



“THE LUCKY FXXXERS”: THE FRINGE TOURING PERFORMER AS EMBODIED THEATRE ARCHIVIST

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This paper explores the concept of archiving fringe theatre from the perspective of the touring fringe performer, with particular attention to the Canadian Association for Fringe Festivals (CAFF) lottery and tour. Looking at the “uncurated, uncensored” model of CAFF Fringes, this paper explores the role of luck, contingency, and embodiment in archiving fringe theatre. By exploring the instability of archiving fringes and, indeed, theatre itself, this paper ultimately seeks to complicate both where and how we might archive the fringe. Through a mix of performance studies, qualitative interviews, and maybe even some poetry, Fitz-James makes an argument for embodied ways of archiving fringes and presents the fringe as a model for alternative performance archives.

Keywords: Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, fringe theatre, performance archives, performance studies, poetry

THE Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals (CAFF), which includes 32 festivals across Canada and the United States, is a unique performance model. For an administrative fee, fringe producers provide performers with a venue, a technician, and 100% of the box office sales. Participants are selected by lottery, and artists are given total creative control. Said to follow the “original” Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and lauded as uncurated and uncensored, the CAFF model is “the archetypal theoretical model of global free trade, where virtually anything goes.”¹ In addition to individual fringe lotteries, the CAFF lottery gives the opportunity for ten lucky artists to tour no less than five fringes in the summer, making their way from east to west across Canada and the United States.

1. Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 186.

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This makes the CAFF touring circuit a unique performance opportunity. For a relatively low cost, performers can tour any city in Canada, so long as it has a fringe festival. As such, the CAFF lottery has become a coveted and competitive opportunity for independent and emerging performers.

The unique model of the fringe results in an equally unique community. Especially among those artists who tour their way across Canada every summer, a community akin to a traveling circus is formed: the self-proclaimed Fringe Family (or Framily). I've written elsewhere about the joys and pitfalls of the touring fringe community, especially as it concerns the safety and consent policies on the fringe.² While the original Edinburgh Fringe set itself as the marginal equivalent to the prestigious Edinburgh Festival (with Edinburgh Fringe founders performing their shows literally on the fringe of that festival), the Edinburgh Fringe has now well surpassed the Edinburgh festival in size and popularity. While Canadian Fringes can still claim the marginal, and indeed antiestablishment energy that the original lauded, we should ask what neoliberal tendencies a "free trade" festival model invites. In many ways, the populist, neoliberal ideologies of the fringe result in a community that reproduces many of the hegemonic structures of power that its uncurated and uncensored "fringe" status might claim to reject.³ Even the "lucky" artists drawn in the fringe lottery are drawn into a system of representation that reproduces structures of violence and oppression. But this isn't my fringe.⁴

My fringe draws on the logic of hysteria. As performance scholar Rebecca Schneider writes:

In the logic of hysteria, all things mark. The relation between signifier and signified is not arbitrary, not purely "accidental," but deeply imbricated in the patriarchal prerogatives and therefore cannot be shrugged off as "oops, oh well, another day, another arbitrary sign of my inscription as woman, as negative term, another 'accidental' exclusion from and repression by the Symbolic Order." Unable to shrug it off (and thus compulsively shrugging), hysterical women seemed to say, in their counter-language of ticks and gasps: "Wake up! – relations between sign and signified are *orchestrated* accidents which secret(e) and disavow

2. Thea Fitz-James, "Consent on the Fringe: Restorative Justice and Accountable Communities," *Canadian Theatre Review* 180 (Fall 2019): 16.

3. Kaj Hasselriis, "#FringeSoWhite: Why Aren't There More Indigenous People and People of Colour in the Fringe Festival?" *CBC*, July 22, 2016. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/fringesowhite-why-aren-t-there-more-indigenous-people-and-people-of-colour-in-the-fringe-festival-1.3691128>

4. I toured my two solo shows, *NAKED LADIES* and *Drunk Girl*, the Canadian and Australian fringes between 2015 and 2019. I am positioning myself as a fringe performer in this paper, as well as a performance studies scholar.

their literal impact. The correspondence is sensuous, like the side of my (scratch, glitch, break) face.”⁵

My fringe embodies the powerful performance potential of hysteria. As described above, this performance strategy critiques the semiotics of representation through the very body marked as “negative term,” through what Schneider calls a “counter-language of ticks and gasps.” These performances use the uncensored, uncensored fringe stage to share stories, experiences, and voices typically excluded, ignored, or silenced. These fringe performers—in my experience—are typically visible minorities, often women, who are finding their creative voice, somewhat chaotically, somewhat spectacularly, on the fringe. These are performers who are interested in using the stage of fringe for creative explorations in form; they speak truth to power through clown, storytelling, queer expression, movement, comedy, cabaret, performance art, burlesque, and drag. Here, one performer might simulate playing Adele’s *Someone Like You* from a Kazoo in her vagina; a clown will make prolonged eye contact with you while covered in honey and inviting the audience to pelt them with marshmallows; here again, an improviser leads an audience in the liturgical callback of their newly founded church; and another speaks to the connection between their queerness, Stephen King’s *Carrie*, and Franz Ferdinand.⁶ The absurd, the sexy, the ideological, the intellectual smash together across this body as fringe, a potluck of alternative performance. This is my fringe. I believe this found community—with its mix of metaphors and mediums—is only possible because of the fringe lottery.⁷

The fact that CAFF participation is determined through a lottery makes the fringe a unique artistic platform *and* accounts for its rejection within theatrical archives and history. Perhaps I might share an egregious supposition: fringes seem largely ignored in the canon of North American theatre history and scholarship because their impact is assumed to be negligible. Fringes are colloquially understood at best as artistic launching pads and at worst as a collection of amateur theatre cliques. I argue that this is in part due to a luck-based curation model,⁸

5. Rebecca Schnieder, *Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 116.

6. These performers/performances are Shirley Gnome’s *Real Mature*; Cam Venn’s *Balls Deep*; Travis Bernhardt’s *Unscriptured*, Adam Bailey’s *Franz Ferdinand Must Die*.

7. The lottery is not a “pure lottery”; there are different categories that are drawn in sections to ensure a balance of acts across the festival. While every fringe is different, the lottery categories typically include: local, national, international, kid’s fringe, and (most recently) equity-seeking groups/priority communities.

8. Since first writing this paper, I’ve been introduced to the idea that Fringes are neglected not because of the (lack of) curation model but rather due to the CAFF Fringe funding model. The CAFF Fringes work on a pay-to-play model, meaning there is a large administrative fee paid by the artist upfront (at the time of writing, anywhere between \$500 and \$800). This model is inherently precarious, where the risk of “breaking even,” or making back your money, is solely on the participating artists. Other financial models in festivals include a box office split, where artists and

unique to CAFF-participating fringes.⁹ If there is no outright creative curation (or accompanying curatorial clout), the unspoken question seems to be: Are fringe performances *worthy* of archiving. The "amateur" categorization of the fringe in North America¹⁰ ignores the scholarly potential of the global fringe circuit and those performers who make their living fringing and the unique perspectives they bring to the stage.¹¹ I cannot count how many times I have sat at a curation table and advocated for a performer who only had the fringe on their resume.¹² Having toured the global fringe circuit twice, I have witnessed the skill, talent, and energy required to tour a self-produced show, be that across the country or the world. I have also seen some of the best shows of my life on the fringe. This, too, is in danger of being forgotten. My intention in this paper is not to articulate the records that would comprise an archive of a fringe performance but rather to linger on the question of the record, the desire to archive, and what alternative archival methodologies the solo, touring "hysteric" fringe performer might produce. Here, the categories of performer and performance overlap— as do the signified and signifier— across the hysteric's body; these one-person bands strut and fret their hour upon the stage, clanging and honking their way across the country, signifying *everything*. In making a case for archiving the fringe, I want to

festival producers split the ticket sales according to a pre-determined percentage (and often minus an administration fee per ticket). Or with the Australian Fringe—or the "Bring Your Own Venue" model in Canada—the artist rents the venue outright and keeps 100% of the ticket sales. Speaking from my own experience, the pay-to-play model has enhanced my access to funds as opposed to creating a barrier, as it is a one-time fee compared to a service fee per ticket or box office split; however, this is not everyone's experience. Exploring and unpacking the equity of the different festival funding models, and how this in turn impacts a festival's access to arts grants and government funding, is the next stage of my research on Fringes.

9. The Australian and Edinburgh fringes operate on an "open-access" model; if you have a venue, you can put on a show. This gives the power of curation to the venues, and not the artists or the festival organizers. Other fringes in Europe, Singapore, England, and the United States are completely curated: they use the word fringe to indicate the festival's tone and energy, embracing the alternative vibe of the fringe, without actually relinquishing curatorial control. The CAFF fringes are the only ones that leave the curation up to chance, and even then, they will occasionally curate last-minute additions to the festival.

10. This is evidenced through fringe projects and performers being ineligible to access public arts grant funding, as this work is deemed by these granting bodies non-professional.

11. This paper focuses on touring artists, and not on local artists, volunteers, staff, critics, or audiences. These groups also create archives in different ways. However, the scope of this paper speaks to the specific strategies of touring fringe artists, those who make a career of touring, and the unique archive they create.

12. Fringe performances are often no more than a flash in the pan, with their show title in the fringe program the only potential artifact/archive. Let's be real: many fringe performances are meant to live and die at the fringe. As a performer myself, I have both seen and performed in fringe plays that I'd rather forget. This is important for an early career artist: the fringe is an ideal place to make mistakes, to experiment, to try new things with the knowledge that this thing we are doing is ephemeral; this performance is allowed to be forgotten. But at what cost? What is lost in the right to be forgotten that might be of critical and historical relevance to theatrical scholarship?

advocate for giving that job to touring fringe performers: the fringe performer as fringe archivist. If we are to archive something as luck-based as the CAFF fringes, we need to do so in a way that embraces the contingency of that luck, without forgetting that contingency too relies on political structures and reinforces ideology. By exploring the instability of archiving fringes, and indeed, theatre itself, this paper ultimately seeks to both complicate where and how we might archive the fringe. Through a mix of performance studies, qualitative interviews, and maybe even some poetry, I ultimately seek to make an argument for an embodied way of archiving fringes and present the fringe itself as a model for alternative performance archives.

There is a reason that festivals, and the fringe in particular, have been overlooked within theatre scholarship. In *Reading the Material Theatre*, Ric Knowles warns against the downsides of the festival circuit. He fears that “homeless” productions may lose touch with their cultural context and develop a “fuzzy universalism.”¹³ Knowles suggests that productions that are created for a festival circuit, rather than in a culturally specific time and place, are “about theatre—the form itself—and will tend to be admired for virtuosity, innovation, or skill rather than discussed as cultural interventions with particular grounded meanings for specific audiences.”¹⁴ If we believe this to be true, it is only aggravated by the “placelessness” of fringe festivals themselves; these cultural marketplaces where clowns, magicians, and storytellers are mixed in with local, national, and international acts to produce a globalizing, placeless place. In Knowles opinion, nomadic, touring artists and their festival(s) must “guard their sense of place” if they wish to engage in “active cultural intervention” or community building.¹⁵ Similarly, previous scholarship has focused on the cultural marketplace of the fringe, demonizing it as a capitalist, neoliberal performance model.¹⁶ Yet to just analyze the fringe as either an artistic utopia or a neoliberal nightmare seems naïve. I aim to extend such analyses, contextualizing festival neoliberalism through the lived experience of artists making their living off the fringe. Their potential for cultural intervention is worthy of further exploration. Continuing, many scholars have commented on how theatre festivals affect the cultural politics of urban space or speak to the social organization of a city.¹⁷ However, very

13. Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 89.

14. Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 89–90.

15. Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 91.

16. Sarah Thomasson, “‘Too Big for Its Boots’? Precarity on the Adelaide Fringe,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 29, no. 1 (2019): 39–55; Brian Batchelor, “‘This Beer Festival Has a Theatre Problem!’: The Evolution and Rebranding of the Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 36, no. 1 (2015): 33–51.

17. Sarah Thomasson, “‘Mad March’ in the Festival City: Place-making and Cultural Clash at Adelaide’s Festivals,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 70 (2017): 187–208; Shelley Scott, “A Fringe Odyssey: 20th Annual Edmonton Fringe Theater Festival, August 16–26, 2001,” *Theatre Research*

few have taken a transnational approach by looking at the touring performers themselves. These analyses typically speak about the fringe and other festivals from the perspective of an audience member or consumer of this cultural capital, where a festival is a convenient piece of evidence for an urban or neoliberal analysis. This is potentially myopic: When the festival ends in the city, so does the analysis, even though the artists continue to the next city, the next festival. By and large, these analyses ignore the potential of putting fringe festivals in conversation with one another. My focus on the fringe festival performer looks at festivals as a network of performers—or a matrix of performances—rather than a bit of city-specific cultural capital.¹⁸ To ignore the tour is to ignore something fundamental to fringe: Fringe is not one city and it is not localized to one culture or capital. Fringe is about performance. However, despite the "placelessness" of performance, we might still find the body's politics. The fringe's body of performance (or fringe performer's body) becomes the locus of culture. I bring my culture with me through my performance. I throw it at my audience, just as they might throw marshmallows at my sticky body.

To further complicate the question of archiving fringe, archiving theatre itself is not a straightforward conversation within performance studies scholarship. In the influential *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan defines theatre as disappearance. She strives for representation without reproduction, suggesting that performance's independence from mass production is its biggest strength. It cannot be recorded—instead, the very act of performance involves a loss. Auslander opposes this "reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatized" in *Liveness* (3). It is theatre's technical mediatization that defines the performance as live; "the live can only exist *within* an economy of reproduction" (53). It is difficult to separate theatre's archival effort from the liveness/disappearance debate. If performance is ephemeral, *can* it be archived? As Auslander asks, can you write about a performance you've never seen? *Can* documentation (or the archive) stand in for the event itself? With the same logic as that tree that fell in the forest, and maybe made a sound, the question is, if a performance happens on stage, and no one archives it, does it matter?

Rebecca Schneider would argue that, of course, it does. More than that, even if a performance is not archived through traditional means, such as published play texts, photographs, or video recordings, it still remains. To assume that performance is dependent on the presence or absence of a material thing is to

in Canada 22, no. 2 (2001): 229–234; Bruce Willems-Braun, "Situating Cultural Politics: Fringe Festivals and the Production of Spaces of Intersubjectivity," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12, no. 1 (1994): 75–104.

18. A recent exception is Sarah Thomasson's "The Australian Festival Network," *The Cambridge Companion to International Theatre Festivals* (2020): 132–146.

keep performance in what Schneider calls the “logic of the archive . . . Such statements assume that memory cannot be housed in the body and remain.”¹⁹ Schneider argues that performance remains in many ways. Disappearance is still at the forefront of performance, but this more phenomenological approach allows disappearance to remain in ways that invite new archival methods. In inviting the embodied/experimental potential of the fringe, I ask for an archive that sees culture and placelessness, form and content, performer and performance, collapse on one another in a moment of performance. The paradigm shifts, the “aha moments,” the feeling when a performer reaches through the audience—and in a moment of vulnerability—grabs your heart and gives it a squeeze: How do you archive these experiences? Perhaps here we can find a phenomenological economy of reproduction: a method wherein we can reproduce (and archive), night after night, those you-had-to-be-there moments.

Schneider’s work is in conversation with Diana Taylor’s exploration of the archive and the repertoire. In reforming the dialectic of the archive and the repertoire away from the hegemony of the archive, Taylor invites us to reject the convenience of a live-versus-documented binary and instead embrace the body as a locus for memory, history, nostalgia, and expression. For Taylor, the “repertoire” is a space of “embodied knowledge—the doing, repeating, and mimetic practices that are performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing”; the “archive” is “supposedly lasting, stable objects such as books, documents, bones, photographs, and so on that theoretically resist change over time.”²⁰ She continues:

The different systems provoke different ways of knowing and being in the world—the repertoire supports “embodied cognition,” collective thinking, and knowing in place, whereas archival culture favors rational, linear, and so called objective and universal thought and individualism. The rise of memory and history, as differentiated categories, seems to stem from the embodied/documented divide. But these are not static binaries, or a sequential pre/post, but active processes—two of several interrelated and coterminous systems that continually participate in the creation, storage and transmission of knowledge.²¹

Taylor advises us to avoid the ultimately reductive binarization of archives and repertoires. Performance and its related archives are not a simple delineation

19. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 99.

20. Diana Taylor, “Save As . . . Knowledge and Transmission in the Age of Digital Technologies,” *Imagining America* 2 (2010). <https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=ia>

21. Taylor, “Save As . . .” 2–3.

between the live and the documented. Rather, performance finds itself at the intersection of these two points. Or, as Schneider states, "[d]isappearance, that citational practice, that after-the-factness, clings to remains—absent flesh *does* ghost bones" (102). The repertoire ghosts the archive. The lived experience of a performance ghosts its play text or library entry.²²

It is precisely at the intersection of memory and history that I find a unique potential for archiving the fringe. What I call a fringe archivist, fellow fringers might call a mythologist; when there is no recorded history, no academic clout, what is left but oral history, myths, and stories. In rejecting the delineation between history and memory, combining Schneider's interventions with Knowles criticism, the question becomes: Where do the touring artists, without a place, without a home, find lasting cultural intervention? In the hurried cultural marketplace of the fringe festival, among the placeless and in their placelessness, is the archive possible? Or more importantly, what "repertoires," or memories, ghost the fringe archive?

In attempting to answer this question, I spoke to a number of fringe performers at the Vancouver Fringe, 2016. For all my talk of repertoires, we spoke mostly of the objects—the receipts, the programs, the flyers, and the lanyards that mark a fringe. And yet, there are many fringe repertoires worth exploring: putting up posters, flyering an audience line, the 15 minutes you get, squeezed into a two-foot by six-foot "backstage" before the show starts. Remembering these fringe gestures, I am hit with a wave of nostalgia: the paths not taken, the memories of walking Canadian cities in the hot, stinking sun, burnt neck, broken voices, performers selling their show. It lives in my body, this nostalgia. Or, my body performs the memory of so many lost/found summers chasing audiences.

The most important thing that a touring fringe performer keeps are the stories that become fringe "legends." I spent most of the time talking about this Jem Rolls,²³ a performance poet who "has been touring his poems across Canada's

22. Some of these arguments feel somewhat dated in a 'post'-pandemic world. Certainly, the question of the live and the mediated is deliciously complicated with the medium of livestreams, for instance. The pivot the performance world has taken—whether toward the digital, or toward other arts mediums entirely—and its influence on archiving fringe is an interesting topic for another time.

23. While Rolls' interview is the most relevant for this paper, I spoke to a number of fringe artists at the 2016 Vancouver Fringe. I asked similar questions to each performer: why they tour, what they get out of it, what they keep, what they discard, what gets remembered, and what gets forgotten. Not many physical objects are kept across a tour, because artists are traveling and there is not a lot of room for any extra weight. Some programs, posters, flyers, and festival passes are saved, but even then, the longer a person has been touring, the less likely they are to keep things. Chelsea Stuyt—both a fringe performer and previous CAFF staff member—told me her fringe "archive" is the literal bag of receipts she deals with come Vancouver. Fringe veteran Cameryn Moore (*Phone Whore*, *Nerdfucker*, *Smut Slam*) has a sixteenth chapel of buttons, patches, and pins, collected over years of fringes, that she sticks into the ceiling of the car she drives across country.

fringe circuit for so long, he should be given honorary citizenship.”²⁴ With more than 100 fringes under his belt, Rolls is the person to talk to about nearly everything “fringe.” Our conversation jumped from questions of “fringe legends” to his own enigmatic effort to write lengthy Facebook posts after each fringe: another kind of fringe archive, perhaps. He called the fringe family the “Lucky Fxxxers” and clearly has a desire to mythologize the summer that was. Yet, in the same sentence, Rolls tells me nothing endures, that this conversation too will be forgotten. And before we can catch our breath, he launches into another story on how he started, who was around, who did what when. We talk “a l’escalier,” jumping from topic to topic, taking 90-degree turns as it suits, and so what if we’re talking in circles. As we talk, it strikes me that while maybe others have forgotten, Rolls has not. There is something of a fringe “mythologist” in him, as opposed to (or in collaboration with) the archivist. For instance, he points to the cabarets across the Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, and Montreal fringe festivals. These are evenings of inside jokes and one-off performances that bring artists together across mediums in one night, in the same way the fringes do over ten days. Are the cabarets a kind of archive for each fringe? Are they part of the building mythology that makes up the archival oral history of the fringe? Certainly, I had heard of *horselesque*—the burselque performance of horses trapped in men’s bodies, which combines physical comedy with—dare I say—dressage to create a most ridiculous comedic sketch—I had heard of *horselesque*, before I saw it in Vancouver *Cabaret of Bullshit*. But I doubt I really *got* it before I experienced it. Do the myth and the archive—memory and history—meet in the seemingly trivial performances that make their way into fringe lore? And how do we determine if these stories will remain part of the fringe mythology? Or rather, how do we embrace their disappearance?

The answer, I argue, has to do with luck: the fringe offers a compelling argument for luck as an archival methodology. Luck creates a discursive space that requires discursive methods. Luck-as-methodology invites something akin to Michel Foucault’s heterotopias or Judith Butler’s performative iterations; it finds meaning and discourse through transient worlds within worlds, through performing subjectivities.²⁵ The ultimate case study for luck-as-archive in the fringe is the Dice Game, a game often played by touring performers to pass the time. A combination of the “dare” part of truth or dare, and a game-of-chance probability game, the Dice Game involves a dare that is only enacted if the instigator rolls a certain number on a six-sided dice. The person playing weighs the

24. Kelly Nestruck, “How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Fringe,” *Globe and Mail*, June 28, 2008. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/how-i-stopped-worrying-and-learned-to-love-the-fringe/article675601/>

25. Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27; Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

difficulty or embarrassment of the dare against the probability of the number being rolled. The Dice Game starts with "If I roll a . . ." with the number and dare to follow: "If I roll a 4, you have to sing a pop song," for instance. Interestingly, because it is a game-of-chance, participants usually spend more time thinking up dares than actually performing them. Similarly, fringers remember the dares that did happen, the magic moments of luck, just as much as the dares that did not. I sometimes wonder, as prompted in the award-nominated episode of *Community*, "Remedial Chaos Theory," how many iterative timelines we are creating with numbers we did not roll. I wonder if it's the same when the lottery gets drawn. Are there hundreds of other timelines with completely different festival line-ups? Is it the artists that make up the fringe fate, or is it luck?

Magician Travis Bernhardt (creator of *Charlatan!* and *Unscriptured*) was the first to bring up luck when I asked him what gets forgotten across the fringe tour. What might be lost, fringe to fringe, is the unlucky artist who doesn't get drawn . . . but we forget that. "People don't want to believe in luck," he tells me, "they want to believe they are in control of their own destinies. . . . That's why you forget that it's luck, that it's a lottery. Can we compute the idea that we are making it somewhere not on merit, but on chance?"²⁶ And there is so much luck to a fringe tour: the venues are (mostly) randomly assigned, the reviews, the timeslots, the technicians, the weather . . . even the audience! The more shows you do, the more you embrace the contingency of it all. And indeed, the "luck" of fringe is part of the draw for audiences and is intentionally used in some of the marketing tactics: Audiences are encouraged to take a chance on a show, to roll the dice on their evening's entertainment. Isn't that what fringing is all about? This is part of the fringe experience: How, then, to archive this?

"Do you actually pursue an argument," Jem Rolls asked me, in a 2022 Facebook message after reading an early draft of this paper, "or do you willfully wander off into vanishment?" My main goal is to complicate the rejection of fringe performances as acultural or only successful due to a kind of "fuzzy universalism". I make the case for a scholarly analysis of fringe festivals that invites the performers to the table as experts of their field, and their bodies (and body of work) as harbingers of cultural and political potential. This might start with treating the Fringe performer as an archivist of their work. It troubles me that scholars such as Knowles can so easily reject the potential for fringe's cultural intervention without actually speaking to the marginalized artists who create the work they analyse.²⁷ This is my argument. However, that does not mean I am not willfully wandering

26. Travis Bernhardt in discussion with the author, September 2016.

27. For one salient example of this, see Ric Knowles' chapter, "Fringe Festivals and Other Alternatives," in *International Theatre Festivals and Twenty-First-Century Interculturalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2021. 156-90.

off into vanishment. Indeed, I don't have one ending to this paper.. I have six. In the spirit of archiving the iterative, of creating the you-had-to-be-there magic moment, I'm going to attempt to make the repertoire present through the performative gesture of rolling the dice. I think the only way to move forward with the question of archiving fringes is to be in conversation with touring fringe artists, to think about fringe as both a singular event and a series of festivals, and to give importance to the embodied experience (and luck) of the repertoire. This is the archive housed in the body, or the subjective memory, that ghosts our end-of-festival receipts. So, I've written six different endings for this paper, and we will roll for them, understanding that each roll creates a different timeline: each offering a different experience to the reader, each telling a different story. It is very far from an ending, really. In its multitudes, in further questions, it invites further discourse. And so, these small timelines lead to more timelines, splintering and intersecting experience into a network of memory and history. The contingent and the concrete come together as some kind of fringe remains—some kind of archive, slipping through our fingers, willfully wandering off into vanishment—even now.

I encourage the reader to read only one ending. You do not get to decide which. Find a six-sided dice. Think about the themes of this paper and roll. Whichever number you land on will be the ending that you read. Good Luck!

If I Roll a One. . .

How do we archive the “luck” of the fringe?

I think the answer is in exploring alternatives to the binary models often associated with the archive. When thinking about Jem Rolls as a mythologist, and myself as an archivist, I too am reproducing the binary of archive and repertoire. Of course, they speak to each other, they influence each other. In returning to my memory of the dares in the Dice Game and writing now, many years after I participated in these games, I wonder if the reader will find this all too juvenile. I wonder if it is all just one big social clique, with the popular kids celebrating in a cycle of self-gratification that can only be described as masturbatory. And so, I hold this possibility in one hand, across from the very real sense I have that there are *essential* stories being told on the fringe. These are queer shows; they are shows that push theatrical forms. They are popular, urban, and transnational. What they lack in “place,” they make up for in politics. These shows are not being archived. They are being lost. And while we may dismiss this all as juvenile, as conjecture, as inside jokes and theatre cliques, I believe the archive of the fringe is also in all of this: the forgotten, the absurd, the silly, the inconsequential. If we locate the archive of the fringe *on* the fringe, then we might get

closer to the re-centering alternative archives, alternative performance methods, and marginalized performers.

If I Roll a Two . . .

How do we archive the "luck" of the fringe?

For Jem Rolls, the answer is in the stories we tell and the touring performers who tell them. "Who's creating the festival of tomorrow within this country?" he asks me. "[This question is] of great significance to the future of Canada and Canadian culture, and the culture of tomorrow. . . . The tour doesn't exist as a private thing in just one city. We're a travelling group. That's why it's called a mythology." The mythology and the fringe family are one in the same, he tells me: "Hey ho Family, hey ho Mythology." Drawing back on Knowles' warning against placelessness, how do these stories and mythologies speak to cultural intervention and community building? Or put differently, maybe these stories and mythologies *are* the cultural intervention. "I don't know what endures from one year to the other." Jem tells me, "I don't know what that mythology is. I remember being around some fringe artists talking about a conversation they were sure would go down in fringe history . . . which no one remembers . . . but I do." So, I ask, "Jem Rolls: fringe mythologist?" He laughs, "The word fringe legend is popping up more and more. I would never say that. I would never say that I'm a fringe legend. Is a fringe legend someone who remembers? Someone who can say those names that I don't know, that I don't remember?"²⁸

Ultimately, he tells me that nothing endures. That someday, too soon, he will walk into the King's head in Winnipeg, where he's sold out entire show runs for years, where audiences have chanted his lines back to him, and no one will remember his name. And a huge fringe archive will go with him. And maybe in his place another "legend," another "lifer," another generation of the fringe family, drinking three-dollar beers and obsessing over reviews.

Or, as Rolls' show *Get Lost* tells us:

the human race
don't you just
love it?
yes I do
its the only possible way
to cope with it.²⁹

28. Jem Rolls in discussion with the author, September 2016.

29. Jem Rolls. *Get Lost*. Unpublished, 2016.

If I Roll a Three. . .

How do we archive the “luck” of the fringe?

Cory Thibert, the director of the 2019 fringe documentary *On the Fringe*, argues that it may not be up to the fringe performers to archive that experience. *On the Fringe* is certainly an archive of fringe 2014, if nothing else. Thibert’s goal was just to move beyond 2014 and capture something like the feeling of the fringe. Conversations in the film mostly revolve around sales, anxieties, and delusions of grandeur, and (of course) reviews. But there is also a lot of hope in the film; the “hustle” of the fringe—echoed in a lot of gig culture and arts worker experience—is foregrounded, as Thibert follows the one-person bands that travel from fringe to fringe in a summer. Yet, despite the fact that he spent a summer both touring shows and shooting a documentary, he questions the artist’s position as archivist. “We write our shows, produce them, sell them on the street, perform them . . . do we really need to archive them too?”³⁰ Should the question of archiving, then, be up to the festival organizers, the academics, the journalists? What do these groups understand about fringe? What do they understand about luck?

Thibert keeps a list of the shows he sees every summer, though at first he wasn’t sure why. After talking over beers, we hope we aren’t romanticizing the fringe with things like this paper (or his documentary). Despite our worries, we still feel like there is something fundamental to our desire to capture that something—that feeling of being on a fringe, of taking a chance on a show. There is a lot of hope in the list of shows Thibert keeps every summer. He keeps a list of shows to remember the summer that was. Something of a table of contents for his own embodied archive.

If I Roll a Four. . .

How do we archive the “luck” of the fringe?

As an alternative answer, here is a story: My first fringe was Edmonton Fringe 2015, the largest fringe in North America. One of the first people I met on the fringe grounds was Shane Adamczak. Shane and I would go on to date for two years, touring the fringes together. Shane also invented the Dice Game. It felt like luck had brought us together for a long time: “of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world,” as they say.

“Perhaps luck only brings you so far,” Shane tells me, as we walk up St. Laurent in Montreal in fall 2016. I had always meant to interview Shane for

30. Cory Thibert in discussion with the author, September 2016.

this paper. After all, he has been fringing for over ten years and makes a profession of touring the fringes both in Canada and Australia. I never got around to interviewing him for the same reason you delay visiting the cultural landmarks of your home city, because really, what's the rush? And so, as we walk up Mont Royal, I ask him about archives. "But why," he says, "why would you want to archive the fringe? Isn't the whole point that you had to be there. You know, The Montreal Fringe filmed the [their cabaret] 13th hour a couple years ago, but it just didn't translate. We all just looked kind of stupid. I mean, why do it? I don't think it'll really translate. If you want to archive the fringe, just go to the fringe." But what if you want to keep the history of it, I ask, to save it for future generations? "It's like Punk Theatre," he tells me. "I mean, someone will still be doing something like this in 20 years. It might not be called fringe, but the spirit of the fringe: the desire to take risks, to challenge norms, that need to be alternative to the mainstream . . . that's not going away."³¹

If I Roll a Five. . .

How do we archive the "luck" of the fringe?

I haven't found a better answer than in Jem Roll's post-festival Facebook poetry:

and we?
The Lucky Fxxxers
after the Vancouver Cabaret of Bullshit
most fun of the summer
15 of us went to Naam on West 4th at 3 a.m.
and the toast?
to ourselves
"The Lucky Fxxxers"
because we are The Lucky Fxxxers in these halcyon days
we get this
the climbable mountain
the winnable battle
the Tour
show after show after show for beautiful volatile unpredictable audience
the Tour
the us

31. Shane Adamczak in discussion with the author, October 2016.

the gang the gang the bloody lovely gang
 the Tour
 the fabulous
 unique
 shattering
 all-embracing
 all-out
 Tour
 . . .
 yes we, the 2016 gang
 the Lucky Fxxxers
 we get . . . this
 we got . . . this
 yet . . . ³²

If I Roll a Six . . .

How do we archive the “luck” of the fringe?

There is some deep romanticization to this question, which doesn’t answer the question but prompts other questions. By focusing on fringe artists, I make a case of the fringe festival as a kind of heterotopia: a utopic space of theatrical innovation, political critique, and alternative social justice performance methods. And yet, the fringe is not a space without challenges. Questions of equity on stage and sexual assault loom large within conversations at the fringe tent, yet they remain mostly undiscussed and unrecognized by the fringe administration, arts community, and theatre scholarship. (Ironically, I’ve had much more success publishing and funding articles/research on the problems that surround the fringe, rather than the things that make it a community to begin with.) As such, where is there room to trouble the fringe as utopia while avoiding a reactive or reductive reading of festivals? Does archiving the fringe simultaneously lionize it? Who do we archive? What are the structural and social biases of “luck”? Is it really luck at all? Many returning performers do not get drawn in the lottery, but they know about Bring-Your-Own-Venue (BYOV), which follows an open-access model. The performers with the time, capital, and knowledge will rent their own venue or partner with other touring performers to get curated with or without the lottery’s help. If we see the fringe as a performance utopia, and luck as its god, we must also ask, “utopia for whom.”³³

32. Jem Roll, Facebook Post, September 29, 2016.

33. Keren Zaiontz, *Theatre and Festivals* (Macmillan International Higher Education, 2018), ix.

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