



THE SAN FRANCISCO FRINGE: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINA AUGELLO

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Christina Augello founded the San Francisco Fringe Festival in 1992. It evolved to become one of the most prominent fringe festivals in the country. In this interview she discusses not only the SF Festival but also the issues involved in creating any indie theater—what indie theater is and the challenges we face producing it. She tells us, “We all serve artists—people who don’t have a lot of money.” An indie performer herself, she expresses the struggle we face working in this type of theater—from actors and audiences to marketing and touring visas. She discusses finances, reminding us, “The first motivation is the art itself.” Ms. Augello is an experienced and articulate expert on indie and fringe theater; this interview is an invaluable resource for fringe artists.

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“We all serve artists—fringe artists, independent artists, people who aren’t part of big companies, who don’t have a lot of money, people who are independently producing themselves and touring and traveling and going from fringe to fringe—kind of like the old vaudeville circuit where people got to work, they got to earn money.”

—Christina Augello

CHRISTINA Augello founded the San Francisco Fringe Festival as a program of The Exit Theatre in 1992. In its first year, the Festival hosted about a dozen independent theater companies on one stage over the course of one weekend. In 2019, the Festival sold nearly 1,500 tickets for more than \$16,000 in sales. In 2020, the Festival was scheduled to present 21 companies; its live season was canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. However, the theater met the challenge with an online event.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Ms. Augello in April 2021.

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During our interview, Ms. Augello references The Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals. This organization was founded in 1990 by a group of North American festival directors. Its mission is “to unite, support, empower and strengthen member festivals in order to cultivate and foster independent artistic exploration for artists and audiences across North America.” As of this interview date, there were 37 festival members in Canada and the United States. See:

<https://fringefestivals.com>

A pleasure for any interviewer, Ms. Augello speaks in a rush of insightful, creative ideas. Here’s the interview:

SC: I want to start at the beginning and ask you what led to your founding the Fringe in 1992. After all, there weren’t any then. In fact, I think there was only one in the country.

CA: Well, that’s not exactly true. Fringe festivals have been around as long as I have because they were born in 47—and so was I!

I’m the Founding Artistic Director of the Exit Theatre, which began in 1983. And now in 2021, we have five small venues in the downtown theater district, but also in the district called the Tenderloin. A lot of years brought me to that point, and there I was.

Exit Theatre’s mission statement is to provide opportunities for artists to work and develop an audience. So we’ve always been kind of a fringe theater, alternative theater, indie company. And that started in 1983. And then in 1992 I was part of a group of people helping small indie theaters get some media attention. Group marketing was the concept. We decided since we were fringe theaters we would start a fringe festival.

It started the first couple of years as a kind of collective effort. And then that fell apart. But within those first two years, I got a phone call from somebody who said, “You’re doing a fringe festival. Well, you know, there’s a fringe organization called Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals and some of the American festivals belong to that.”

I went back to Exit Theatre, and said, “Hey, we’re pushing forward with the fringe festival and we’re right in line with this group [*Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, CAFF*].” And so that’s when the Fringe took off as an Exit Theatre project. It was just right up our alley, you know what I mean? We were producing, co-producing, presenting. We were supporting artists, mentoring them. And this was another thing that would help support our mission statement.

Now it’s been 30 years. The Fringe became one of our projects. I really believe in the concept [*the CAFF concept*]. Now, the Edinburgh Fringe—it’s not that. It’s not a CAFF, Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, which includes American festivals who follow the mandate [*the CAFF mandate*].

That mandate to me is the true essence of fringe. Now, over the past 30 years of going to meetings, I've seen fringes grow and change and not support the mandate I believe in.

It's very difficult to support that mandate if you grow big because—you know—it just is. There's probably a bazillion reasons. But I've noticed that change, although Canada still maintains its mandate.

SC: Did you say the Edinburgh Fringe Festival is not fringe?

CA: Well, it is fringe, I mean—what's happened now in 2021, you can look around the world and see fringe festivals of varying different pedigrees. To me, the pedigree of fringe is the Canadian model which began in Edinburgh almost 40 years ago, when the world was of a much more collective mind. But that's where it started—from artists. And for me, that's the essence of a fringe festival. All the other ones are great.

SC: Are the main qualities of fringe festivals, then, that it be non-curated, that it use collective marketing? I'm trying to understand what "fringe" means.

CA: Well, it means different things to different people. I'll give you an example. When I discovered CAFF, Exit Theatre became a member because we're the producer of the Fringe Festival. And for a while that was copasetic. There wasn't the proliferation that there are now fringe festivals in the States. We maintain the mandate of non-curation and 100% of the money going back to the artists. In Canada, that is licensed; it is controlled.

25 years ago, maybe even more than that, in New York, they were going to do a fringe festival. I remember having dinner with the person who was promoting the idea. I invited him to come to our CAFF conference. And after a couple of days, they decided they were going to be a fringe, but they weren't going to follow the mandate. Their market was different, and they didn't want to.

I came back after that meeting and petitioned the government to give us the same kind of control over the word "fringe" that Canada had. However, the government decided after a year of deliberation—and much appeal on my organization's part—that "fringe" was just a word that everybody used, so it could not be patented, could not be copyrighted, could not be owned by anybody.

And in retrospect, that's okay, because *all* the fringes worldwide, globally, support artists. Some of them support artists with curation, or with a mix of curation and non-curation; some of them support artists with taking some money from the ticket sales.

In my experience after 30 years, almost, of doing fringe, it's changed. And what makes me okay with that is that we all serve artists—fringe artists, independent artists, people who aren't part of big companies, who don't have a lot of money, people who are independently producing themselves

and touring and traveling and going from fringe to fringe—kind of like the old vaudeville circuit where people got to work, they got to earn money.

I work as a performer. I toured. I performed in Prague, Edinburgh, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Victoria, New York. . . . As a performer, it's hard to earn a living. But I do have that opportunity when I go to a fringe festival to independently produce myself, to have a collective support system marketing-wise, audience reach-wise, usually tech-wise. So I can take my solo show and I go from city to city.

CAFF has a touring fringe lottery and I entered in 2019 and was lucky enough to be chosen. They booked me into all these festivals. Each festival functions differently. The San Francisco Fringe Festival runs a lottery. 120 people, maybe, apply in the lottery, and 21 are chosen.

For touring performers, that lottery was really important. Because you have people who are actually making a living doing this—or trying to make a living. They want to know they're not going to have a two-week gap in between or a three-week gap or do one in June and not get another one till August.

SC: What is the relationship between the fringe and mainstream theater artistically? In New York it seems like they're in different worlds. Off-Off-Broadway has nothing to do with Broadway. They're almost different art forms.

CA: Well, to say that Off-Off-Broadway has nothing to do with Broadway is a mistake. Who do you know that went to Broadway and started there? No one I know. Broadway wouldn't exist if there wasn't Off-Off-Broadway.

People need to work and hone their craft and build their resumes. So Off-Off-Broadway is integral to Broadway, and to Off-Broadway. I don't see them as climbing the ladder from a vertical level. I see them as horizontal. You have an ecosystem that's important to sustaining performing artists of all genres—and Off-Off-Broadway sustains, Off-Broadway sustains, and Broadway sustains.

Where would you get new scripts? You're not going to get a new script on Broadway.

SC: But Off-Off-Broadway I see exciting forms because I see immersive theater, unscripted theater. I never see them on Broadway.

CA: You have more freedom in Off-Off-Broadway—indie theater—because you don't have the overhead, for one thing. You're not trying to sell the tickets, another way. Half of the audience at the Exit Theatre are other artists. On Broadway, you've got people buying two, three, or four hundred dollar tickets who are coming from Nebraska to see a Broadway show.

Not to put it down! I go to New York to see Broadway shows. I love the pomp and circumstance you can afford with a Broadway budget. However, you can't take the risks and the chances you can in indie theater. For

me, the excitement comes from taking the risks and watching that seed blossom. Creativity and artistry should not be equated to economics.

SC: Right.

CA: If we only equated your success with economics, 99% of the artists in the world probably wouldn't qualify.

SC: Oh, God knows! There's no question!

CA: Unfortunately, as Americans, we tend to value things economically. But the first motivation is the art itself. Create something, a communication with the audience. For me the excitement is watching the artist create something that I hadn't seen before. Do I want to see something that somebody did 10,000 times before? If it was really good, maybe. But I like to explore—as a producer, as a presenter, as an artist—the pockets and corners that are not real yet. Indie theater leads the march artistically.

Somebody said to me, "What? Wouldn't you like to be the Artistic Director of ACT? (American Conservatory Theater)" And I said, "No, I wouldn't have the freedom I have." Maybe I'll be making lots of money and have a whole bunch of other opportunities, but right now, I have freedom. I can talk to someone that excites me as an artist, and I can produce their show. I couldn't do that if I was in a different environment.

SC: If you if you get a hundred submissions a year, you must really have a great idea of what theater is happening, what innovative theater is in this country, in general. Tell me about it. What do you see?

CA: Well, I see indie artists searching for something new, exciting, different, not being constrained. I also see someone who never did a show in their life get up and fail—but they're having fun and the audience is enjoying their performance. I go see a show, someone presents something I had never considered. It could be in a 15-seat theater with a person who's not that accomplished, but if they trigger something in my mind or my heart or my soul that's new and different—which you can find more in a 15-seat theater than you can on Broadway—then I might change my mind about something. I might be enlightened by their performance.

So the new theater? I don't know. There's nothing new in the world. We're all kind of recreating what happened before.

A long time ago at a show at the San Francisco Fringe Festival, there was a reviewer from the Chronicle. And there was a young woman on stage. She was a neophyte, but her heart and soul was there and she was delivering her performance. I remember an older woman watching her show said to this reviewer, "Well, she did the best she could, didn't she? I really enjoyed that."

As a performer, you know, you go out on stage, you got 10 people in the audience and it's like, "Shoot me now." You go out and you got 50 people

that are cheering you long with it—you soar! So that energy exchange is really important.

SC: Was that the reason that you canceled last year's festival instead of going online?

CA: Yes, I did not want to put 21 shows an hour long online because I think that's boring. So we decided to do what we call the "magazine format." We asked who wanted to participate and we had, I think, 18 companies who said OK. We gave them all 15 minutes to create whatever they wanted, to have a presence.

I felt like it was important to give the performers who were canceled for an in-person fringe the opportunity to present themselves to the audience.

SC: And you invited them back, your website says. You've been offering them slots.

CA: Oh, yeah, yeah. All the 2020 people will be invited back. I'm hoping to do an in-person fringe with the companies from 2020 in September. It will be—it will be tailored differently. I don't know if we're going to go exactly back to the "before times," but hopefully we'll have something that will satisfy the audience. Maybe we won't sell tickets at the door—we always had cash tickets at the door because some people don't want to buy tickets online. Some people now are upset about handling cash. It'll be now a hybrid, so to speak. We realized that we could reach people who can't come to the theater. We could reach people internationally. The United States is horrible. We don't allow international fringe performers to come here. So all those opportunities are now kind of opened up with this hybrid.

I'm not excited all about online performance. I don't want to do it. I don't like it. I don't watch much of it. I really wish it wasn't happening. But it is an opportunity that we can't deny anymore. So we'll do some. But I'd like the live streaming. So now Exit Theatre right now is doing something called Exit Theatre Presents, which is live streaming, and I really notice the difference.

There was an actress using Zoom. We had a rehearsal and she was fabulous. But the night she knew she had the audience, she went over the top! She had her audience—even though they weren't in the room, they were there and she delivered directly to them and they were watching live. Some people say you can't quantify it, but I felt that difference. It's not as good as being in a theater live but it made a difference.

SC: You mentioned that the government doesn't encourage international productions. Can you say more about that?

CA: They don't allow visas for indie performers. The United States does not allow me to pay people who aren't American citizens, basically. They have to get a work permit. You can't even come here and do a free performance.

It's against the law unless you get the government to sanction it. There is no category for independent performers to apply to. The performers have to spend more money than they earn to try to get the visa.

The flip side of that—I went to Canada and performed because they have a different policy. Their government allowed me to perform and earn up to a certain amount of money. This government does not allow us to do that. And I've been fighting this fight for a long time.

SC: Well, good for you!

CA: Yeah, it's not gonna help.

SC: Your website does classify all of your venues as having national and international shows.

CA: International people apply and some of them are American citizens. Some people might come from Spain, but they cast here.

I have had some performers who paid lawyers and gotten the visa, because they came here to tour across the United States. One of the places they came to is the San Francisco Fringe Festival. They had a bigger investment in coming to the States to perform. But if they came here illegally and were caught, they could not come back to the States for five years.

I don't understand why it's a problem. I went to Edinburgh and performed. I went to Prague and performed. Nobody flagged me. I don't make money. Fringe performers don't make money. We probably spend more money than we make.

The reason the country won't give them a visa is because they can't get a work permit because they think they're going to take a job from somebody. Also, in order to get the work permit from the government, the unions have to say it's okay. So I have to get Equity letters saying that this performer coming from—from Poland—is not taking an American actor's job.

SC: Is Equity helpful?

CA: I don't want to start talking about Equity, but they did give me a letter of support. However, Equity in general is not very helpful to indie artists.

SC: What trends do you see over the decades in American theater? Do you see a lot of forms that are so bold that they might be difficult for the audience to accept?

CA: Oh, yeah, but I've always seen that. Talk about The Living Theater—I mean, come on! The Living Theater was difficult for the audience to accept back in the 60s! Yeah, theater's always bold. Indie theater, in particular, should be a step ahead of everybody else, because we're not constrained.

You know, I went to Hollywood in the late 70s as an actor to get rich and famous. One thing I learned was I didn't want to be an actor for hire. I didn't want to just get a job, you know? Not to say that that's bad or wrong, but for me, personally, I realized I have a different relationship to this art form. So again, for me, putting myself in an artistic environment

where I could continue to do my work, where I could help other people do their work—the fringe is definitely a major player in that kind of art.

SC: Yes, right. What advice do you have for some companies who might want to start a fringe. Anything that you know?

CA: Keep it simple, start small. Learn your community, know your environment. Each fringe is unique because of each environment it's in.

SC: How does being in San Francisco inform your festival? How does that environment of a very progressive city—

CA: There are a lot of artists in the Bay Area—which really informs what happens here. It's very progressive. It's eclectic, it's diverse. It's all sorts of theater from theater Guignol to straight theater to gay theater to ethnic. We have a diverse community.

San Francisco is not known for its theater community, but here I see artists passionately dedicated to creating work, to pushing the boundaries, to finding new ways to work.

When somebody comes to me and says, "How do I get to be you?" The first thing I say to them is "Don't quit your day job." I still work as a bartender part time, in order to live like an adult. It's the choice you make in life. I'm not married. I don't have kids. I keep my responsibilities to a minimum. I like my freedom.

I tell everybody to keep it simple first and then grow. As artists, our minds are so open and grandiose—but there's nuts and bolts. It's funny—the Fringe Festival is a free-for-all, but it's really run very regimented. There's rules that keep it together. It runs like a train that runs on time. There's a structure that keeps it running. There are a lot of people running behind the scenes—administrative people, a lot of people who dedicated themselves to creating this opportunity for artists.

One thing about the fringe that I think is really special—no matter what the philosophy behind a fringe festival is, how they're handling it, how they're running it, it's still artist-oriented—and artist-audience-oriented, too. The audience is extremely important to fringe—because that's our connection!

About the Author

Steve Capra is the author of two books: *Theater Voices* and *Stage Voices*. They contain interviews with some of the leading theater artists in the world, from Judith Malina to Robert Icke. His articles have appeared in many theater journals, including *Critical Stages*, *Puppetry International*, and the magazine of the Association of Portuguese Theatre Critics. He sits on The International Committee and The Communications Committee of The American Theatre Critics Association.