PERFORMING
ARTS RESOURCES

Creating Collective Identity: Geek Theatre, Fringe Festivals, and Fan Audiences

SCOUT STOREY
Independent Scholar

Fringe Festivals and Geek Theatre share a plethora of affinities: both have penchants for generating offbeat and experimental theatre as labors of love on shoestring budgets, attracting quirky subcultural audiences made up of theatregoers and newcomers alike, and creating a sense of community based on values of egalitarian access to self-expression. Geek Theatre manifests in an intersection between the affinity spaces of fandom and the live experience of staged theatre, facilitating a uniquely community-based affective experience in which artists and audiences share a common language and love for the geeky genres of their subject matter. The history of Geek Theatre is embedded in Fringe culture, which I argue is the perfect incubator for its campy aesthetic and dialogic relationship between production and fan audience.

Keywords: Geek Theatre, fandom, fan art, non-traditional audiences, marginal subculture

In an interview with fellow fan studies scholar Suzanne Scott, Henry Jenkins refers to fandom as "an 'affinity space,' 'community of interest,' a 'connectivity and collectivity' " (Interview 2013). What I call "geek theatre" exists at the intersection of this fandom space and the stage. This space is one in which the audience, far beyond the basic concept of a theatre public, constitutes a subset of a legitimate community, one that often also encompasses the performance's writers, producers, and even performers.

"Geek theatre" is a term coined by the Vampire Cowboys (VC), a genre fiction theatre company co-founded by playwright Qui Nguyen and director Robert

Contact: Scout Storey <scout.storey@gmail.com>

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Ross Parker. Nguyen and producer Abby Marcus, seeking a name that concisely described VC's multifaceted work and aesthetic, found their focus in their target audience: "the Geeks" (Bray 2014, 125). The Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company, the first and only professional theatre company officially sponsored by the New York Comic Con ("Bio"), got its start in New York City, producing at fringe festivals. Nguyen and Parker wrote and directed, respectively, and produced the premiere of *Stained Glass Ugly* at the indie Midtown International Theatre Festival in 2003. Nguyen recounts a moment in this production that proved an essential turning point: "We had 1 audience member at one of our performances. That audience member being Abby Marcus who would then take over VC as our producer and, well, we never had an audience problem again" (Nguyen 2019). VC's first show, *Vampire Cowboy Trilogy*, was produced first in 2000 at the Ohio University Seabury Quinn Playwrights Festival as a fringe event and later at the New York International Fringe Festival in 2004 ("Past Shows" 2019).

Like many other theatre companies that produce geek (or otherwise quirky) work, once they'd tapped into their audience, VC could boast not only general appeal to geeks but a loyal fan following of its own. As producers of geek theatre, appealing to a fandom-based audience generally overlooked in the world of theatre, VC filled a gap and created a much-needed space for fandom communities and geek expression on the stage.

John Patrick Bray has singled out the difference between the broader category of genre plays, such as science fiction or fantasy, and "geek theatre," such as the shows produced by VC, as "its dedicated focus on geek culture, and its mission to create a theatre for a geek audience" (2014, 125). He explains, "Geek Theatre [. . .] fully embrac[es] geek (subcultural fan) life, thereby attracting a very responsive geek (subcultural) audience" (124). As fandom builds communities, so too can geek theatre transform audiences into collectives. I will argue here that the affinity space engendered by fandom and evoked in geek theatre can be ideally cultivated in fringe festival audiences.

Fringe and Fandom

Fandom audiences searching for a home in the world theatre are practically destined to encounter fringe culture. Fandom and fringe festivals share a plethora of ideals, aesthetics, and quirks. Beginning with the obvious, neither fringe nor geek theatre attracts a typical theatre audience. Both audience subsets—fringe and fan—tend to be seeking something distinctly different from the mainstream. Both are audiences who veer toward the marginal and bizarre, who reject passivity in favor of participation, who enter their chosen cultural events in search not only of art or entertainment but of kindred quirky spirits.

Fringe already attracts a sort of fandom of its own. First and foremost, audiences who choose a theatre festival of any kind as a site of cultural immersion are typically already, on some level, theatre fans. Secondly, fringe attracts a dedicated and (some would say) deviant subset of the theatregoing community. Wesley Monroe Shrum, Jr., observes of fringe festival audiences: "Neophytes seem immediately to grasp the meaning of 'It's a fringe kind of thing' " (1996, 65). This statement would imply that such work attracts and requires a fringe sort of audience. Graydon Schlichter (2019) differentiates fringe audiences from commercial theatre audiences specifically by their "expectations, or rather the lack of them," praising their tendency to show up with "an open mind and questing heart" and the intention of "repeatedly hav[ing] their expectations subverted." Schlichter originated the concept for Kitty Keim's geek playscript *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead*, a Harry Potter/Tom Stoppard mash-up, and later premiered the role of Gregory Goyle at Hollywood Fringe in 2019. This fringe play serves as a prime example of the intersection of geek fandom and theatre fandom.

On what "kind of thing" fringe presents, Shrum notes that the definition—or at least connotation—of fringe has expanded since that first 1947 Edinburgh Fringe, simply defined as outside of the officially sponsored festival, to mean "a 'style' of performance or an 'approach' to drama," specifically an innovative style, "often by new playwrights and companies, performed in any kind of space" (67). The theatrically minimalistic connotation of fringe "style" is also comparable to fan production. Bray notes that fringe shows tend to be built "from the ground up" ("Dumpster Divers"). Fringe shows tend to rely on imaginative staging, both from an artistic and a financial perspective. Nguyen recalls mounting *Stained Glass Ugly* "with our roommates and like a $500 budget." Derek Davidson and Karen Sabo contrast typical fringe productions with more capitalistic, producer-backed theatrical endeavors: "Since nearly all fringe shows operate on a shoestring budget, they are freed from the pressures of having to produce massive financial return. Moreover, their budgetary constraints can inspire ingenuity in the creation of exciting and unusual theatre" (2016, 21). One gains a sense of creating a theatrical event almost solely on wit, love, and a roll of duct tape.

Shrum praises the very term "fringe" as "wonderfully evocative, connoting creativity, scruffiness, oddity, scandal, frivolity, youthfulness, frothiness, and frippery" (1996, 64). While the notion is romantic, fringe can inspire a sense of getting to the roots of theatre, the drive to create and to connect, by "eliminating" the "superfluous," as Jerzy Grotowski might say (2002, 19). Similarly, fan production is often solely motivated by desires to participate in the universe of a fandom's source text, to express one's own creativity, and to connect with fellow fans who share a love for the fandom or genre. Bray emphasizes that the success of geek theatre companies such as VC is inextricable from fan culture's love for given genres and bonding as a community: "Viewing audience members

as fans—focusing on the emotional interchange rather than direct economic exchange (though it would be foolhardy to suggest one does not exist)—is a key component in creating new audiences for the theatre" (2014, 128). By conducting themselves primarily as fellow fans rather than primarily as producers, they are able to create not only new audiences but also a community where these same audiences might be repelled or feel excluded by more traditional or capitalistic theatre. Jenkins explains the difference between typical attitudes of capitalistic production versus geek fan production:

> Fan cultural production is often motivated by social reciprocity, friendship, and good feelings, rather than economic self-interest. So many in the media industries are arguing that acts of "piracy," of "stealing content," are undermining their motives to create, and it seems important to hold onto the idea that people create for many different motives, only some of which are pecuniary, many of which are social, and some of which are enhanced through sharing rather than selling content.
>
> (Interview 2013)

Indeed, due to the nature of intellectual property and copyright laws, with the exception (occasionally) of parody, fan creations typically bear no hope of financial return, and the simple act of sharing them with an audience can carry the risk of legal ramifications. These works are almost exclusively labors of love.

Ric Knowles compares fringe to a free-market economy of cultural capital (2019). Jen Harvie states that "Fringe produced itself as specifically oppositional and intentionally anti-elitist, dedicated to operating as an inclusive rather than an exclusive festival, and presenting a broader range of work, by a greater range of companies, for a more diverse audience" (2003, 21). These principles of inclusivity and, as Shrum calls it, "nonselectivity" (1996, 88) are ideals that fringe and fandom share. As Abigail De Kosnik, in her book *Rogue Archives*, observes in online archives of fan-produced work, particularly fanfiction, the principle of egalitarian nonselectivity—reflected in the typical fringe theatre festival's refusal of adjudicated systems of play selection—is fundamental to fan culture. Fringe and fandom alike encourage equal opportunity for self-expression and creation, shunning systems of gatekeeping that dictate what work should and should not be made available for public consumption based on predetermined standards of quality.

The High Ground

Shrum observes that fringe's philosophy, by and large, is "markedly egalitarian" and that it "supports innovation and covets marginality" (1996, 14). Of course,

this egalitarianism does not and cannot guarantee quality as a necessary side effect of eliminating gatekeepers. More significant, however, is the guarantee that restrictive genre boundaries and elitist standards of "highbrow" versus "lowbrow" or "art" versus "entertainment" are not permitted to mediate what should and should not be given the opportunity of production. Of course, the dichotomy of fringe versus "official" is by no means synonymous with those of lowbrow/highbrow or entertainment/art. Rather, fringe represents the abandonment of such binaries along with the gatekeepers who determine them. As fan art has always been banished to the realm of "popular entertainment" without the possibility of parole, fringe again becomes an ideal site for geek artistic expression on a more democratic stage.

Fringe certainly provides one answer to audience studies scholar Susan Bennett's call for "new definitions of theatre and recognition of new non-traditional audiences" (1997, 1), and geek fandom is certainly a new and non-traditional audience. While theatre has frequently traversed the boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow, geek genres that generate fan cultures tend to exist purely in the "popular" media.[1] The term "popular" is here applied, as Lawrence Levine explains, "aesthetically rather than literally. That is, the adjective 'popular' has been utilized to describe not only those creations of expressive culture that actually had a large audience [. . .] but also, and often *primarily* [emphasis added], those that had questionable artistic merit" (1984, 46). Susan Sontag defines:

> The distinction between "high" and "low" (or "mass" or "popular") culture is based partly on an evaluation of the difference between unique and mass-produced objects. In an era of mass technological reproduction, the work of the serious artist had a special value simply because it was unique, because it bore his personal, individual signature. The works of popular culture (and even films were for a long time included in this category) were seen as having little value because they were manufactured objects, bearing no individual stamp—group concoctions made for an undifferentiated audience.
>
> (2001, 296–297)

Likewise, geek fan productions are not only stuck with the somewhat ironic "popular" label but are derided as derivative, using such "low" works of "popular

1. Geek fan culture is also noted (and notorious) for their "misbehavior" in applying academic-style close reading and discourse to "unworthy" texts, thereby disrupting hierarchical boundaries between high and low cultures. As Henry Jenkins points out, geek fandom's offense is in "treating popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts," and as a result, it "stands as an open challenge to the 'naturalness' and desirability of dominant cultural hierarchies" (*Textual Poachers* 17, 18).

entertainment" as raw material for their creations. De Kosnik points out that regardless of quality in the artistry, fan work "is never a candidate for earning designations of either 'art' or 'mainstream culture' because it is a subcultural production" (2016, 103). Where better for the marginal subculture than on the fringe? As Knowles points out, fringe festivals can "*disrupt categories*—in particular the categories of high and low culture, art and commerce, even [. . .] 'us and them' " (2000, 92). They also disrupt the boundary between stage and spectator.

Pass or Play

Fan studies scholars Jen Gunnels and M. Flourish Klink identify fandom as "a performed set of practices. It is something that one *does*." Likewise, geek theatre is not merely a site of media consumption but requires a participatory audience who can engage with the dialogic nature of the text and performance.

Geek fan culture is created not only by shared love for a given source text but also by a drive to contribute to the archive of that text by creating commentaries, revisions, and new media and material.[2] Ethnographer Camille Bacon-Smith specifically locates the geek fan's source of enjoyment not in "passive reception but [in] active engagement with her favorite genre or medium" (1992, 16–17). Fan scholars Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse note the "intertextuality of fannish discourse, with the ultimate erasure of a single author as it combines to create a shared space, fandom, that we might refer to as a *community*" (2006, 6). As a rule, fan cultures reject the notion of individual authorship in favor of shared creation within these communities. As Henry Jenkins stated in his foundational work, "fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings" ([1992] 2013, 24). In other words, geeks seek to become part of the source text's legacy through active participation, by performing their fandom, and blur the lines between audience and author/performer.

In this manner, geek fandom audiences are predisposed to the style and format of fringe theatre festivals, where the boundaries that separate artist and audience are known to shift and blur, and the mode of consumption tends toward the

2. Abigail De Kosnik's article "Theories of Fan Fiction" (published as Abigail Derecho) discusses in detail the archontic (borrowing the term from Jacques Derrida) nature of fan production, which contributes to ever-expanding archives centered around but not limited to the source text, as each contribution adds complexity to the original text and the archive as a whole. De Kosnik also comments in *Rogue Archives* on fandom's archontic production and the fundamental principles of fan culture that source texts, once released, belong not solely to producers but to the audiences as well; that fans have the right to contribute, expand, revise, comment, or create as they wish; and that all creations are equally worth preserving, regardless of who produces them.

participatory over the more traditional passivity of theatregoing audiences. For theatregoers, Shrum points out that "the lines between performers and audience blur here as nowhere else," as "fringe style" itself "implies innovation, intimacy, and often participation" (1996, 69, 109). Elspeth A. Frew and Jane Ali-Knight note that "fringe movements" not only "challenged the accepted definitions of 'high' and 'low' arts" but also "encouraged experimental theatre groups and the use of alternative venues" (2010, 232). Particularly as fringe shows are often produced in nontraditional theatre spaces, the boundaries of the stage are automatically unclear—and neither are they necessarily preserved even in more traditional theatre spaces. This blurring of boundaries fosters an intimate and much more equal relationship between performer and spectator than is typical of modern theatre, which takes its traditions from Diderot's fourth wall. Yet these traditions, though still pervasive, have been in crisis almost since their inception, particularly as theatre struggled against the advent of film as a competing medium. While film immediately became more suited to the style of realism, theatre has been forced to constantly redefine and explore its own strengths as a performative medium. In answer to this identity crisis, Grotowski argues—and actualized in practice—theatre can exist without the usual trappings (such as costume, set, spectacle, even stage) but "cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion" (2002, 19). Of course, in the digital age—and particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic—we have witnessed an explosion of mediated, online theatre. Even amidst this phenomenon, however, the space of live performance remains a singularly unique human experience. Moreover, much of this digital theatre, on social platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, maintains live audience interaction by drawing input from their chats.

For geek theatre, the content of a play is not merely a story being told but an intimate communication between the artists and audience, a sort of inside joke shared by a collective. This very ethos of collective identity is again in opposition to the cultural elite's distaste for participatory audiences. Levine explains that "though theatres [. . .] were public places, they were meant to create an environment in which a person could contemplate and appreciate the society's great store of culture *individuality*. Anything that produced a group atmosphere, a mass ethos, was culturally suspect" (1998, 164). As the sense of a shared space can lead to actively engaged and disruptive audiences, it is mistrusted by producers and architects of "high" culture alike, who favor passive, well-behaved audiences.

If fandom and fringe festivals have anything in common, possibly the greatest factor is the refusal to behave, to stay inside the lines. Sontag argues for just such a revolution against the standards of high culture: "The point is that there are new standards, new standards of beauty and style and taste. The new sensibility is defiantly pluralistic; it is dedicated both to an excruciating seriousness and to fun and wit and nostalgia" (2001, 303). This ideal echoes the

pluralism and diversity of fringe, the community of fandom, and the pursuit of a boundary-traversing artistic aesthetic.

Target Audience Locked

Bray argues that "Qui Nguyen and his company, Vampire Cowboys (VC), have risen in the ranks of New York independent theatres by actively cultivating not just an audience or a subscriber base, but a fandom" (2014, 121). Some of the first and most vital steps in building this fandom and the geek theatre company itself were taken in the incubator of fringe festival culture. Moreover, VC's plays and philosophy continue to find a home in fringe. In an interview on Affair of Honor's 2017 Vancouver Fringe Festival production of Qui Nguyen's play *Soul Samurai* (originally a VC show), producer/actor/fight choreographer Jackie T. Hanlin (2018) states simply: "We are creating a piece of theatre that we would want to see." This attitude is typical of producers of geek theatre, who are interested not merely in producing highbrow art or achieving financial success but in participating in the universes of their fandoms and connecting with their community. Hanlin adds that the company received multiple comments that the show "changed the minds of non-theatre people," generating nontraditional theatre audiences who have been previously overlooked or neglected by the mainstream and the elite. These are just the sorts of audiences that are cultivated by fringe festivals. Geek theatre forms enthusiastic, participatory, and communal audiences by engaging with fandom, creating community from a sense of collective identity, and employing boundary-traversing practices that are the very fare of fringe theatre festivals.

About the Author

Scout Storey is a playwright with a PhD from the University of Georgia in Theatre and Performance Studies with a specialization in Geek Theatre (genre plays and fandom performance) and an MFA in Musical Theatre Writing from NYU Tisch School of the Arts. In 2023, MB Stages produced two of his Geek Theatre plays, *The Year That Carrie Fisher Died* and musical *Boom, Headshot! A Geek Tragedy*, at the Hollywood Fringe Festival.

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