

Still Battling to Free the Fringe

The success of the Netflix series *Baby Reindeer* and the furore that followed it brought Richard Gadd's name to the attention of many.

It was a reminder that Gadd's initial breakthrough came at the Edinburgh Fringe.

More specifically, Gadd first came to prominence through PBH's Free Fringe, initially via 2013's *Cheese and Crack Whores* and culminating in his comedy award winning 2016 show *Monkey See Monkey Do*. Gadd's success was a manifestation of the PBH's Fringe's role as a nursery of talent and a clear illustration that the Free Fringe deserves to be taken seriously.

The Free Fringe is a significant part of the Edinburgh Fringe, in both scale and cultural contribution, but faces constant challenges.



Despite such moments, PBH's Free Fringe remains on a constant financial tightrope, threatening to tip into bankruptcy at any moment. Started by Peter Buckley Hill in 1996, it was inspired by a desire to reform the financial model of the Fringe, making use of the many unused spaces in the city. The deal is that the venues used will get trade from those attending the shows as payback. In this way, PBH's Free Fringe supports local businesses, rather than the money going elsewhere via the big venues. Free Fringe venues range from regular spots (such as the Liquid Rooms, and Banshee Labyrinth – where Gadd performed in 2016) to spaces that may open up for a short time-and may then join the roster. In my experience this has meant some creative re-use of spaces; I've found myself in areas of the Old Town that I didn't previously know existed!



Peter Buckley Hill – ‘head honcho’ of the PBH
PBH’s Free Fringe is now one of the largest players in the Fringe but its future is deeply uncertain. Speaking recently [to Elise Harris](#), Peter Buckley Hill stated that the Free Fringe is “under attack” from elements of the paid Fringe “who want to see us dead”. He sees a number of other elements of the Fringe adopting aspects of the Free Fringe model but not being truly free, in that they charge performers a fee for the space they perform in.

The Fringe is, he believes, “full of profiteers...trying to make money off the performers”. He wants Fringe-goers to “distinguish between the true and genuine free fringe” and those with free admission to the public but “do not benefit the performers”. This model does lead to the constant financial tightrope. The financial situation is particularly severe post – Covid, as the Free Fringe received nothing from the Resilience Fund. In contrast, the big venues received substantial amounts. All PBH’s Free Fringe gets comes, as its CEO Luke Meredith puts it, “from the generosity of the general

public”.

The Politics of the Free Fringe

I discussed the Free Fringe with Harun Musho'd and Chris O'Neill, hosts of [The Political Breakfast](#). Cannily, this 9.30am show is the earliest starting in PBH's Free Fringe programme (the Wee Blue Book), drawing in those keen to start their 'fringeing' early. On a wet Monday morning (following a thunderstorm), the show played to an impressively full house.

For Musho'd, it is the inherently political nature of the Free Fringe that inspires him. A number of PBH performers are certainly expressly political in their shows, such as Attila the Stockbroker (John Baine) and Kate Smurthwaite. At another level, PBH's Free Fringe is, by its nature, a critique of a highly commercialised cultural sphere. Musho'd sees PBH's Free Fringe as a necessary alternative to the paid Fringe, which he considers “exploitative”. PBH's Free Fringe's aim is to “stop exploitation of performers by someone”, agents, venues etc. Though he's not directly involved in the running of PBH's Free Fringe (“I'm not in the close circle”), Musho'd uses his position on the Board of Directors of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society as a voice for the Free Fringe. In his 'bucket speeches' he passes on the Free Fringe message and why it needs urgent financial support.

One battle the Free Fringe is constantly fighting is retaining its best venues. Every year, some of the best are poached. This has long been part of the Fringe and was the source of a conflict between PBH's Free Fringe and Laughing Horse's The Free Festival. Laughing Horse have themselves now lost one of their key venues – Cabaret Voltaire on Blair Street. Just the Tonic is seen as leading the poaching at present. What is particularly irksome to those involved with PBH's Free Fringe is the unproved suggestion that some of the big venues are using some of the money from the Resilience Fund to induce venues to jump from the free to paid Fringe. However, Musho'd

and O'Neill don't see the paid Fringe as one monolithic force, praising year-round venues such as The Stand and Monkey Barrel for giving performers a fair deal, not fleecing them.

Not only does PBH's Free Fringe seek to make the Fringe more accessible for performers but also for the public. While the performers do ask for voluntary contributions at the end of their shows, it is on the basis of "pay what you can afford". With Fringe shows at the big venues getting expensive, this model allows those on a limited budget to enjoy the Fringe. For Peter Buckley Hill himself, PBH's Free Fringe is "a collective of performers working for each other and the benefit of the public".

The Leith Hub

One criticism that could be made of PBH's Free Fringe is that it has added to a geographic 'centralisation' of the Fringe. As Musho'd admitted, the Old Town has become "saturated" with Fringe venues; more so than in past decades. Most of the PBH's Free Fringe venues are in and around the Cowgate. This adds to the sense of a city overrun with tourists and Fringe-goers, especially around the notorious South Bridge bottleneck. Even a venue such as Brewdog on Lothian Road is considered to be geographically marginal, though it does see good footfall. The need to spread the Fringe out over a wider area is a pressing one. Luke Meredith, CEO of the Free Fringe rejects the centralising charge, pointing out that the big venues have led this, while PBH's Free Fringe has consistently made efforts to disperse further afield, including this year. As Meredith puts it, "Where are the outlying venues from the "big four"?"

O'Neill admits that generally "most venues outside the centre have struggled". PBH's Free Fringe shows often rely on people nipping into them, taking a chance. They are far less likely to walk 20 minutes or so to get to a venue. This year, PBH's Free Fringe has made a significant effort to spread, with five venues in Leith and, Musho'd feels, things have started

promisingly. Leith's status as a self-contained community (and one of the most densely populated urban areas in Scotland) means that there are plenty of locals around, without a great need to entice people down from the city centre. Leith is also an established cultural venue.

As the manager of one of the new Free Fringe venues, the Satyr Bar on Leith Walk, outlined, many Fringe-goers stay in Leith. This again adds to the potential audience. He admitted that hosting Fringe shows had been a "learning experience", but, especially at the weekend, the shows at the Satyr Bar had seen good numbers. He felt that PBH's Free Fringe had potential to establish itself in Leith as there were several venues within a short distance. It was well worth fringe-goers making their way down Leith Walk. Musho'd himself performs at the Strathmore Bar and has enjoyed performing in such a vibrant area. He hopes that it will increasingly become "a hub for the Free Fringe".

Bare bones

Musho'd embraces the communal aspect of PBH's Free Fringe and the bare bones aspect. The Political Breakfast is for him "the epitome of the Fringe" in the rawness of its venue. It's a very basic set up: the humid basement of an eatery with clanging noises coming from the kitchen. Audience involved in the show (today was a bit low energy, "people were mainly in listening mode"). More broadly, stand-up suits PBH's Free Fringe because of its inherent simplicity. Some have argued that the Fringe is now dominated by stand-up comedy, with other art forms somewhat sidelined. Another Free Fringe performer Neil Davidson describes the Fringe as "an orgy of stand-up". Musho'd admits that there is truth to this, but defends stand-up because of its "low barriers of entry". It is, he argues, the "most democratic art form". Musho'd though would like to see greater diversity within stand-up, "which is generally dominated by white men".

In a number of ways, PBH's Free Fringe manifests a stripped down cultural experience. Many Fringe-goers embrace this while others are more comfortable with the more polished venues of the paid Fringe, with their battalions of t-shirted staff. In contrast, whether PBH's Free Fringe sinks or swims depends on getting their message out there and getting good numbers in the door. It also relies on people taking 'a punt' on shows.

Eccentric but enjoyable efforts such as Neil Davidson's *The Thermos Museum* (Satyr Bar, 15.40) are the type of shows that have that 'only at the Fringe' feel but add variety to it. At the other end of the spectrum, Mark Simmons' *More Jokes* and Markus Birdman – *We Are All in the Gutter, but Some of Us Are Looking at the Gutter* demonstrates that established acts are delighted to be part of the Free Fringe. More generally, PBH's Free Fringe adds much to the richness of the Fringe. For how long will it continue to do so?