

Enter The Haunting Presence of Edinburgh Deaf Pioneer Alexander Blackwood

Step into the haunting presence of Alexander Blackwood – and meet other historic Scottish heroes of world-wide deaf community.

Saturday (10 August) sees the world-premiere of *The Ghost of Alexander Blackwood*, created and performed by an all-deaf team, and performed as part of the Edinburgh Deaf Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe.

Blackwood (1805-91) was one of the city's most pioneering but least known historical figures. The son of a city haberdashery owner and became deaf aged seven after catching scarlet fever.

It was a time when deaf people's prospects were often bleak.

Blackwood made it his life's work to change this, becoming the pastor of the world's first deaf church, which originally met in Lady Stair's Close in 1830, and founding the world's first deaf-led benevolent society in 1835.

That organisation grew into Deaf Action, the charity now based in Albany Street, which runs Edinburgh Deaf Festival and whose mission is to "support and celebrate deaf people".

Performed in British Sign Language (BSL), and with creative captioning for hearing audiences, the play is an intimate and insightful journey which highlights Blackwood's profound impact on the deaf community.

Meet other famous deaf figures from Edinburgh's history along the way, and discover how these interactions shaped deaf society and language.

Jamie Rea, Producer, said: *"This is a tale that's both unusual and enlightening which celebrates a man who was a true pioneer an important figure in the campaign for deaf people to have equal access and opportunities.*

"His legacy is immense – in 1835 he founded the world's first deaf-led organisation, which has now become Deaf Action, and which continues to build on his beliefs and ideals nearly two centuries later.

"The play is also a celebration of Edinburgh's outstanding role as a city that has influenced deaf culture around the world."

The play was written by Nadia Nadarajah, a deaf actor and playwright who feels Blackwood's message still resonates today.

Nadia said: *"I am delighted to be coming back to this year's Edinburgh Deaf Festival, not only as an ambassador but as a playwright for the new production, The Ghost of Alexander Blackwood.*

"This festival holds a special place in my heart as we've evolved so much from the first festival. We've learned so much from the process and we are proud to share this with audiences.

"What makes this year even more special for me have been the ability to collaborate more with deaf artists and creatives. Being part of a deaf-led production this year has meant deaf artists have collaborated, shared our skills, and learned so much from each other, even more than before. We can't wait to showcase our hard work to both old and new audiences at our third festival."

Deaf Action has also launched an Alexander Blackwood Heritage Tour which takes people round the city sites associated with his life and work, including the location of the first Deaf Church services and his gravestone in Old Calton burial.

This will be the third Edinburgh Deaf Festival, and in its brief history it has done much to improve access by providing a diverse array of shows and events that reflect deaf people's experiences and the UK's vibrant deaf culture.

This is vital for a group which is still very much marginalised.

Funding challenges mean it was a struggle to stage a festival this year, and the programme has been slimmed down.

About Edinburgh Deaf Festival

The event, which runs alongside the Edinburgh Fringe takes place from 9-18 August and is unique in the UK – providing a platform for deaf talent, giving deaf audiences access to the arts and inviting hearing audiences to experience a vibrant area of creative culture.

Organised by Deaf Action (the world's oldest deaf-led organisation) it continues the pioneering work that made Edinburgh a world-leader in championing the interests of deaf people.

The programme, which has had to be slimmed down from 2023, also includes:

- **Gavin Lilley:** The renowned deaf comedian brings us his stories about life as a sign language user, traveller, and a weary father of three. Gavin performs across the UK and Europe and has performed alongside John Bishop. A unique perspective on our diverse cultures.
- **Listen to the Forest:** Do forests carry a message which needs to be shared? This is the place to ask these

questions and listen to the voice of the forest. Take a journey that melds movement improvisation, music, creative writing and BSL. A dance performance created from a workshop on the same day.

- **John Smith:** Drawing on personal experience and real-life observations, John offers an amusing insight into what it's like as a deaf person navigating a hearing world.
- **Life is a (Deaf) Cabaret:** Join us for fresh and exciting cabaret, as emerging performers take to the stage to showcase their talents. Featuring dance, sign songs, comedy, drama, and monologues, performances will be a mix of English and BSL.
- **There Is No Me Without You:** Two sisters navigating life's challenges, growing apart and rediscovering the true meaning of family. A short theatre performance followed by Q&A.

Workshops allow participants to discover more about everything from photography to deaf history. There are children and young people's workshops on art, interactive storytelling, TV production and more.

Then there are also a variety of other productions which are holding accessible performances including Lubna Kerr's new play *Chatterbox*, which is part of the Fringe and the Edinburgh International Festival's *Hamlet*.

An Interpreter on Demand service allows deaf people to arrange an interpreter or captioner for Fringe shows that are not accessible.

- <https://tickets.edfringe.com>

