

THE ORLANDO FRINGE: AN OVERVIEW

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This paper provides a brief overview of the Orlando Fringe, which started in 1992 with the Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival, which is considered the longest-running Fringe theatre festival in the United States. The paper opens with a discussion of the origins and structure of Fringe festivals and then focuses on the history and organization of the Orlando Fringe, using a variety of sources, including an interview with former Executive Director George A. Wallace.

Keywords: fringe festivals, Orlando Fringe, theatre, community engagement, Orlando, Florida

Festivals and Community

I have long had an interest in festivals not only as an audience member but also as a scholar and as an archivist. When I was an assistant professor at the University of British Columbia (UBC) School of Information in Vancouver, Canada, I had the honor to work with the graduate students enrolled in my 2009 Archival Research and Scholarship course. In order to provide the students with hands-on qualitative research experience, and the opportunity to apply the theories and approaches that we were studying in class, I proposed a study to be conducted over the 13 weeks of the academic term. The topic I proposed focused on the multiple and historic festivals that were part of city life, including the Vancouver Fringe Festival (launched in 1985), the Vancouver Folk Music Festival (since 1978), and the Bard on the Beach Shakespeare Festival (since 1990). The students and I designed the study and formed research teams, focusing on how the festivals were being documented; I conducted interviews at the Fringe Festival and at Bard on the Beach. Our research was included in a Vancouver Sun newspaper

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article in January 2010, providing timely visibility for our research efforts.¹ My experience with this project, and my personal attendance at the wonderful Vancouver Fringe shows, gave me insight into the great world of Fringe festivals, which are so community oriented and tightly interwoven with the history of the cities they take place in. What I wrote in the Vancouver Sun article about local festivals is also true for Fringe festivals in general: “community is at the essence of the festivals in many ways and exists beyond festival time”²; “sources such as administrative documents, photos, videos and artifacts, as well as artists’ and people’s memories, are all part of archiving the festival experience and the organizations . . . No matter what we do in terms of formal archiving, the legacy lives on in the tightly knit texture of . . . [the] city.”³

Origins and Structure of Fringe Festivals

Fringe festivals provide a space for everyone and were inspired by the original Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which celebrated 75 years in 2022. “The Fringe is a three-week festival of performing arts that takes place in Edinburgh [Scotland] every August. Its story dates back to 1947, when eight theatre groups turned up uninvited to perform at the Edinburgh International Festival. The Edinburgh International Festival was an initiative created to celebrate and enrich European cultural life in the wake of the Second World War. Not being part of the official programme of the International Festival didn’t stop these performers, they just went ahead and staged their shows on the fringe of the Festival anyway, coining the phrase and our name—the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.”⁴ Since 1947, Fringe festivals have continued to grow internationally: World Fringe (an international association of Fringe festivals) states that there are over 250 fringe festivals worldwide.⁵ What makes them unique is their inclusive structure, although different festivals have different rules. For example, at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, “there is no centralised selection process and the festival as a whole is not programmed or curated (though individual venues choose which shows they want to programme).”⁶ Ben Hill writes that “most Fringe Festivals opt for an

1. Francesca Marini, “Festivals Help Vancouver Forge a Shared Cultural Identity,” *The Vancouver Sun*, Arts & Life section, January 16, 2010: F2.

2. Marini, “Festivals Help Vancouver Forge a Shared Cultural Identity.”

3. Marini, “Festivals Help Vancouver Forge a Shared Cultural Identity.”

4. Edinburgh Festival Fringe, “The Fringe Story,” Edinburgh Festival Fringe website 2022. <https://www.edfringe.com/about/about-us/the-fringe-story>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

5. World Fringe, homepage, “World Fringe Festival Database.” <http://www.worldfringe.com>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

6. Edinburgh Festival Fringe, “Putting On a Show,” Edinburgh Festival Fringe website 2022. <https://www.edfringe.com/take-part/putting-on-a-show>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

'open' or 'unjuried' approach to artist selection,"⁷ while some "opt for a 'lottery' system: participants are chosen at random from an annual pool of applicants,"⁸ and "others operate on a 'first-come, first-served' basis."⁹ There are some Fringe festivals that use a juried approach, though, for example, the Theatre Crude Fringe Festival in Oklahoma City,¹⁰ while other festivals are part-programmed or use a mix of approaches.¹¹

The Orlando Fringe

This chapter focuses on the Orlando Fringe and builds on a conversation with former Executive Director and current sponsor, Dr. George A. Wallace, who was one of the panel presenters at the October 2016 Theatre Library Association's symposium "Fringe Festivals: Live Theatre on the Edge." Dr. Wallace was part of the "Building Fringe" panel, in which "Fringe Organizers from some of the oldest festivals in the country present[ed] brief histories of their respective festivals, including audience outreach and engagement and what these festivals contribute to the performing arts scenes in their local communities."¹² The Orlando Fringe started in 1992, with the Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival, which is considered "the longest-running Fringe theatre festival in the United States"¹³; the festival is a member of the organizations World Fringe,¹⁴ the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals (CAFF),¹⁵ and the U.S. Association of Fringe Festivals.¹⁶ It is a very vibrant and complex organization, engaged in multiple activities and operating year-round; as the website states, "Fringe is all year long."¹⁷ There are "Fringe Year Round" events, as well as the 4-day Orlando

7. Ben Hill, "A Fringe Model," article 66, February 25, 2009, Hollywood Fringe website 2022. <https://www.hollywoodfringe.org/learn/article/66>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

8. Hill, "A Fringe Model."

9. Hill, "A Fringe Model."

10. Theatre Crude, "Info for Artists," Theatre Crude website 2022. <https://www.theatre crude.org/getinvolved>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

11. World Fringe, "What is a Fringe?" World Fringe website 2022. <http://www.worldfringe.com/what-is-a-fringe/>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

12. 2016 Theatre Library Association Symposium, "Fringe Festivals: Live Theatre on the Edge," symposium schedule, May 5, 2016. <https://www.tla-online.org/news/2016-symposium-2/>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

13. The Orlando Fringe, "What is Fringe?" Orlando Fringe website 2022. <https://orlandofringe.org/may/#what>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

14. World Fringe, <http://www.worldfringe.com>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

15. Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals (CAFF), <https://fringefestivals.com>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

16. U.S. Association of Fringe Festivals, <https://www.usaff.org>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

17. The Orlando Fringe, "Fringe Is All Year Long," Orlando Fringe website 2022, available at: <https://orlandofringe.org/home/events/>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

Fringe Winter Mini-Fest and the 14-day Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival, which includes an outdoor stage, special events, and activities. The 14-day Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival “is a safe space”¹⁸ and “is founded on being: 100% uncensored . . . the artists have full control over their performance; 100% unjuried . . . performers are chosen at random by a lottery, providing equity among artists; 100% accessible: ticket prices range from free to \$12 . . .; 100% inclusive . . . an environment where everyone is treated with love and kindness; 100% of all ticket sales are returned to the artists.”¹⁹ Kids Fringe festivals take place during the Winter Mini-Fest and the 14-day festival. Kids Fringe also includes Campy-Camp and year-round community events.²⁰ Visual Fringe is the visual art portion of the Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival,²¹ and Fringers of the Future encourages and develops artists in middle and high schools.²² The Fringe Collective, launched in 2019, fosters startup arts organizations in Central Florida.²³ For a short time, Pet Fringe also existed; Seth Kubersky writes: “2006: Pet Fringe . . . For a couple of years, there was also a Pet Fringe, attended by cats, dogs and other domesticated critters. It didn’t last, but it was early proof of the recent motto ‘Anyone Can Fringe.’ ”²⁴ In May 2022, the City of Orlando approved a new partnership with the Orlando Fringe, enabling the development of an arts accelerator program and allowing the organization to operate the theatrical performance space at 54 West Church Street (previously Mad Cow Theatre) in downtown Orlando.²⁵ The ongoing activities of the Orlando Fringe demonstrate how Fringe festivals can become an essential part of the fabric and heartbeat of a city.

18. The Orlando Fringe, “What is Fringe?”.

19. The Orlando Fringe, “What is Fringe?”.

20. The Orlando Fringe, “Kids Fringe,” Orlando Fringe website 2022. <https://orlandofringe.org/kidsfringe/>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

21. The Orlando Fringe, “Visual Fringe,” Orlando Fringe website 2022. <https://orlandofringe.org/visualfringe/>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

22. The Orlando Fringe, “Fringers of the Future,” Orlando Fringe website 2022. <https://orlandofringe.org/fringersofthefuture/>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

23. The Orlando Fringe, “The Fringe Collective,” Orlando Fringe website 2022. <https://orlandofringe.org/fringecollective/>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

24. Seth Kubersky, “20 Memorable Moments in Orlando Fringe History,” *Orlando Weekly*, May 18, 2016. <https://www.orlandoweekly.com/orlando/20-memorable-moments-in-orlando-fringe-history/Content?oid=2493130>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

25. The Orlando Fringe, “Orlando Fringe Partnership with the City of Orlando Will Allow for the Management of Downtown Theatrical Space and Creation of an Arts Accelerator,” press release, May 16, 2022. <https://orlandofringe.org/2022/05/16/orlando-fringe-partnership-with-the-city-of-orlando-will-allow-for-the-management-of-downtown-theatrical-space-and-the-creation-of-an-arts-accelerator/>, accessed on October 11, 2022; and Brendan O’Connor, “Orlando Fringe Announces Takeover of Mad Cow Space on Eve of 2022 Festival,” *Bungalower*, May 16, 2022. <https://bungalower.com/2022/05/16/orlando-fringe-announces-takeover-of-mad-cow-space-on-eve-of-2022-festival/>; accessed on October 11, 2022.

To avoid confusion, I want to reiterate that the Orlando Fringe is the overall organization, encompassing multiple components and activities, and that the Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival is specifically the “14-day immersive cultural experience held annually in mid-May,”²⁶ which was the origin of the whole organization in 1992.

A 2021 doctoral dissertation by Brook Akya Hanemann has examined the Orlando International Fringe Festival in depth,²⁷ emphasizing its values. Hanemann’s dissertation is “the first historical and administrative overview of the Orlando International Fringe Festival”²⁸ and provides an insightful scholarly contribution. It also discusses the work of Dr. Wallace, former Executive Director and current sponsor of Orlando Fringe, as well as former Vice President of CAFF. I interviewed Dr. Wallace about the Orlando Fringe, via email, in October 2021.²⁹ In the rest of this ~~chapter~~, I will briefly reflect and expand on Dr. Wallace’s answers to the interview questions, which were³⁰:

- 1) How and why was the Orlando Fringe established?
- 2) When did you get involved with the Orlando Fringe, and in what role?
- 3) How did the Orlando Fringe change and evolve over the years?
- 4) What would you consider the best and worst times for the Orlando Fringe?
- 5) What is your view on the significance of Fringe festivals in the performing arts landscape?
- 6) How does the Orlando Fringe fit within the North American Fringe festivals landscape?
- 7) What challenges is the Orlando Fringe currently facing, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?

I am discussing the content of the interview in four sections: “The Beginning,” “Close Ties,” “Evolving Over the Years,” and “The Importance of Fringe.”

26. The Orlando Fringe, “What is Fringe?”.

27. Brook Akya Hanemann, “The Orlando International Fringe Festival: An Historical and Administrative Overview,” (Doctoral diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2021). https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/5720. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

28. ~~Brook Akya Hanemann~~, “The Orlando International Fringe Festival,” XV.

29. Dr. George A. Wallace, email interview with the author, October 28, 2021. In 2021, the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB) classified the interview conducted for this ~~chapter~~ as “not research involving human subjects.”

30. These questions were formulated by Mr. Joseph Tally, Head Librarian at the American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.) in San Francisco, and editor of this Performing Arts Resources volume on Fringe festivals.



The Beginning

In Dr. Wallace's words, "the Orlando Fringe was established in 1992 by three area men, who sought to bring a Fringe Festival to downtown Orlando and increase the cultural vitality of Orlando. The founder is Terry Olson, who is currently the Director of Arts & Cultural Affairs for Orange County Government."³¹ Seth Kubersky writes that "it all started with three members of SAK Theatre (Terry Olson, Andy Anthony and Rick Kunst) and a dream to start an unjuried, uncensored festival in the spirit of Edinburgh, Scotland's famous Fringe."³² The SAK Theatre Company first opened the SAK Comedy Lab on Church Street in downtown Orlando in 1991 as a professional ensemble of improv comedy actors.³³ The company originated in Buffalo, Minnesota, "when four individuals with a background in evangelical street theater began performing at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival in 1977."³⁴ Olson, Anthony, and Kunst produced the first Orlando International Fringe Festival, which was presented by the Orlando Theatre Project and was performed outdoors and indoors, including "in four storefront spaces" (SAK Theatre Comedy Lab at 45 East Church Street was one of them).³⁵ The first festival brought "together 28 plays, comedy acts and musical revues from England, Canada, Puerto Rico and the United States to give more than 160 performances in downtown Orlando in the space of 10 days,"³⁶ and it ran from April 24 through May 3, 1992.

Close Ties

The Orlando Fringe has become an Orlando institution; many people have helped the organization grow and have stayed connected with it over the years. Dr. Wallace has been connected with Fringe in different capacities over time. In our conversation, he shared: "I began volunteering in 2005 and, in 2007, I was awarded the Volunteer Excellence Award. In 2008–2009, I was Volunteer Coordinator and then in 2010 I began working mostly full-time, first as Director of

31. Wallace, email interview.

32. Kubersky, "20 Memorable Moments in Orlando Fringe History."

33. SAK Comedy Lab, "We Make Stuff Up," SAK website 2022. <https://www.sakcomedylab.com/about>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

34. SAK Comedy Lab, "Our History," SAK website 2022. <https://www.sakcomedylab.com/about>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

35. Elizabeth Maupin and Sentinel Theatre Critic, "On the Fringe of Something New the Orlando International Fringe Festival Will Be 10 Days of Plays, Comedy Acts and Musical Revues," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 18, 1992. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1992-04-19-9204170329-story.html>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

36. Elizabeth Maupin and Sentinel Theatre Critic, "On the Fringe of Something New"

Operations and then as General Manager. I was promoted to Executive Director in 2014 and left in 2017. For seven years I served as Vice President for CAFF, the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals. In 2017 I served as Associate Producer of Indianapolis Fringe and resigned following my first festival. I worked in some capacity for Orlando Fringe for 10 years and I am currently a sponsor.”³⁷ Other key figures have been part of the Orlando Fringe at different times. For example, the current executive director, Alauna McMillen Friskics, started her career at the Fringe as a new staff member in 2001 and helped the organization recover from the damage caused by a fire that destroyed the archives and other assets in 2002.³⁸ After working at other institutions, she came back in 2017, as executive director, and helped the Fringe through the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁹

Evolving Over the Years

In the course of its history, the Orlando Fringe has been through good and bad times. Dr. Wallace said that the years 2012–2017 were a time when the organization saw the largest growth.⁴⁰ In his opinion, the worst times “were the years 2001–2004, before moving. The organization faced many financial struggles and lost a great deal of props, etc. in a fire.”⁴¹ Hanemann discusses this dramatic fire and writes about “the loss of the Festival’s entire storage contents, which burned in the 2002 fire that destroyed the Old Bryan Hotel.”⁴² Elizabeth Maupin wrote in the *Orlando Sentinel* that “when the beat-up old Bryan Hotel burned Saturday afternoon, more than a shuttered flophouse was destroyed. Stored in the 80-year-old building on West Church Street were most of the belongings of the Orlando International Fringe Festival—slim pickings to somebody else, maybe, but prize possessions to the Fringe.”⁴³ The Orlando Fringe writes that “fire broke out in the old Bryan Hotel on West Church Street. It was where Fringe stored schedule boards, podiums, the colorful air tubes, and our archives. No programs or photos survived. Everything was lost.”⁴⁴ As mentioned in the previous section, Alauna

37. Wallace, email interview.

38. The Orlando Fringe, “Fire at the Old Bryan Hotel,” Orlando Fringe website 2022. <https://orlandofringe.org/2002/03/25/fire-at-the-old-bryan-hotel/>, accessed on October 11, 2022; and Elizabeth Maupin and Sentinel Theatre Critic, “Hotel Fire is a Tough Act for the Fringe,” *Orlando Sentinel*, March 27, 2002. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-2002-03-28-0203270404-story.html>; accessed on October 11, 2022.

39. The Orlando Fringe, “Fire at the Old Bryan Hotel.”

40. Wallace, email interview.

41. Wallace, email interview.

42. Hanemann, “The Orlando International Fringe Festival”: 172.

43. Elizabeth Maupin and Sentinel Theatre Critic, “Hotel Fire is a Tough Act for the Fringe.”

44. The Orlando Fringe, “Fire at the Old Bryan Hotel.”

~~McMillen~~ Friskics was one of the people who helped the organization recover from the consequences of this destruction, and many others helped, including supporters who started fundraisers, benefits, and auctions.⁴⁵

When discussing the evolution of the Orlando Fringe, Dr. Wallace stated that “the most significant change, in my opinion, was the move, in 2004, from downtown, where empty storefronts had been converted to theatres, to Loch Haven Park, where there were professional theatres. It was the cultural hub.”⁴⁶ Hanemann discusses festival locations in chapter 5 of her dissertation⁴⁷ and writes: “The move happened in two phases starting in 2004, with the footprint split between Loch Haven, a 45-acre cultural park, and downtown Orlando.”⁴⁸ The City of Orlando states that “Loch Haven Cultural Park covers 45 acres and serves as the region’s premier cultural park”⁴⁹ and “is home to Orlando Shakespeare Theater, Orlando Science Center, Orlando Repertory Theatre, Orlando Museum of Art, Orlando Fire Museum, Mennello Museum of American Art, Orlando Ballet, Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival, [and] Ivanhoe Village Mainstreet District.”⁵⁰ The Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival is not only expanding geographically; the number of shows and the size of its audience have grown over the years. Growing from 160 performances in 1992,⁵¹ the festival now features “850 ticketed theatrical performances and a free outdoor music festival.”⁵² Dr. Wallace stated that “the other significant growth has been in attendance”⁵³; Matthew J. Palm writes that “2019 was ‘the best year ever’ as attendance hit an all-time high”⁵⁴; and “just shy of 75,000 people attended the 28th annual festival.”⁵⁵ The increase in attendance, though, was unfortunately damaged by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic: Palm reports that about 45,000 people attended in 2021 and 48,000 people attended in 2022 (the 2020 festival happened online).⁵⁶ Other organizations have been facing

45. The Orlando Fringe, “Fire at the Old Bryan Hotel.”

46. Wallace, email interview.

47. Hanemann, “The Orlando International Fringe Festival,” 179–216.

48. Hanemann, “The Orlando International Fringe Festival,” 179.

49. City of Orlando, “Loch Haven Park,” City of Orlando website 2022. <https://www.orlando.gov/Parks-the-Environment/Directory/Loch-Haven-Park>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

50. City of Orlando, “Loch Haven Park.”

51. ~~Elizabeth~~ Maupin and Sentinel Theatre Critic, “On the Fringe of Something New.”

52. The Orlando Fringe, “What is Fringe?”

53. Wallace, email interview.

54. Matthew J. Palm, “2019 Orlando Fringe Festival Hits Attendance High in ‘Best Year Ever’,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, May 30, 2019. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/entertainment/arts-and-theater/os-et-orlando-fringe-2019-success-20190530-hxtqmop5ijhjezi3vxlx2jclte-story.html>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

55. Palm, “2019 Orlando Fringe Festival Hits Attendance High in ‘Best Year Ever’.”

56. ~~Matthew J.~~ Palm, “Price Hikes, Weather, COVID-19 May Have Hurt Orlando Fringe Attendance,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, June 14, 2022. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/entertainment/>

similar setbacks as a consequence of the pandemic. Dr. Wallace remarked on the fact that the 2021 festival had a scaled-back in-person version and that the organization “faced significant financial loss.”⁵⁷ But, as an organization, the Orlando Fringe continues to “increase the cultural vitality of Orlando”⁵⁸ and continues to expand its important presence in the city. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a May 2022 partnership with the City of Orlando allowed the Orlando Fringe to operate the performance space that previously housed Mad Cow Theatre in downtown Orlando.⁵⁹

The Importance of Fringe

The conversation with Dr. Wallace touched on many important topics related to Fringe festivals. Dr. Wallace considers Fringe festivals essential to the performing arts landscape⁶⁰:

“Fringe gives performers a platform to travel the world and workshop and showcase new and unique works.”⁶¹ In discussing how the Orlando Fringe fits within the North American Fringe festivals landscape, Dr. Wallace remarked that “it is unique in the fact that it is the oldest of its kind in the nation [the United States].”⁶² He also added that “the Orlando Fringe essentially kicks off the summer tour for many Canadian artists,”⁶³ a comment that underscores the importance of festivals beyond national borders. When Dr. Wallace talked about his growth within the organization, he emphasized how Fringe festivals rely on and nurture volunteers, as an integral part of the organization, and told the story of how a volunteer can move up to Executive Director. Dr. Wallace’s remarks about the original founding of the festival, with performances taking place in empty downtown storefronts, spoke to the importance of the arts in re-energizing communities. Hanemann also points out how the festival was founded “in defiance of the perceived chokehold that

arts-and-theater/orlando-fringe/os-et-orlando-fringe-festival-2022-results-20220614-cw4x-ncplivcwjm5hqbl6umeily-story.html. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

57. Wallace, email interview.

58. Wallace, email interview.

59. The Orlando Fringe, “Orlando Fringe Partnership with the City of Orlando Will Allow for the Management of Downtown Theatrical Space,” and Brendan O’Connor, “Orlando Fringe Announces Takeover of Mad Cow Space.”

60. Wallace, email interview.

61. Wallace, email interview.

62. Wallace, email interview.

63. Wallace, email interview.

the area's theme parks had on the region's creative artists."⁶⁴ Dr. Wallace also addressed the enormous growth of the festival, which Hanemann emphasizes, too. This is a testimony to the success and popularity of Fringe festivals, inspired by the original 1947 Fringe.

The ongoing success of Fringe festivals, and of the Orlando Fringe in particular, demonstrates how art is for all communities and not only for the elite; art is democracy and engagement, as this themed Performing Arts Resources volume shows.

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