

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

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Debbie Pearson (DP): My undergraduate degree was in Film Studies and English Literature at Queen's University in Canada. I applied to the National Theatre School in Montreal after I graduated, specifically for their playwriting programme which only takes two students a year and for their acting programme which takes about ten students a year. I got through to the shortlist for both of those but the playwriting one was particularly exciting because they put me up in a hotel and they only shortlisted six people. It really felt like being on *The Apprentice* or something! [Laughs].

Stephen Greer (SG): [Laughs].

DP: Or The X Factor, but sadly I was not the winner of The X Factor that year. Funnily enough they did three rounds of interviews as part of that playwriting shortlist and in the third round they asked me what I was going to do if I didn't get onto the programme. I'd already met Andy Field because he'd done an exchange and he was in the English Literature department in my last year at Queen's. He was going back to the University of Edinburgh where he went to school and we'd already sort of starting hatching plans and schemes together at that point. So when they asked me what I'd do if I was rejected from the National Theatre School I said, "I'm going to go to Edinburgh and stay with my friend Andy, and you know, we'll try to do something at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival," And they were like, "Oh that sounds like a great idea." I just made it up in that moment [laughs].

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

SG: [Laughs].

DP: I was talking about what I was going to do if I got rejected from this programme that I then did get rejected from and that was what I ended up actually doing. But you know, I think the decision to go to Edinburgh was in part because Andy said I could come and stay on his couch. My first professional theatre job was doing research for Volcano in Toronto. They had shown work at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and won Fringe Firsts and stuff. [Ross Manson, the artistic director] of Volcano, was very keen about me going to Edinburgh. In fact, he said look I think you should go to Europe, knowing the kind of theatre and performance you're interested in, I think you should go to Europe for at least a year if you can afford to because there's much more happening in Europe than there is Canada. He'd gone to Germany when he was younger to do the same thing. He had contacts with Katherine Mendelsohn who was literary manager of the Traverse Theatre [from his company's work in Edinburgh], so when I got there I also made contact with Katherine and with David Overend. At that point David was working as literary assistant at the Traverse Theatre and later on his work was in our first ever programme at Forest Fringe. I also started volunteering at The Forest Café in Edinburgh which was this kind of anarchist café, and I started doing a lot of little productions with the Bedlam because Andy was really involved with the Bedlam at that point. I put on a couple of plays there and I was in a couple of plays there. It [ended up being a kind of gap year] between my Undergraduate and my Masters, where I was just in Edinburgh hanging out with people [laughs] who were the same age as me but who were in their last year because Edinburgh's a longer course than my course in Canada was. I was doing stuff at the Bedlam, at The Forest Café, and I was on the Traverse Young Writers' group, getting to know the Traverse. I did a workshop there with Ben from Grid Iron and I think, Douglas Maxwell. It was an exciting time for me. I was 22 and I knew I wanted to be a playwright, and Andy and I sort of decided together that we were both going to apply to do an MA in London that he'd heard about from a lecture at Queen's. [It was an MA of Text and Performance that] was run by RADA and King's College London at the time. When we were on that MA we kind of announced we were going to start a theatre company together, which we named *Contrived Productions*, really pretentious.

SG: [Laughs].

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

DP: Then through doing some publicity work for Volcano at the Traverse [before the fringe], I met LJ from The Arches.

SG: Yes, yes.

DP: We hung out at this press thing and I pitched to LJ that week to be part of a scratch night that they were doing at The Arches. [The piece was by] Andy and I and our funny *Contrived Productions*, where he was the director and I was the playwright. That dynamic was kind of dissatisfying for both of us. I think both of us were really interested in what the other person was doing, which was maybe a good indication that this very hierarchical [new writing] world of playwrights and directors was not for either of us necessarily. [So The Arches] enjoyed the scratch that we did in Glasgow while we were doing our MA and then they programmed a full version of the piece to go on as part of the Arches Live! festival, maybe a year later.

SG: Okay.

DP: And then [that longer version of the show] got a terrible review [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

DP: From *The Scotsman* and *The Herald*. I think they called it the most, oh gosh, it was something like it was the most self-absorbed thing they'd ever seen, I can't remember! It wasn't self-absorbed, it was like the most pretentious [and bourgeois] thing they'd ever seen. It's really great that I forgot what that insult was because I used to be able to kind of [laughs] say it by heart!

SG: [Laughs].

DP: But anyway, both Joyce and Neil who were later huge champions of Forest Fringe hated [that show we put on] and I don't think they ever put two and two together [laughs]. That show they'd really hated was by Andy and I and they were really supportive of us when we did Forest Fringe. I was doing my Masters part-time because I was an overseas student and my fees were just so expensive that I couldn't afford to do it full-time, I had to sort of split them out over the course of the two years. So I was [still studying a year after Andy

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

finished]. Andy did his full-time in one year with AHRC funding, which actually existed for MA students back then, whereas [laughs] I was going into a huge amount of credit card debt to [live in London]. In the second year, I'd been approached by Ryan Van Winkle, who was chairman of the board for The Forest Café.

SG: Yes.

DP: He basically paid for me to come up to Edinburgh and said, you know we have this amazing space upstairs, we want to have a venue at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, but we don't know people in theatre so would you run it for us? Would you kind of curate it and run it? And I decided that I would do it as my MA [dissertation] project, as my kind of final thesis project in producing.

SG: Okay.

DP: So that was the first year that we did Forest Fringe but Andy was not co-directing with me at that point, I was essentially directing it [with help from] Rebecca Thompson and James Baster. James came through the Forest Café and he was really interested in the technical side of things and he worked with us for the first two years. Rebecca I'd met at RADA and she was helping me keep the venue going and keep it afloat in that first year. Then in the second year they asked me if I would do it again and I very nearly said no because it had been so much work the first year. So the first year was 2007 and the second year was 2008. I told Andy that Forest Café had asked me to [run the fringe venue for them] again and that I was probably going to say no because it was too much work. Then he said what if we just run it together? And I was like, actually that would work. I think it's a job that two people could do. So Andy and I started running it together in 2008. He was working as a press officer at Battersea Art Centre [and a lot savvier than I was when it came to professional connections]. He had met a bunch of [really interesting emerging] artists through BAC and convinced BAC to give us a little bit of money in exchange for some office space that year. They called us a "BAC Supported Venue." Just having BAC's name on Forest Fringe [laughs] even in that way, like as a kind of new enterprise run by people in their early twenties was really, really important because it lent us a little bit of legitimacy with the kinds of artists that we'd really wanted to work with in the first year. That said, we

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

did manage to work with some great artists in the first year, David Overend among them and Kieran Hurley too. Ellen McDougall [curated a bunch of play readings] and now she runs the Gate, so we did have a lot of really great people in the first year. Then in the second year, we were able to get an even wider array of people who were attracted by the fact that BAC gave us their stamp of approval.

SG: Okay. You've already said it was a lot of work in that first year, but those first two years, what do you remember? You and Andy have both talked about the DIY aesthetic of Forest Fringe and I know how much of that is born of necessity as much as the style of work that was being made [laughs].

DP: Well yes, I mean I think that something that doesn't get talked about that often is just how integral The Forest Café was to most of the decisions that we made, decisions that ended up feeling like ideological choices later on. In the first couple of years they were almost imposed upon us by virtue of working with Forest Café. So for example, the fact that we weren't in the Fringe Guide. I mean in that first year I would have liked to be in the Fringe Guide. I was running out on the streets to try get people to come in to see the work, or going round the Café asking everybody if they would be willing to come upstairs. [The first year was also a challenge in terms of attracting] artists. Sometimes in some ways there were too many artists, and in some ways there were too few, which you know frequently happens in the first year of something you're trying to curate, particularly because the range of people I knew were just other recent graduates like me so I was trying to wade my way through that. The thing of not being in the Fringe Guide was because the Forest Café said, "We're anarchists. We don't want a number on our door." They didn't want to be in anything that used advertising like the Fringe Guide. [They also felt strongly ideologically that everything they did had to be] free. It had to be free for the artists and it had to be free to the audience members. So all of those [more subversive elements of how Forest Fringe ran in Edinburgh] came to us through the Forest Café. I think the years we were at the Forest Café were really, kind of like magical years to come to the venue. There was always something exciting happening. A lot of that was because of what the Forest collective was up to. For example, they threw a party almost every night in our space which was good and bad. I mean it was good because people were like, if you come to Forest Fringe after 11pm something really weird is going to be going on there [laughs] and really fun.

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

SG: [Laughs].

DP: It was bad because it meant that we had to clean up those parties in the morning. The amount of cleaning we had to do in the first five years was insane. The cleaning was really disgusting [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

DP: One of the most important jobs at Forest Fringe in the first couple of years was emptying recycling bins [full of beer bottles]. That was like a key job, because otherwise the recycling bins would sit in a hallway next to the box office and they just stank of alcohol and they were full to the brim. Forest Café was a volunteer-run endeavour, so you know, there was no reason anyone [other than us] should empty those bins. We were as legitimate in terms of people to empty the bins as anybody else because nobody was being paid to empty the bins. So yes, I think a lot of the DIY aesthetic kind of came out of that. For me, there was something kind of great and I think for Andy too about you know, emptying bins and cleaning toilets on the same day as you were having conversations with funders or fellow [programmers. It was also interesting trying] to sort out accommodation on the same day as you were trying to sort out the technical elements of someone's show, on the same day as you were doing an interview with *The Scotsman* about the endeavour as a whole. I mean there was such a mix of different kinds of responsibilities [laughs] that all went together. [During the Forest Café years] I was still working in retail so those really unglamorous jobs were not unfamiliar to me, that was the kind of thing you had to do in retail anyway. But I would say that, yes that's where some of it came from. The other thing about the DIY thing is that we were working for free basically. A couple of years we managed to be paid a little bit for the time that we were in Edinburgh, because we were working twelve-to-sixteen-hour days throughout the festival. Forest Café did a great thing for me and Andy [and our associate director Ellie Dubois], and I think also for Ira [Brand who became our co-director in 2011]. We could eat for free at the café so we didn't have to pay for our food the whole time we were up there. That was really helpful. I would stay on my friend Callum's couch. We would all just find a friend who could let us stay on a couch. And actually, in the first couple of years we also managed to do that for artists. We knew enough people who were still in Edinburgh and who were generous enough to let artists stay in their

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

apartments or in their houses. So we were able to put people up without having to raise a huge amount of money. But as things progressed, artists got older and needed to be put up in more decent accommodation. I think legitimately people do [need better places to sleep] as they get older because they have bad backs. I think it's okay to not want to sleep on someone's couch for two weeks. That was when we had to start doing a lot of fundraising for accommodation, and also when we moved to the Drill Hall. We also started paying the Drill Hall to be there, [though we paid them] a very reduced rate. We were paying them a little bit of our donations. The arrangement changed. It all became more grown up, more professional, which you know, has upsides and downsides basically. [Although Andy, Ira and I still weren't being paid. All of the artists and staff did still get a free lunch though at the Drill Hall].

SG: Okay, it's interesting hearing you talk about how the elements of what would become the ethos of Forest Fringe were related to the Forest Café, their outlook, what they wanted. When you did start sort of making conscious decisions of your own? I'm just thinking here about the choices about the kind of work that was shown during Forest Fringe. In particular, and again I think you and Andy have talked explicitly about this, there was room being made for shows which couldn't be included in another venue's programming. How conscious was that or was that another thing which sort of you named after the fact of realising oh okay, no we do make space for durational work, for example?

DP: It was the kind of work that Andy and I were interested in and to give Forest Café some credit too, that was also the kind of work that they were interested in. I remember there was an early email where we put together a call-out for artists to get in touch with Forest Fringe in the first year. I think Ryan [Van Winkle] added a sentence like, "We want artists who are at the edge of their art," or something like that into the brief because he didn't want us putting on stand-up comedy. We did actually work with a couple of stand-up comedians in the first year, but they were like Reggie Watts and Doktor CocaColaMcDonalds, more experimental comedians. If you look at Ryan's work as poet, he's really interested in experimental work. Andy and I are both interested in experimental work. So in that sense, I think we all artistically saw eye to eye. In the first year for example, we had an adaptation of a Thomas Hardy [short story], like *The Withered Hand*, that was very competent but very conventional and straightforward. It was only on for a couple of days

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

and I think, and even though we were like that was nice, it was good, it wasn't the work we were proudest of. In that first year we also had a piece [by Charles Ryder], a man who'd been to prison who had devised his own show about [his experience there]. It was much more experimental and a little rough around the edges, but it felt much more in line with the ethos of the kind of work that we were all interested in making space for in Edinburgh. So yes, I think in a way, it's sort of like asking someone who really loves rock and roll why they didn't put on classical [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

DP: We don't like classical! You know what I mean? We all like rock and roll, so that was what we put on.

SG: Okay, yes that makes sense. So if I've got the dates right, 2011 is the last year in Bristo Hall and then 2012 is the year where you do the first version of Paper Stages and then 2013 is when you're at the Blue Drill Hall. And you kind of suggested, and correct me if I've got it wrong, that there was a little bit of a step change in terms of professionalisation?

DP: Yes.

SG: But I guess I'm thinking about the artists who were involved, some of whom had been involved over a number of years at Bristo Hall, that there is a certain sense of a core group of artists and maybe a core group of friends as well. Is that fair?

DP: Oh yes absolutely. And part of that was that, in that interim we also had on our first micro-festival at The Arches in Glasgow in 2010. [Our then associate director Ellie Dubois curated and organised a lot of that event]. That was part of an Arts Council funded project, which was the first time that we were able to get paid by funding for anything we did with Forest Fringe. We did a series of micro-festivals, one in Glasgow at The Arches, one at the Bristol Old Vic, one at Battersea Art Centre and one with National Theatre Wales. Through those micro-festivals, I think we also started to have sense of like oh these are the artists that we work with outside of the Fringe and this is how it works outside of the context of the Edinburgh Festival. This is what Forest Fringe is without the Edinburgh Festival. So I think that community was already being built. At the Battersea Art Centre microfestival for

example, Tania El Khoury[came along and saw a lot of work intimate autobiographical shows, including one I'd made. We had already agreed to work with her but she was going to show a piece she had made during her MA. When she saw the microfestival, she] made some changes and created *Fuzzy* because she kind of got inspired by [what was possible in our context]. Then I lived with Tania and we became really good friends and we still are to this day. So these kinds of friendships were starting to take place as a result of some of the work that we were doing outside of the Fringe Festival as well. Then in 2012 we had our first international micro-festival which was at Culturgest in Portugal. That was where Andy and I came up with the model of how to programme international micro-festivals. We decided that it would be good to be able to bring some local artists in amongst the artists who we were bringing from the UK, some local Portuguese artists [curated by Francisco] to show some work-in-progress pieces so that basically [together we could] take over a building and use their resources but also use unusual spaces within the building. I have really nice photographs from the first time that I visited Culturgest when we were planning that micro-festival. I have all these pictures of the bathroom stalls for example, like maybe we'll put something on in the bathroom!

SG: [Laughs].

DP: [Laughs]. So, yes when we went to Culturgest, I think about it all the time because it was such a lovely first international touring experience for a lot of us. Kieran Hurley was there, he and Gary McNair and Nic Green all had video pieces on as part of the programme. Tania El Khoury was there, I was there, Search Party were there, Action Hero were there. I think Brian Lobel just came along even though we hadn't programmed his work, he just wanted to be there and I'm pretty sure Ryan Van Winkle also just came along even though we hadn't programmed his work [laughs] because he wanted to be there. Bryony Kimmings was there. It was really exciting to do that first bit of travelling together, and I think it's actually through that international micro-festival travelling that we all started to feel like there is a kind of community here, that sits outside of August, which was really nice. [And that community is from all over the UK], it's not just a London-based community. It's people from all over the UK who have a sort of, a certain aesthetic. I mean also in the way that Forest Fringe ran, artists bunking in the same room together, artists having to volunteer their time at the box office, artists having to take out the garbage together or do the

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

recycling together. I definitely did the recycling with some artists who are now really lauded [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

DP: I think that also creates an atmosphere of friendship too which was really nice.

SG: I'm interested in whether, as Forest Fringe became more well-known and I guess as promoters, curators and programmers were becoming a larger or more active part of your audience, the dynamic changed at all? I guess I'm just thinking here that I can imagine the potential of pressure to feel like you've got to be the development agency at Edinburgh for this kind of work, even if you have no interest in doing that, or the resources to do that.

DP: I want to answer that question in two parts. So one part is that, when you were telling me about the project earlier, it gave me a flashback to something I hadn't thought about in a long time that I wanted to relay, like a little anecdote. [It happened when] RSAMD were working with, what was the name of the live art festival that used to happen in Glasgow?

SG: The National Review of Live Art?

DP: Yes, with the National Review of Live Art.

SG: Yes.

DP: I was invited to come by New Work Network who also, I don't think exist anymore.

SG: No.

DP: I was invited to come and speak on a panel as Forest Fringe about experimental work in Scotland basically. I think that was 2009. It was actually how I discovered Gary McNair's work and *Glass* and a lot of really interesting Scottish artists who we went on to work with. [Ellie Dubois was living and studying there at the time and made a lot of those connections for us]. [A lot of Glasgow-based artists were] introduced to me at that event which was really great. But I remember on that panel saying something about how difficult it was to be in a situation where we were having to work so hard and not being funded at all. Forest Fringe was starting to feel like a full-time job that we were doing for free and it just was a

lot. And I remember someone from Creative Scotland afterwards speaking to me and saying something like there's just no way you will ever get any public funding to do this [laughs] basically. I was really upset by that, by her saying that, because we hadn't had that many conversations with funding bodies at that point and it felt like, oh god okay so we're either going to be exploited to do this or we'll have to stop doing it. I think that a lot of what she was saying was to do with the fact that at that time the Edinburgh Festival was seen so completely through the eyes of audiences and the idea was there's a lot for audiences to see so it doesn't really matter whether or not we ever put any money, like any publicly funded money, into this platform. Whereas for us at Forest Fringe we always saw the Edinburgh Festival as an opportunity for artists, particularly emerging artists, to be able to develop work and to kind of advance their careers. You know, and to be able to put their work in a context where it would get reviews and would get seen by programmers. [This was where artists] would start new relationships with commissioners etcetera, and we thought that was a really valuable and important opportunity. I remember at the time, that element of the Edinburgh Festival was not seen as fundable by funding bodies, the Arts Council England included, Creative Scotland included. There wasn't this idea that this was a really important thing, that it was worth funding a different group of artists than the artists who could afford to lose ten thousand pounds, to be able to go and have their work on that international platform, on that stage. So I just wanted to say that, because I remember how upsetting I found that. It felt like a ship turning around, like a cruise ship turning around. It took such a long time and I feel like, bit by bit, we witnessed the mentality around the Edinburgh Fringe Festival changing and people starting to realise, actually this is an opportunity for artists and that also needs to be funded and that's a different proposition from how much is there for audiences to see. So with that said, I remember in the first couple of years I had the idea of wanting to write, especially once we had a bunch of programmers who started to come, I think I even did write to them asking if they could give us a little bit of their budget so that we could keep going because they were programming work they had seen at Forest Fringe and at that point we were programming a lot of works-in-progress. Sometimes it was work that wasn't finished and that was sort of part of what we could offer artists. They didn't have to bring a finished, polished piece of work, but programmers might see it and see potential in whatever they were working on. We met with a lot of resistance around that [idea of basically asking NPOs to share funding with us].

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

But then much later, once we were already quite established at the festival, in 2013 or 2014, the Deaf and Hearing Ensemble approached us and talked to us about the fact that there were no provisions made for BSL speakers at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, or really in theatre in general. When Andy and I heard that, it was Lucy Ellinson and Jennifer [Bates who we met with]. I just remember it seemed so clear that to say no to them would make us such thundering assholes [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

DP: We needed to say yes! We needed to find a way that we could say yes, we're going to put on some work that is accessible to BSL audiences and we're also going to programme some work that is by BSL artists and is accessible for them as well. So that was when we were already part of Live Art UK and we were able to make a pretty compelling case to all of the organisations in Live Art UK to each give us a little bit of money towards an accessibility day at Forest Fringe. And they did that and that happened every year until we stopped doing the festival in Edinburgh. [But the accessibility day] was a different proposition and I'm very happy that happened. [I will always remember years earlier when we were struggling to put enough money together to put on the venue and] I thought, maybe we can get this budget that we need by asking these institutions to just cough up a little bit of cash [laughs].

SG: Yes.

DP: And the answer to that was no, you know. Although when I think about it, the amount of money that they could've given us would've been like the amount of money if we charged them tickets they might have spent! You know, I wish they'd been more open to that I suppose, but everything works in the way it works for a reason.

SG: But that's such an interesting thought. The dynamic of going, you know, look we're doing this development work for you, you are benefiting if not profiting from this development work. Wouldn't it be cool if you could share in the some of the cost of taking this risk?

DP: Yes.

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

SG: There is an essay that you wrote, I think it turned up in a published theatre collection later on. It was in 2015 maybe, the Canadian Theatre Journal? I can't remember what it's called, it might be called the Canadian Theatre Journal, I don't think it is! [laughs].

DP: Yes I think it is called the Canadian Theatre Journal!

SG: [Laughs].

DP: Canadian Theatre Research Journal maybe? I think it's CTR. [Canadian Theatre Review].

SG: It's an essay where you talk about curation as a form of artistic practice, and so I'm just looking at the date of it, 2015, so I'm guessing it was written 2014/2015 in the middle of the Edinburgh Festival period of Forest Fringe's existence, and there's a few really striking lines in that. I just want to read one of them back to you, just because it still strikes me. You wrote: 'we want Forest Fringe to be a home for artists, but as much as we love to share, Andy, Ira and I permanently occupy the home. We are hospitable to our temporary flatmates but at the end of the day, the lease is in our name.' It's striking because it's just really candid [in] this recognition that even within this friendship group, and this collaborative enterprise, there is if not a hierarchy, there is still a kind of centre where you, Andy and Ira are making decisions about the programme, about the direction of organisation.

DP: Yes that's absolutely true. It's nice to hear that back [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

DP: I wanted to be really candid about that, because I felt like, well because you know, we'd have artists we'd work with again and again and they would be hurt that they weren't invited to participate in one particular microfestival. The microfestivals were you know, interesting, because the work in Edinburgh was free, everybody knew it was free and you had to volunteer. Then we started doing this work outside of Edinburgh and we always had a budget, it wasn't like it was extremely well paid but it was paid work which is different. Being invited to do something that's paid is different. Although arguably, being invited to perform in Edinburgh, especially near the end became incredibly competitive. The last couple of years at Forest Fringe, it was so hard to get into our programme. Even if you were

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

someone who had worked with us many, many times before. I mean we rejected some people who we adored and worked with all the time because there just wasn't space in the programme. But yes, I think in a way almost because of those friendships I wanted to be frank about the fact that as much as we say, oh this is artist-led, and you know we're like a collective and stuff, we also had to be clear about who the big decision-makers in that collective were, which was three artists, not ten artists or twelve artists. Although we do have a group of Forest Fringe core artists, who we would consult with about major decisions, and we've always tried to bring in those core artists when working on different major decisions. There were probably about I don't know, six to ten artists, kind of depending, but even that word 'depending' shows you that it fluctuates, you know? So yes, I thought it was important to not pretend that the organisation functioned in a way that it didn't, because in truth there is, as you say there was a centre, there is a centre, and there still is a centre in terms of the decisions that get made, and the work that we end up doing. If one of us really loves someone's work for example, and another one of us doesn't, there's an impact on whether or not we're going to show that work. I can't say whether or not that means yes we definitely would or yes we definitely wouldn't because it's gone both ways in the past. But yes, we're also three individuals who disagree sometimes.

SG: Yes.

DP: Making decisions amongst three people is hard enough and impressive enough I think to be frank [laughs]. We're not pretending that fifteen of us are making these decisions together because that's just not true. It's sometimes true but it's not always true.

SG: Yes, and better to be frank than pretend there is some kind of holistic collective decision-making process that doesn't exist, I guess.

DP: Yes exactly. Three people's already a lot of people.

SG: Yes, true.

DP: To make decisions with, and to try to kind of have a sort of equitable distribution of agency and resources amongst. I think it's important to be honest about it.

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

SG: So when it came to ending Forest Fringe at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, my understanding is that this was informed by quite a few different sort of decisions or realisations. I guess part of it is to do with the amount of labour it was [demanding]. You know, even if it was also creating paid work, it was still I think, really dependent on free labour. And also, talking to you, having had the chance to chat to Andy and also to Ira, and also having followed and read about the Forest Fringe and been at the Forest Fringe over the years, that there was a sense of some of the problematic politics of the Festival which the Forest Fringe had intervened in, it was also [still] embedded in them in ways that individually as an organisation you couldn't resist or you couldn't deny.

DP: Yes I think you can say in Forest Fringe versus Edinburgh Fringe Festival sometimes we won, but I guess ultimately the Edinburgh Fringe won [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

DP: Sometimes we did win! And for a while we definitely did at least make an aesthetic impact. For us what would be [disappointing] about some elements of a venue like Summerhall for example, is that it was so clearly influenced by Forest Fringe aesthetically, but in terms of its working models or the politics of how it works, it is completely not influenced by Forest Fringe and I think that is a little depressing. Although at least it's a year-round venue and the year-round work is a great element of the fact that [Summerhall exists] because Edinburgh needs that.

SG: And then there was, I guess and the end of the Forest Fringe's Edinburgh years there was the kind of passing of the torch, of passing on a little bit of funding and kind of passing, literally, figuratively, passing the torch onto a few other kind of artist-led organisations to programme stuff during the festival? So I guess that would've been 2018 that happened?

DP: 2017 was the year that we had the Pass the Torch fundraiser. In 2017 I curated a venue at the Cameo Cinema called Cameo Live, which we were only able to keep going for one year because the brilliant and creative manager, Corin Christopher, who put all of the effort into making it work stopped working for Picturehouse Cinemas the next year. [We also had lots of qualms about working with Picturehouse at all because of their ongoing labour disputes, but they were letting us use the space for free. Basically it's a discussion for

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

another time). So we did the fundraiser [which was programmed at the Cameo as part of] Cameo Live, and then in 2018 it was The DICE Festival which was run by people who had volunteered in really significant capacities with Forest Fringe in past years, and also, I think they're called CLAY now, the artist lead space.

SG: Yes the Centre for Live Art in Yorkshire? I can't remember what it stands for, but CLAY, yes.

DP: Yes, yes. So that was who got the money to put on some events. We did try in earnest to pass that torch and I think, you know I went along to DICE and it was pretty great, it was pretty cool, and it was on at Summerhall.

SG: I'm realising through all of this, that you're also making your own shows, you're making your own work?

DP: Yes.

SG: And so I guess there's *The Future Show* which is what, 2014? Is that when that starts being shown?

DP: Yes, 2013–2016 was when I toured it.

SG: Okay, and then *History History History* follows in 2016.

DP: Yes.

SG: Was that part of Cameo Live actually? Was that programmed?

DP: Yes, [there was a one-off performance of it at the Cameo as part of Forest Fringe in 2016, which was our last year in Edinburgh. Then there was a five-day run in 2017 at the Cameo] as part of Cameo Live. *History History History* toured between 2016–2019 thereabouts, but I started developing it in 2012, so I also showed works-in-progress of it at Forest Fringe in 2014 and 2015. I also put on] *Like You Were Before* as part of Forest Fringe in 2010, which won a Herald Angel Award and it was nominated for a Total Theatre Award, and that was like the first kind of long run I did at Forest Fringe. That was on in a video store that I used to work in called Alphabet Video in Marchmont. I guess that toured for a couple

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

of years, but only nationally. It did eventually tour internationally to Austin and Lisbon but other than it mostly stuck closer to home. [I also did two performances of *The Future Show* in Edinburgh in 2013. Nearly every year that we did Forest Fringe in Edinburgh I always showed something, whether that was a work-in-progress or a finished piece.

In 2007 I showed a couple of plays that never went anywhere and whose titles I don't even really remember. In 2008 I showed *Music's Been Ruined by Dating*, an intimate performance that was then also shown at BAC and Central School of Speech and Drama. In 2009 I showed *Something Very Quiet Is About To Happen*, an interactive installation that was on at Armchair Books in the Grassmarket that went on to be shown at BAC and Morningside Library. In 2010 I showed *Like You Were Before* which ran for the entirety of our festival. In 2011 I didn't show anything because Andy had found my run of LYWB so stressful. In 2012 we did *Paper Stages*. In 2013 I showed *The Future Show*. In 2014 I showed a work in progress of *History History History* called *First the Cinema, Then the Revolution*. In 2015 I showed a work in progress of HHH and in 2016 I showed the finished piece].

SG: We've sort of said in passing that The Forest Fringe is three artists, but it's not just three artists, it's three working artists.

DP: Yes [laughs].

SG: I suppose I'm interested in that balance of yourself as curator and artistic director and that work of creating and running shows. Maybe it doesn't make sense to talk about them as different roles, maybe they're just different extensions of you as an artist full stop, but I'm also wondering if there were moments where those roles are in tension with each other?

DP: Of course, of course. I mean I remember when we did a micro-festival in Austin and I was doing *The Future Show* as part of that micro-festival, and *The Future Show* was an incredibly labour-intensive show to do. So it wasn't really a show that I could do whilst also being a kind of Forest Fringe producer I guess, and so we hired Dan Coup to come and work as a producer for us during that time because we knew that that was going to happen and Andy and Ira weren't coming to Austin. But I can remember feeling very torn and a lot of

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

guilt about not being able to be more present for the other artists during that festival, because of the nature of doing my own show, it was a big task. I think Andy did this less so, but Ira and I realised that it was very important that we be able to show our own work as part of Forest Fringe at the Edinburgh Festival because of the fact that that was the opportunity a lot of people had to see the work, and in part, especially in the later years that was one of the concrete benefits of doing Forest Fringe for us, other than just a warm fuzzy feeling hoping that you're supporting and helping other artists, you know. I would say, with the proliferation of things like Summerhall and actually different kinds of opportunities at the Edinburgh Festival, I think near the end there was also the question of like, are we really the only options for these artists that we're programming in Edinburgh? I don't think we are anymore. I think there are other options for them. Yes, I think for us it was clear that we needed to put our own work on as part of the programme, and that could be really tricky because Forest Fringe during Edinburgh was a hungry beast and it wanted our attention! [Laughs] And if one of us wasn't able to be very present for a day or two because they were doing a show, then the other two members would feel it and would have a more stressful time as a result. There could be tension around that too absolutely.

SG: Yes. It feels like the stakes of that are even more heightened around a show like *The Future Show*, where so much of it is dependent on you making time to be present and write about your own experience [laughs].

DP: Yes, I mean *The Future Show* was a really difficult thing to do as part of any sort of Forest Fringe event, but I'm so grateful [that I was able to do it]. I don't know if Ira would say this, but I think Andy would probably say this too although who knows, certainly in my case it's completely impossible for me to imagine making the kind of work that I've made as an artist in the way that I've made it without Forest Fringe. The first more experimental show I did [was at Forest Fringe], because I was trying to do playwriting, more straight playwriting for a long time. I was on the Royal Court Young Writers' programme, and in Canada this thing called the Tarragon Playwrights Unit. I wrote a lot of plays that would just languish around in development and then not get put on while I was definitely interested in this more kind of solo practice, live art, DIY stuff. My plays were also a little bit too weird at that time. I think that was one of the reasons they would sit around development for a long time. So I realised that this was the kind of work I wanted to make, I just hadn't really

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

known it was possible yet. I remember the first live art piece I did was called *Music's Been Ruined by Dating* and it was an intimate piece for four audience members at a time. That was in 2008 and I had just seen a lot of work that really inspired me at Forest Fringe. Lucy Ellinson had done this piece for five audience members. It was an intimate piece and I'd been really moved by it and thought it was really incredible. I remember talking to Ed Rapley about my concept for how to do this show [about music and break ups] which had seemed beforehand like a really insane idea, and he just totally validated it and talked it through with me while we were working box office or something at Forest Fringe [laughs]. I put that show on for a few people on the last night of the festival, as part of a larger event that we were doing at the Forest Café, and some BAC producers came to see it and really loved it and then I started getting work with BAC. That kind of was what finally broke me through to being able to be a paid artist, like a professional artist. So Forest Fringe played a really important part both in terms of the practicalities of becoming that thing and also the aesthetic choices, the kind of inspiration that was available, and just being aware of what you could do in theatre, what you could call theatre, because that wasn't the kind of work I was seeing in Canada. So yes, Forest Fringe in Edinburgh was such a key element of that journey for me and I think that's why a lot of those friendships with other artists – because I think you mentioned in your email, who are your people? [laughs].

SG: Yes, yes, I said something like, who are your peers or your fellow travellers?

DP: Yes, who are my fellow travellers. And you know, I would say I'm close friends professionally and personally with Tania El Khory, Brian Lobel and Action Hero. They have definitely been fellow travellers and I've worked as a dramaturg for all of them. They've all done work for me and I think that through that, through these years of all working side by side, and they are also all core Forest Fringe artists, we've influenced each other, we've collaborated. They've been such important parts of me making the kind of work that I do, I'd say. And just like I've had the artists who have been important, like my peers and stuff, I think Forest Fringe also had organisations that were our peers, you know? That we sort of kind of came up next to, and have important conversations with relationships with. I would say that one of the big ones was The Arches. The end of The Arches was really hard. I think everybody took it really hard. The Arches was where Andy and I did our first ever you know [laughs] semi-professional theatre anything! And it was also a conversation with Jackie

Live Art in Scotland: Deborah Pearson

Wylie in the first year that I was doing Forest Fringe. I think I said something to her like, oh I just really don't know how to be a producer, I don't know if I should actually do this. I remember she said something like, you know what, nobody knows how to be a producer, ninety-nine per cent of it is just blagging it. Just do it. So she was really encouraging. I'd say that The Arches was pretty key. LJ and Jackie in those early days definitely helped us a lot. Oh and I should also say that we had a lot of championing from Lyn Gardner, especially in 2008. She basically made *The Guardian* our free PR page, it's ridiculous [laughs] and that helped a lot. She came along in 2007 to see something that Andy had made and wrote a little blog post about it. So Lyn was also a big part of what allowed us to do Forest Fringe. [Not to mention that her daughter Ellie Dubois was one of the key curatorial and practical forces behind Forest Fringe for three years, from 2009 to 2011]. Forest Fringe without Lyn Gardner, I don't know if we would've made it to 2009. She really made such a huge difference in terms of people finding out about that the venue, taking the venue seriously, taking what we were doing seriously because we were, you know, we were only twenty-four then and really figuring it all out. [She also really helped us to take ourselves seriously. And she was also open to her extremely talented daughter Ellie, who was only 17 when she started with us, working with us between 2009 and 2011 as our associate director to keep the venue going and make it more cooperative, more open and altogether better.

Remembering all the generosity from so many different venues and artists and shops and practitioners and press and writers and Edinburgh locals – that's what makes me really nostalgic for the days of our Edinburgh venue. We were embedded in this incredibly commercial festival, running on a generosity of spirit from all these different individuals that could really build its own momentum. When that was happening it was like everyone could feel it and would take part in it for a little while. And those moments would give way to a feeling which was probably one of the most energising and life affirming feelings I've ever had. In those moments it really felt like we could change the world. Or like for as long as those moments lasted, the world was changing, and had changed].