which is why we were 'we should probably pay bus fare'. Even little things like 'do you get your volunteer discount after one week of not volunteering or two weeks of not volunteering?' [Our decision] would have been we should err on the side of two or three weeks.

SG: One of the things that came to mind when we were talking just now was about how these sort of organizations or spaces become sustained or not, in the longer term. How do you how do you keep them going, particularly when there are circumstances which might be completely out of your control when it comes to something like lease of the building not being there for you anymore? I had a really interesting conversation with Jackie Wylie - she was the artistic director of the Arches and now

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National Theatre of Scotland - and she put this idea in my head, or this question about when an organization or an initiative comes to an end, about asking if there an element of negligence or [whether it is] because there is a life cycle to these things, or a lifecycle to everything. And that being a really difficult and thorny question. So I supposed I'm interested in your sense of that idea, of a 'natural life cycle' for arts organizations, particularly grassroots ones, and that question of how do you sustain that thing in the longer term. Because hearing you talking about Forest, it did feel as though the possibility of putting people together in a room and having those long maybe sometimes quite drawn out meetings was very much part of house sustained over its existence.

RVW: I think it's totally possible. I think.. I think. What do I believe? I believe the Forest could have kept going if we had managed to secure that building, if our landlords hadn't disappeared, if we had managed to secure that building after the financial crisis, I think there was still an appetite and a need for it. I think we would have still been there. Edinburgh is a very difficult place for grassroots arts organizations, especially giving the economics of the festival, the limited size of the city [as] by its nature it's all very compressed, the weird up and down of August where suddenly everybody's here and then nobody's here, the fact that the Council seems more interested in building hotels than they are in supporting artistic organizations, possibly because they're spoiled because once a year, everybody comes here, and so they don't really need to care. So I think it's just a tough city for that. But I don't think it's impossible. I think what Forest saw.. I think people get tired of it, people have to leave, and you have to come to terms with that. And I had to leave and all of my great friends had to leave because, at a certain level the Forest wasn't for us. Because you top out, there was no place for me to go other than kitchen manager, building manager – there was going to be nowhere else. And you got two choices, then you can either create an infrastructure, where you're paying people, when you're giving people pensions and you're getting involved in all that, and then you become a different organization. And I think Out of the Blue and the Bongo Club managed to do it and they managed to do it pretty spectacularly and gracefully, but I think there's still plenty people would say that's not necessarily the same organization that was running in New Street. I think we were keen to be.. most of the collective at the time when I was there, so that would have been 2012 maybe.. we were kind of like oh, we're done, we have to step back, we have to let the younger people run it. And they did, you know, they did. They struggled with it and we lost the building [and] they ended up at a different building but some great artists came up through, there some great organizers came up through there. And they managed to get it keep it going until I got back involved in 2019 because there was a shitload of debt. And I was still the director, on paper, so I was going to be liable for it, so I rolled my sleeves up and got back into volunteering and it was great and I actually had this real realization that we were too

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young to do it then, but there was enough time, there was still juice in the thing, and a lot of the older people, with the benefit of experience and new expertise [could] come back and help the forest kind of continue on for another 20 years or so. So I think it was all very possible.. I feel like I'm not answering your question now..

SG: But I think you are addressing the question because it's that..

RVW: Really steer me.

SG: I suppose what I'm hearing, what I'm thinking about is that... one of the dynamics I'm alert to is [how] on the one hand, grassroots volunteer-run organizations need to be set up or want to be set up in a way where there is always the opportunity of new people coming in and new people having ownership over it. And that is sort of held in relationship and sometimes tension with [recognising how] you build up knowledge, you build up skills. And [so] how do you hold that knowledge without bringing a hierarchy in with it that might bring a sort of organizational politics that isn't what you want, and [which] might turn you into a different kind of organization?

RVW: It's a really nice summation Thank you. I mean, there's a few things that we very much didn't do. We never went for core funding, we were really suspicious of grants in general: we occasionally got project-based grants, but we realized early on, even with project-based grants, you had to put money in to get money. Nobody was going to just get paid for your album. So we were kind of like 'why don't we just do it ourselves and cut out all the bull?' We were running a business so we had that luxury, we had the luxury of volunteers, we had the luxury of running a profitable non-profit – there's got to be a better way to say that – so we could invest in things like building a studio. We didn't need to go ask for permission. So that was one thing we did, and what else did we do that I think was important? We didn't even want to become a charity, because we didn't want a board of directors – we felt that.. the collective thought that was a little bit weird to do. [Our thinking was that] if you're in the meeting you make the decisions. If you're a volunteer and you come to the meeting, you make the decisions. I mean, that did have its risks to it, because the people with the most amount of time weren't necessarily the most.. I think you saw this in like the Occupy movement. I remember watching that and thinking oh yeah you can see it fraying because the people who have the most time to go to all the working groups aren't necessarily the people with the experience. Maybe that's not a good analogy.

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SG: But there's a sense of how your ability and your capacity and your interest to take part in all of those meetings doesn't overlap exactly with skills and experience. And that sometimes being at those meetings is absolutely the engine of getting that knowledge and experience but it's not guaranteed, it's a process. Who knows?

RVW: There was a lot of process, a lot of time spent on it, and people with the most amount of time they don't necessarily want to be there. Those with the least amount of time, who are very good at what they do, aren't necessarily people want to be there. So I say that going back to Jackie's comment and is the folding of something negligence, I guess I mean negligence seems a pejorative word but.

SG: I think she offered it in knowledge that it was a really charged term.

RVW: Maybe it's the most precise term but I probably give a little bit more of a benefit of the doubt. If it folds, it's partly [because] people couldn't think around it and that to some degree is negligence. Sometimes it's the circumstances around why something like that happens, but I do think these things do run [their] course. Forest is still a charity in name and we still have a board of directors and we're still doing little things you know, to keep the thing going in case something interesting happens. We're not actively looking for a new space or anything but we're still there.

SG: I'm remembering the conversations that we were having as part of [Live Art in Scotland's] Festival Futures event from now a few months ago and thinking about alternative rhythms of working. And just hearing you talking about Forest as being still there, but maybe slightly dormant or slightly in abeyance, and [I'm] thinking well, maybe that's what a resilient arts organization looks like. That rather than having this thing that goes 'we do the same scale of work, every year' or that we're always moving towards growth, that there is a sort of period of being active and there's a period of stepping back when there are less opportunities. And then it's there to step forward again if there's the need or [should] opportunity arise. And I'm just trying to imagine that as an affirmative model, rather than one where one is feeling like 'this is work we could be doing or should be doing but we're not'.

RVW: Yeah, I will tell you in 10 years, I guess, whether or not.. [laughter] It feels right and based on my experience of leaving for eight years or whatever was taking a backseat and sort of just sort of letting it roll and then coming back in, it does feel like that that's totally fine and I didn't realize that was fine when I was in my early 30s, late 20s. I didn't realize, you could take your hands off the wheel and let something go. That kind of perspective comes with age, so long as the thing is still there and maybe

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we're lucky that we had good caretakers and we managed to get dig our way out of debt and in some shape have survived some difficult things. We haven't done it successfully as, well, maybe, successful isn't the right word but certainly I view the Bongo Club or Out of the Blue [as having worked] amazingly well. From what I saw them from when I first started working in Edinburgh in 2000 to now, it's incredible to see what they've achieved and how they've managed so many so many challenges of being moved around and moved around and moved around. You know, like how many venues did the Bongo Club have? So many in my lifetime. And I find that stuff just crushing. For the volunteers, it was crushing. It was exhausting, exhausting work finding a new place, signing [a lease], all that stuff. I's just such a such a drag.

SG: It's consuming of time and energy and.. I've become so conscious of it during the pandemic, of the cognitive load of contingency planning which is very grand way of saying always trying to hold plan B and plan C in your head. And as I've been having these conversations [with] people who've been involved in collective or group endeavours of different kinds, I feel like that's a huge part of the unmarked labour [of] being involved in holding these projects together over the longer term, holding Plan B, plan C, and plan D..

RVW: Constant catastrophizing which I'm pretty sure isn't healthy to be doing. Always looking around the corner.

SG: And that's maybe what so attractive and so necessary about that continually saying yes, because that's the utopian counterpart to [catastrophizing]. There is always possibility. It's not just about the catastrophe that's on the horizon, but the possibility on the horizon as well.

RVW: I mean, we had some great things. The Forest Fringe in itself was just great. What those volunteers provided for and what having and running an open community space allowed for was really transformative. I think it changed people's lives, it certainly changed mine. And I think it gave people access to artwork and theatre and things that they would never.. I don't think they would have seen it, you know, certainly coming back to that kind of Fringe theatre. There's so many people who were in that building who would not have gone to see any of these shows, but ended up chasing a guy around in a basement trying to catch him to see his face, you know, and who knows what that unleashed on the world. [laughter] Who knows where that thing went. It's just seeing the spaceman going up [a ladder] every day, putting stars up. There are so many people who walked by that guy who'd never would have looked at something like that. It was really special. That building was really special.