

Street performers feel ignored this summer

Edinburgh's street performers are being turfed off the area they have made their own on the High Street during this year's Fringe, and they are very angry about it.

To signify their protest more than 130 artists and supporters including impressionist and comedian, Rory Bremner, have signed an open letter to The Fringe Society which they will hand in to Fringe officials on Tuesday morning.

The letter points out to the society that they feel ignored, and they are worried about the direction of the management of the

spaces which are so important to them on the High Street.

The group says in their letter that the performers are “outraged” that The Fringe Society is allowing sponsor, Johnnie Walker, to position a bar on The Mound with an enclosed family performance space in the bar making it unusable for most performers.

The plaza beside the galleries has been used as a performance space all year round since the 1970s, and now the street acts say they would be expected to perform there for free. They go on to say: “When infrastructure such as stages, arenas, bars and seating are placed on the spaces we perform, the very nature of ‘Street’ show is lost along with the ability to deliver our art form to our audiences.”

The West Parliament Square pitch is “internationally recognised as one of the best places to perform street shows”. But it will also be unworkable as a performance space this year for many acts as there will be an arena built there.







Todd Various, Super Scott, Matt Von Trap and James James, street performers on Edinburgh High Street. Photo: © 2021, Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

There have been consultations between representatives for the performers and the Fringe Society, but the performers say it is all pretence and their feedback was disregarded.

Matt von Trap is a comedy magician and street performer on the Royal Mile, and in common with the others in our photo is a local, living here in Edinburgh all year round. Usually he and other artists can be found on the Royal Mile on the street outside the Fringe office where they attract people to gather in a circle and watch their acts. This is, he says, their front room and office, where people know they can usually watch street performances. We understand that from the

beginning of August there will be a Fringe information point there instead.

Instead of their usual space, the performers will be restricted to using two other designated spaces – one outside St Giles and one at the foot of The Mound, where sponsors Johnnie Walker will position a bar. Johnnie Walker have become a major sponsor of the Fringe in the last three years, and are developing the new visitor centre and retail experience in the former Frasers building at the West End.

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James James, street magician.
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Todd Various originally from Detroit Michigan.
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Super Scott
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Matt Von Trap

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Matt explained to us where the difficulty lies. He said: "We are not going to be able to perform anywhere on the High Street. Personally, I perform to a circle crowd and understand that the Fringe are trying to make everything Covid secure, but what has happened this year is that the Fringe has not listened to us at all. I have been involved in meetings with the Fringe where they have made promises that they will make sure it works for the performers. We have now got to a point where the community is quite desperate and very upset really because we don't feel like we have been listened to.

"We feel that the consultation was a pretence to them and they have brought in a private events company, Unique to run what was a public festival. Organisers have now put a Johnnie Walker bar at The Mound with a performance space. I won't be able to perform on that as it is too small for me. I work in a

much bigger space like this one outside the Fringe office on the High Street. We all love the Fringe and their core values of openness and open access. But this year they have allowed the space to be taken over by Johnnie Walker to put a bar in place with an arena for Covid security.

“I don’t see how replacing street entertainment with street drinking is safer than having street performers. It is described as a family friendly bar – what is more family friendly than jugglers and our other acts?”

Matt explained that the council and government public health officers have said that any performances have to be within a controlled environment, and their little piece of Edinburgh on the High Street would not meet the criteria. As well as using the area over a number of years, the local street performers have been using the space for a number of weeks until now this summer. The group of performers who take it in turns to wow the crowds have talked to the police on a number of occasions and there have been no problems or complaints about the performances. Matt said: “The police say that as long as we are asking people to socially distance, to stay in their bubbles and to keep access clear on both sides of the street. Whenever performers ask people to move during the show they ask them to keep their distance.”

Amelia Cadwallader, who has been in discussions with the Fringe and is a regular street show performer at the Festival, said: “For many years the Mound has been a wonderful location for Street Events. A family friendly space with musicians, market stalls, face-painting, caricaturists, clowns, magicians and jugglers, which has been full of life and easily accessible for families with small children, the elderly and those with restricted mobility. They could come and spend the day enjoying what was on offer. I do understand that due to the pandemic the Fringe Society needs to control the crowd numbers, but I question the choice of a Johnnie Walker Fringe Club bar venue as the answer.”

“For many years the street performing community has had concerns that the historic performance spaces would be turned into commercial venues. These concerns have been repeatedly brought to the attention of The Fringe Society, who’ve always replied that there was no basis for our concerns. Yet here we are, an historic performer pitch whittled down to a corporate bar and commercial venue, with a small space for one busker that has to perform inside the bar,” she added.

Dave Southern, a veteran Fringe street performer who first performed on the Mound in 1988, said: “It seems street drinking is more important to the Fringe Society than street performance this year. Having a bar as part of an open air family performance space is like having a drive-thru restaurant on stage with the ballet!”

The Fringe festival is due to begin on the 6th of August, with Fringe organised street shows and busking confined to just three locations including the spot in the Johnnie Walker Fringe Club Bar. Despite concerns over this year’s plans, many street performers are determined to come and perform safely for the audiences who come back to the Royal Mile and Mound year after year to see thrilling, hilarious and spectacular entertainment that is open to all.

Another of the street performers told The Edinburgh Reporter he would probably stay at home in August, meaning that the city’s streets could be bereft of family entertainment.

A spokesperson for the Fringe Society said: “Performances will only be possible in purpose built spaces in order to comply with public safety and Covid mitigation. Additional busker and small performance spaces will also be available and managed by the street team to allow audiences to enjoy the Fringe Street Events safely and comfortably. This includes the Mound precinct, which will also host space for buskers amongst other activity taking place there and what is possible under the current public safety guidance.”

Chief Executive of The Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society, Shona McCarthy said: “The iconic Fringe Street Events is part of what makes this festival so special, and we’ve done everything we can with partners across the city to enable it to take place in some form across the city. These measures are in place to support public safety and allow audiences to enjoy what our world class street performers have to offer, and are only in place for 2021 in line with required covid mitigation. We look forward to the full return of Fringe Street Events in 2022 on the High St and Mound.”

We have also asked The City of Edinburgh Council for comment.

The letter to the Fringe Society offers a framework of a way to engage in future years, particularly demanding a promise that street performance spaces will not be sold off to anyone.



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