

Attila the Stockbroker urges everyone to “Reclaim the Fringe!”

The veteran Fringe performer [Attila the Stockbroker](#) (John Baine) has launched a broadside against the contemporary Fringe.

The punk poet and multi-instrumentalist musician believes that it's time to 'reclaim the Fringe'.

In a piece 'Edinburgh: a Tale of Two Cities' (reproduced below – with permission), he outlines that the 'democratic and accessible fringe' he first experienced in the early 1980s has been overwhelmed by 'corporate' forces, especially in the comedy sector.

In his polemic, Baine echoes the concerns [recently expressed by Richard Demarco](#), one of the key figures in the Fringe's rise to international standing as an arts festival. Demarco regards the trend towards more and more stand-up comedy as tied up with the Fringe's transition from a culturally ambitious event to 'a money making machine'.

Demarco believes the contemporary Fringe is a pale imitation of what it once was. In similar fashion, Baine now sees the city at Festival times as a city of two parts, only one of which is culturally authentically alternative. Otherwise, there is a proliferation of 'ghastly corporate pop-up monstrosities', which are manifestations of a very different Fringe.



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For Baine, the only part of the Fringe which is true to its roots is the [PBH](#) Free Fringe, set up by Peter Buckley Hill in 1996. The idea behind the Free Fringe is that 'instead of paying for a venue and charging for tickets, there should be no hire charge and free entrance for everyone'. Those who enjoy the show can put 'a voluntary donation in a bucket at the end'. The PBH Free Fringe certainly allows many Fringe-goers to take a chance and try something a bit different, as undoubtedly the ticket prices at the big venues put off many.

Baine's sentiments were also echoed by the comedian [Harun Musho'd](#), who, in addition to his own show, regularly chairs the daily Political Breakfast – as part of the PBH Free Fringe. For Musho'd, the Free Fringe is crucial in opening up the Fringe to those without promotional support or the money

to invest. Stories abound of performers struggling to pay for their venues, including one at the Mash House who tried to sell their slot to recoup some of their losses.



EDINBURGH: A TALE OF TWO CITIES –by Attila the Stockbroker

I love being in Edinburgh – and I mean the place, not just the Fringe. The most brilliant thing about doing the Free Fringe at Bannerman's Bar is that I am at the very epicentre not just of the Festival but also of the whole city.

Bannerman's is the beating heart of the independent music scene, my chosen venue. I've played there on tour at other times of the year: it is an atmospheric, authentic metal/punk bar with wonderful, friendly staff and locals. Performing there, and doing my two early music shows at the totally contrasting St Cecilia's Hall: Concert Room & Music Museum literally 40 yards away, I am truly 'playing Edinburgh': local institutions, not ghastly corporate pop-up monstrosities cashing in for three weeks and, so I'm informed, spending forty-nine as literally a waste of space in a city which desperately needs it.

Festival time is a tale of two cities. Last Thursday I walked from Bannermans to Easter Road to watch Hibs v Luzern. Down

the Royal Mile, crammed with visitors and festooned, like everywhere else in the centre, with endless streams of corporate billboards advertising endless streams of corporate or, mostly, would-be corporate comedians (virtually nothing else!) making endless streams of revenue for corporate Festival promoters – and guaranteeing financial misery for many performers with stars in their eyes. Then I turned left and was in a different world: one called ‘Edinburgh all year round’.

The billboards stopped, to be replaced by lamp posts with freshly attached stickers from the FC Luzern Ultras en route to the game (I added a few of mine advertising my show: no billboards for me, just carefully located stickers, a few posters and social media). The hordes of tourists were replaced by streams of locals heading to the match. The pubs were full of football fans. Don’t get me wrong: I love the bustle of Festival time, otherwise I wouldn’t come, but as at Bannermans or St Cecilia’s I was in ‘my Edinburgh’ now. The same happened on a much smaller scale on Saturday when I dashed from my show to the new (and, I’m afraid, utterly horrible) Meadowbank Stadium to watch Edinburgh City v Queen of the South. Two different worlds, side by side.

But it absolutely doesn’t have to be like that – those two worlds could be reunited. The PBH Free Fringe is in the vanguard of a movement to reclaim the original idea of the Fringe as a festival accessible to all, performers and audiences alike, locals and visitors alike, regardless of ability to pay. Because it really was like that forty years ago.

When I first came to Edinburgh in 1982 I played the Assembly Rooms, now the jewel in the corporate crown, for a door split: it was run by hippies and I’m pretty sure I remember Musho’d church pews for seats. Over the next ten years I did different spaces – Wilkie House (with excellent feminist comedy trio Sensible Footwear) and a converted boxing ring at Marco’s

Leisure Centre (with John Otway, who is doing a Free Fringe show at the Voodoo Rooms tonight) being two which stick in the mind. Always for a door split: gigging's how I earn my living! Then I stopped to tour abroad and do August music festivals and when I wanted to come back I was told I had to literally pay to play. In the words of one of my old poems I said 'Bollocks to that' and, I thought, said goodbye to 'Edinburgh' for ever.

PBH's Free Fringe brought me back. It's a wonderfully simple idea. Established hospitality places – bars, cafes, you name it, many not usually performance spaces – take shows for the three weeks, charge no rent to performers and make money from the audiences we bring in. We let those audiences in for free and invite them to make donations at the end of the show. I can tell you from years of experience that many most certainly do! We advertise, not via expensive billboards, but via social media (part of the point of this very post) and the Wee Blue Book and Free Fringe app. Plus, of course, each individual show's flyers and posters.

It really, really works, it is reclaiming the original idea of the Fringe from the corporate monsters, and they HATE it. When Covid recovery money was available via the Arts Council they got loads and the Free Fringe not a penny. But the message is spreading and the task now in my view is to get more and more 'big names' to join us and more reviewers to come to shows. (I don't care about reviews, they make no difference to me one way or the other, but many need them!)

We're taking the Fringe back.

(Attila the Stockbroker, August 2023)