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# STRUCTURES OF U.S. FRINGES: AN OUTLINE FOR ARCHIVISTS

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To archive and preserve materials connected to the most widespread and fastest-growing form of arts festival in the world, it is important to understand the breadth of the fringe festival phenomenon. The very concept of “Fringe Festival” is contested—ranging from the organic growth of performance venues “round the Fringe” of the original Edinburgh Festival to, decades later, the publication of the Canadian Association of Fringe Festival’s “Fringe Ideals.” This conceptual diversity is reflected in how Fringe Festivals are organized—with some being highly centralized and others operating with a decentralized structure of independent venues. This conceptual and managerial diversity has proven to be a strength. Fringes have been the fastest-growing and most widespread form of festival for decades now, precisely because of their adaptability. But a proper understanding of both the artistic endeavors at these festivals and how the festivals are understood and operated will allow that flexible growth to continue.

**Keywords:** fringe festivals, Edinburgh Fringe, Edmonton Fringe, Philly Fringe

**T**HIS year, 2016, marks the 25th anniversary of the Orlando International Fringe Festival, the oldest operating fringe festival in the United States. Other important fringe anniversaries this year include the 20th anniversary of the New York Fringe, the 35th anniversary of the Edmonton Fringe, and—next summer—the 70th anniversary of the original fringe, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Last summer marked a big Fringe anniversary for myself, as I attended my 20th Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It has been about 20 years since I began researching fringe festivals, and I am so excited that we are having this discussion today because I have been concerned about the lack of recordkeeping and archiving of fringe festivals. These festivals are amazing, and like many of you in this room, I have dedicated a

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large portion of my life to helping them flourish, but the scholar in me knows how ephemeral they are and how fast we are losing information.

Maintaining records connected to the Edinburgh Fringe is particularly vital. Because we have arrived at its 70th anniversary, we have—naturally—lost many long-time festivalgoers. Thank God, we have not lost artist and producer Richard Demarco, CBE, yet. Professor Demarco has attended every Edinburgh Festival Fringe since its first year in 1947. He has a massive archive of his interactions with the festival for the last 70 years, but it can be a struggle to get him to explain and label what it is he has preserved. For example, Richard has taken thousands and thousands of pictures of people, performers, and visual artists—but only he knows who all of them are. The other challenge is finding a permanent and safe home for his massive archive; it is, as of now, being kept in a donated space, which is not entirely safe. Just this year, for example, a broken pipe ruined several boxes; a few years ago, several pieces of art were stolen from the collection. If this could happen to such an important fringe archive, we should all be concerned about preserving fringe materials everywhere. All this to say, I am very enthusiastic about the important task of archiving the memory of fringe festivals.

My interest in fringe festivals has come out of a particular fascination with the managerial structures of both the original Edinburgh Fringe and the fringes that followed. This, in turn, has interested me in the institutional histories of both the first fringe and fringes worldwide. To really be able to understand and appreciate what we are hoping to archive or preserve, I want to start at the beginning and give a brief overview of the history of the Edinburgh Fringe and an outline of its managerial structures. Then I want to turn our attention to a brief overview of the formation of especially significant Canadian and U.S. fringes to show how the very definition of a “fringe festival” has evolved alongside these managerial structures. I will demonstrate, briefly, that at first the word “fringe” was a locational designation. Then, in Canada, it came to signify a festival that is open and accessible to all artists. More recently, and especially in the United States, the definition has stretched again to designate a festival that prioritizes cutting-edge work. The evolution of the understanding of the term “fringe” is inseparable from the historical evolution of fringe festivals, first in Edinburgh, then in Canada, and then in the United States.

## The Edinburgh Fringe—Brief History

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is the largest arts festival in the world. For three and a half weeks each August, the Fringe takes over downtown Edinburgh.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The history section of this paper is a revised and significantly condensed version of a portion of Xela Batchelder, *The World's Largest Arts Festival, The Edinburgh Festival Fringe: Mechanics, Myth and Management* (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, 2006).

Every available space is converted into a theatre, crowds of actors mob Princes Street and the Royal Mile, and the atmosphere is electrifying. Fringe 2016 featured over 50,266 performances of 3,269 shows in over 294 different venues; an estimated 28,000 performers took to the stage, and a whopping total of 2.47 million tickets were sold in 2016.<sup>2</sup>

The Fringe grew up alongside the Edinburgh International Festival, which was launched in August 1947 as “an initiative to re-unite post-war Europe through arts and culture.”<sup>3</sup> The year the official Festival began, eight companies, which could not be accommodated at the main Festival, showed up uninvited. The organizers of those companies reasoned that a suitable audience would already be in Edinburgh for the Festival, and so they took the chance of finding their own audiences and press coverage. They received no assistance whatsoever from the official Festival. They had no central box office and no support in finding performance spaces. These early companies used buildings such as the YMCA and turned them into unconventional theatre spaces. The first year the press referred to these “un-official” performers as “Festival Adjuncts.” During the second year, dramatist Robert Kemp first used the term “fringe” in an article in the *Evening News*: “Round the fringe of official Festival drama there seems to be more private enterprise than before. . . .”<sup>4</sup> Thereafter, the adjuncts became known collectively as the Fringe.

The Edinburgh Fringe inspires the theatre community beyond Scotland. Recent decades have seen the spread in numbers and influence of other arts festivals calling themselves “fringes.” These non-Edinburgh fringes often little resemble their namesakes—this is especially the case in North America. Many fringe festivals have scarcely more in common with the original than the use of the word “fringe,” yet all look in some way to Edinburgh as their model or inspiration.

## Edinburgh—How it Works

To understand the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, one must understand the basics of its structure. First, no one is invited to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe by a

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2. After 50,266 performances of 3,269 shows, the 2016 Edinburgh Fringe Festival Draws to a Close, August 29, 2016. Accessed September 2016. <https://www.edfringe.com/learn/news-and-events/edinburgh-festival-fringe-draws-to-a-close>; Numbers Soar as Fringe Records Big Tickets Increase, September 7, 2016. Accessed September, 2016. <https://www.edinburghfestivalcity.com/news/480-numbers-soar-as-fringe-records-big-tickets-increase>.

3. Edinburgh Fringe Society, *How to Do A Show On The Fringe: The Definitive Handbook* (Edinburgh: The Festival Fringe Society Ltd., 1997), 5.

4. Alice Bain, *The Fringe: 50 Years of The Greatest Show on Earth* (Edinburgh: The Scotsman Publications, 1996), 4.

central authority.<sup>5</sup> No governing body selects shows, and no committee picks a theme or highlights a particular playwright, style, or subject. If a production is to be put on at the fringe, producers, companies, or performers must choose to do this themselves. Because no central authority invites productions to the Fringe, there is no authority to offer financial help for companies. Companies must themselves raise the considerable costs required to perform. Finally, performance space is either found by the performers themselves or provided by entrepreneurial venue managers. Shows can be found either in unconventional theatre spaces (such as in a pool or on an island) or in temporary theatres often built solely for the 25-day run of the festival in hotels, schools, meeting rooms, churches, or any similar such accommodation.

## The Fringe Society

The only overarching structure of the Fringe—the only coordinating body—is The Fringe Society. The Fringe Society did not come onto the scene until 1958, over 10 years after the first Fringe performances. The Fringe Society is not a central governing body of the Fringe but rather a hub providing essential services in exchange for fees to participating fringe companies and the entrepreneurial venues that host performances.

The Society provides services such as publishing one gigantic Fringe Program, along with the corresponding website, and handling all the press and marketing for the festival as a whole (but not for individual shows). They also run a central box office that sells tickets to all the shows in central locations, as well as running promotions such as the Half-Price Hut. The Society runs Fringe Central, a performers' office away from home. Fringe Central also serves as the location for a series of professional development and networking events run by the Society. In recent years, the Society has added an entire office dedicated to the Arts Industry. These services may help connect performers with agents or shows with a producer who is looking for new shows to take on the road.

The success of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe has inspired imitators throughout the world. As of 2016, there are over 205 different fringe festivals internationally (the number varies based on how the person counting defines “fringe festival”), and new fringe festivals are added to this list every year. In 2006, there were less than 90 fringe festivals. This phenomenon doubled in size in just one decade.<sup>6</sup>

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5. The section of this paper describing how the Edinburgh Festival Fringe works is a revised and significantly condensed version of a section of Batchelder, *The World's Largest Arts Festival*.

6. The author was keeping track of these numbers through 2010, but since then has used numbers generated by World Fringe. [www.worldfringe.com](http://www.worldfringe.com)

To be sure, this is a worldwide phenomenon, and non-Edinburgh Fringes outside the United States have grown to real prominence and importance. The Adelaide Fringe Festival, founded in 1960, is now the largest arts festival in the Southern Hemisphere; the Brighton Fringe, which started in 1966, now claims to be the largest arts festival in England and one of the largest in the world.<sup>7</sup> Our focus today will be on U.S. fringe festivals. However, to understand the history of U.S. fringe festivals, we need to look to Canada first. In particular, we need to go back to 1982 and look at the founding of the Edmonton Fringe.

The story begins in Edmonton with a 50% funding cut to the organization that had usually produced “Shakespeare in the Park”; this dramatic reduction forced them to cancel their programming for the summer of 1982.<sup>8</sup> Brian Paisley, then artistic director of a small theatre company performing for young audiences, was asked to conceive of a program that could operate on half the former “Shakespeare in the Park” budget. Paisley had attended the Edinburgh Festival Fringe several years earlier, and he saw an opportunity to bring it to Edmonton—but he wanted to add a unique Canadian flavor. Paisley’s version of the fringe was not meant to be an exact copy of the Edinburgh Fringe. There was no parent festival like the Edinburgh International Festival, and because the grant stipulated that the money had to be spent that very summer, Paisley could not wait for artists to spontaneously arrive and start performing alongside a larger, established event. He also felt he could not invite artists to come without setting everything up for them. Paisley was flexible: he inverted the decentralized and entrepreneurial structure of the Edinburgh Festival and used part of his initial \$50,000 grant to hire venues, lighting, and technicians.<sup>9</sup> He also printed and distributed programs. At the same time, he decided not to do one of the primary things the Edinburgh Fringe Society was founded to do, which is to provide a centralized organization to sell tickets. The companies would sell their own tickets at the door and keep all the revenue.<sup>10</sup>

The Edmonton Fringe was influential not only because it was the first on the North American continent but also because they created a “fringe” that was not attached to any official festival. Whereas the term originally was related almost entirely to the *location* of a group of productions around a parent

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7. Edinburgh Fringe in 2016: 3,269 events. Adelaide Fringe in 2016: 1,100 events. Brighton Fringe in 2016: 932 shows. From their respective websites.

8. The history of Canadian Fringes section of this paper is revised and condensed from a section of Batchelder, *The World’s Largest Arts Festival, The Edinburgh Festival Fringe*. That work itself owes a great debt to Erika Paterson, *Ordering Chaos: The Canadian Fringe Theatre Phenomenon* (PhD diss., University of Victoria, British Columbia, 1997). Also, to an interview Xela Batchelder conducted with Miki Stricker (now Miki Stricker-Talbot). Stricker, Miki, Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival answers to author’s questionnaire, January 2006.

9. Paterson, *Ordering Chaos*, 46, 48.

10. Paterson, *Ordering Chaos*, 47–48.

festival, beginning with the Edmonton Fringe, the term “fringe” evolved away from its locational meaning toward another characteristic of the Edinburgh Fringe—its *openness and accessibility* to all artists. Miki Stricker-Talbot is an authority on the Edmonton Fringe Festival.<sup>11</sup> In a research interview, she explained, “the Edmonton Fringe Festival turned the Canadian Theatre landscape on its head. The Fringe demonstrated that theatre can be produced anywhere. . . . The Fringe enabled artists who had been previously marginalized by the theatre community to develop their craft and bring new forms of theatre to life.”<sup>12</sup>

Other cities saw Paisely’s success in Edmonton and sought his advice on creating fringes of their own. These early fringes started meeting annually in 1990 to “talk about their respective Fringe festivals, swap ideas and to share resources.”<sup>13</sup> After several years, the group had concerns about other festivals using the term “fringe” that did not adhere to the principles they thought were most important. The Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals (CAFF) officially registered as a nonprofit in 1994 with a mandate to “safeguard the integrity of Fringe Festivals as outlined in the four minimum criteria,” as well as “to recognizing the health of all member festivals as important to the circuit. . .,” and “to encourage communication and cooperation between member festivals. . . .”<sup>14</sup> And in 1998, CAFF went a step further and trademarked the terms “fringe” and “fringe festival” in Canada. CAFF hoped to ensure that any festival in Canada using the term “fringe” as part of its title must first obtain membership in the organization and abide by the CAFF mandate and the four “guiding principles.”<sup>15</sup>

While most Canadian Fringes still cite the Edinburgh Fringe as part of their history, most also maintain they are historically in line with the Edmonton Fringe. For this reason, it is worth briefly examining these four guiding principles, now called “Fringe Ideals.” This will help us trace the lineage of fringes inspired by Edmonton.

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11. Miki Stricker (now Miki Stricker-Talbot) was Festival Director of Fringe Theatre Adventures (Edmonton Fringe) from 2001–2006; from 1998–2001, she was founder and co-producer of Calgary International Fringe Theatre Festival.

12. Miki Stricker, Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival, answers to author’s questionnaire, January, 2006. Originally quoted in Batchelder, *The World’s Largest Arts Festival, The Edinburgh Festival Fringe*.

13. Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, *History*. Accessed 2006. [www.fringefestivals.com/history.htm](http://www.fringefestivals.com/history.htm). Originally cited in Batchelder, *The World’s Largest Arts Festival, The Edinburgh Festival Fringe*.

14. Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, *History*. Originally cited in Batchelder, *The World’s Largest Arts Festival, The Edinburgh Festival Fringe*.

15. Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, *History*. Originally cited in Batchelder, *The World’s Largest Arts Festival, The Edinburgh Festival Fringe*.



## *Fringe Ideals*

1. Participants will be selected on a non-juried basis through a first-come, first-served process, a lottery, or other method approved by the Association.
2. The audience must have the option to pay a ticket price, 100% of which goes directly to the artists.
3. Fringe Festival producers have no control over the artistic content of each performance. The artistic freedom of the participants is unrestrained.
4. Festivals must provide an easily accessible opportunity for all audiences and all artists to participate in Fringe Festivals.<sup>16</sup>

How do these guiding principles differ from the Edinburgh model? The third and fourth principles are less pertinent to our discussion today. However, the first two need to be discussed quickly in order to better understand U.S. fringes. First: “Participants will be selected on a non-juried basis.” The Edinburgh Fringe is not formally juried, to be sure. The Edinburgh Fringe Society neither approves nor disapproves of any productions. But there absolutely is a selection of shows at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe—it’s just that instead of a jury, or a sponsor, or a theme whittling down shows, the selection of shows at the Edinburgh Fringe is done by the managers of the many entrepreneurial fringe venues. Venue managers choose what will play in their venues, but there are multiple independent venues. A company can always shop a show around to more than one venue. Furthermore, if a company is refused a time slot in established venues, it can always bring a show to Edinburgh by renting out a space and setting up a venue of its own.

However, because CAFF’s festivals were created *de novo* by festival management in a short span of time instead of evolving alongside a larger festival, the entrepreneurial venue system that grew up in Edinburgh alongside the official festival is not there. The festival management team at a CAFF festival is limited by how many venues they themselves can manage, operate, and afford. Disappointed companies turned down for time slots cannot usually just start a whole new venue.<sup>17</sup> So in trying to keep the festival open access to artists, the CAFF model fringes end up having to deal with scarcity artificially by turning to first-come, first-served, or even lottery models to determine who can perform in the limited spaces without resorting to jurying the festivals. To put it another way, while the Edinburgh and CAFF models are

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16. Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, *About*. Accessed September 2016. [www.fringe-festivals.com/about-caff/](http://www.fringe-festivals.com/about-caff/).

17. This is in the process of changing. Many Canadian Fringes have what they call “BYOV” or “Bring Your Own Venue” locations that allow artists to find their own spaces outside of the festival run venues.

both essentially open access, the differences in the models are that there is still some jurying in Edinburgh, albeit by venue managers rather than any central organizing committee. “First-come, first-served” models and lottery systems are the non-jurying way that CAFF fringes deal with the scarcity of performing slots.

The second guiding CAFF principle is: “The audience must have the option to pay a ticket price, 100% of which goes directly to the artists.” Again—this is not how it works in Edinburgh. In Edinburgh, typically, shows and venues negotiate between themselves, and the most common agreement is a 60/40 split with a guarantee (with 60% going to the artist and 40% to the venue, based on the venue receiving a minimum guaranteed amount). In addition to this, the Fringe Society charges a percentage fee for any ticket sales sold through their own ticketing system. (It is also required that companies put a minimum of 25% of their ticket sales with the Fringe Society in order to be included in the program.) In the late 1990s, this fee was as high as 7.5%, but was often 6%, and more recently has been lowered to 4%.<sup>18</sup>

Because the CAFF fringes are determined to pay ticket money directly to artists, they must find other revenue streams to support the festivals themselves. These typically come in the form of buttons, beer tents, and sponsorship. The most interesting approach—which in the early days of the growth of fringe festivals was unique to CAFF fringes—is the button. At many CAFF festivals, buttons must be purchased by audience members before a ticket for any particular show is purchased. The buttons are not technically tickets, so the festival can uphold the principle of giving 100% of the specifically denominated ticket money to the artists. At the same time, the income from buttons can fund the operation of the festivals.

So now that we have a very precursory understanding of the structure and history of the Canadian fringe festivals, we can turn our attention to the U.S. fringe festivals. The first fringes in the United States were based not directly on the Edinburgh Fringe but on the Canadian fringe festivals. The first four U.S. fringe festivals were heavily influenced by the Edmonton Fringe, so much so that they consciously adhered to the CAFF model despite being in the United States. These first four fringes were the Seattle Fringe (founded in 1991), the Orlando Fringe (1992), the San Francisco Fringe (1992), and the Minnesota Fringe (1994). The Seattle Fringe closed due to financial troubles in 2003 (though it has been revived recently), and the Minnesota Fringe is now no longer an official CAFF fringe. However, the Orlando Fringe has flourished and is not only the oldest operating fringe festival in the United States but also very highly regarded and respected among performers.

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<sup>18</sup>. Experience of author as a venue manager and producer for 20 years.



Not every American Fringe Festival followed the CAFF model. Fringe festivals in two of America's leading arts cities decided to spurn it entirely. The New York Fringe (FringeNYC), and later the Philadelphia Fringe (Philly Fringe) decided to adjudicate.<sup>19</sup> This prompted protests from the U.S. fringes following the CAFF model; indeed, it even provoked a demand that FringeNYC change its name, as it was alleged that it was not a "real" fringe. From my perspective, what we have here is not "real" versus "false" fringe festivals, but another shift in the definition of "fringe." Just as Canada shifted from its original *locational* meaning to an understanding of a fringe festival as being defined by *openness and accessibility* for all artists and audiences, FringeNYC sought to redefine "fringe" according to the *type of performances* it hoped to promote. To FringeNYC, "fringe" festivals meant performances of innovative, edgy, or alternative works.<sup>20</sup>

The Philly Fringe also began with an adjudicated festival but soon realized the need for an unjuried version of the festival. While the Philly Fringe juried in order to present a core of contemporary and challenging work, it allowed anyone else to perform as long as they found their own venue and paid their own way. Whether purposely or not, in taking this approach Philadelphia became more like Edinburgh because the unjuried portion of the festival grew up around the juried Philly Fringe shows while allowing artists to come and go as they pleased in the absence of almost any oversight or meddling. In fact, Philly Fringe is more like Edinburgh before the 1980s, as Philadelphia does not have any large-scale venue conglomerates but only small venues, often with artists creating their own spaces one building at a time.

Based on the historical overview I have shared concerning the diverse structures of fringe festivals, what can we conclude about how we should define a fringe? I have attempted to find a way to categorize the diverse U.S. fringes and have come up with five structures. My five structures primarily reflect the relationship of the festival to the artist.

The first is what I would call the "Completely Open" structure. This is the most like Edinburgh. If a company wants to come, it comes. Venues may have an

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19. Amy Lane, *The Edges of Fringe: Development and Structure of the American Fringe Festival* (PhD Diss., Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, 2003), 122. Lane points out that none of the founders of the FringeNYC had ever gone to Edinburgh. The Present Company (John Clancy was Artistic Director) was told its show *American Absurdism* should do well in Edinburgh, but because transatlantic production was too expensive, they opted to start their own fringe in New York. The only member of the group to have ever been to any fringe before starting his own was Jonathan Harris. He had been a founding member of the Seattle Fringe. (He is now called Ezra Buzzington and advises the Hollywood Fringe Festival.)

20. "The New York International Fringe Festival shifted focus from the community spirit of democracy at the core of the four original American festivals, and turned instead to the promotion of 'fringe' works, meaning innovative, edgy, or alternative. With this one stroke, the concept of fringe festival had been radically altered in America from a philosophy promoting accessibility to a quality promoting artistic innovation." Lane, *The Edges of Fringe*, 132.

application structure for performers, but if no venue manager books a particular company, they are always welcome to start their own venue. In the United States and Canada, this structure may often be referred to as “Bring Your Own Venue.” Examples of the “Completely Open” structure in the United States include the Hollywood Fringe.

The second structure is the Juried Structure. In Juried Fringes, performers must apply and be selected. In the United States, examples of the juried structure include FringeNYC and Cincinnati Fringe.

The third structure we might call the First-come, First-served Structure. This means that any company that succeeds in getting an application in before the venue slots are filled is accepted. Of course, this approach is one way to be truly open access, but it also limits the number of shows to the number of spaces and time slots available. This approach is particularly useful for newer fringe festivals, as the response to the invitation to perform at a new fringe often becomes overwhelming in a short period of time. The Scranton Fringe has been using a version of this structure in their first two years.

First-come, first-served fringes often convert over to what I consider to be the fourth structure, the Lottery Structure. Again, the Lottery Structure is a way to be an open festival, while still limiting the number of shows to the particular capacity of a given fringe. In addition to the basic show lottery, some festivals have sub-lotteries to ensure diversity. An example would be the drawing of a certain number of performers from an out-of-town “hat” and a certain number of performers out-of-the-local “hat.” The Orlando Fringe is a great example of a Lottery Fringe.

The fifth structure is the combination or mixed structure, which is a combination of any of the other four structures. Some festivals may run a portion of the festival as juried but allow the rest of the festival to be open, like the Philly Fringe. Some festivals may just jury a venue or two but allow the rest of the festival to be open. Or, a fringe may book a few major shows, emulating in miniature the sort of “official festival” in Edinburgh, then allow independent venues to multiply around those big shows which, in turn, book smaller shows. The Rochester Fringe is an example of this.

To conclude this survey of structures of fringe festivals and conceptions of what constitutes a “fringe,” I would stress that all this diversity is really a strength. What is right for a well-funded fringe in a big city may not be right for an entrepreneurial fringe at the edge of a college town. What seems closest to the spirit of the Edinburgh Fringe may be what most inspires one team of festival managers, while another may care more about the content of the performances than the openness of the process. This overview of the dramatic variations in the definitions/understandings of what it is to be a fringe festival might tempt one to conclude that the term does not mean anything at all. However, I think this is

wrong. I think that the worldwide (and North American) success of the fringe festival ideal suggests that rather than meaning nothing, “Fringe” on a global scale, and even within one festival, can mean all of these things and can encompass many ideals successfully.

## **About the Author**

Xela Batchelder, Ph.D., is a widely recognized expert on Fringe Festivals worldwide and has been cited in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. She is the Executive Director of the Pittsburgh Fringe Festival, and has served as a consultant for Fringe Festivals, including the Hollywood Fringe and Rochester Fringe. She is also the Executive Director of Fringe University, a program designed to educate undergraduates and graduate students by using the Edinburgh Fringe as a classroom. From 1996 to 2008, she was the Executive Director of Rocket Venues, a group of Edinburgh Fringe theatres which hosted performances from Europe, Asia, North America and South America and produced award-winning shows with the Demarco European Art Foundation. She has been contributing material from fringes worldwide to the archive at the Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute at The Ohio State University.