

Starting from Scratch to Performing at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival

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A Seed

August indicates a time of artistic explosion in Edinburgh, as well as a time of pilgrimage for countless theatre practitioners from all over the world.

As a drama student in the UK, I planted a seed deep in my heart when I was enrolled three years ago. I have also been an avid audience of the yearly Edinburgh Fringe Festival to improve my own theatrical perspectives and practices.

Dedicated to offer showcasing spaces for rebellious, anti-commercialization works, the core of Edfringe lies in its encouragement of small groups to pursue diverse and anti-mainstream work. Edfringe finally made its comeback following a three-year suspension due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The opening of theatres fuelled my enthusiasm out of which emerged an idea of creating a performance for us international students in the UK. I attempt to inquire into such existential issues as a city we can't wander, a home we can't return to, engaging with or retreating from the neoliberal society, living in the present or the future.

An invisible group in British society doesn't mean nothing can be represented about the international Chinese students. Three years of theatre studies has taught me that everything can become sources of theatre. A performance will have its social significance as long as targeted audiences find their way into the play.

As Phoebe Waller-Bridge, President of the Edfringe Society, says: "New forms of artistic movement are born here, and cultural exchange is once again moving forward and developing". In the 2013 Edfringe, she created a seemingly niche show, *Fleabag*, about modern urban femininity from the perspective of a woman working in London. The play became a huge success and had recently been successfully reproduced in television, due to its breaking-the-fourth-wall dramatic style and unique perspective unveiling a real London underneath its gilded glamour.

It is a perfect example of the magnitude of the 'fringe' perspective. Nevertheless, I am also quite aware that a "marginal" subject matter and aspiration may not necessarily mean success. Yet it can certainly lead to a process of experiments and attempts, given that the first step to success is to learn lessons from every attempt.

Some breeding

We need to set a desired goal before we start, and the “watering” process should be completed step by step. The first step was to set up a timeline. The seed was officially planted at the end of March. As a result, all of the work had to be done within five months before the show. The hardest thing was the participants, but I was lucky enough to have Guozhao Sun, who had a passion for my subject matter and whose schedule coincided with mine. As a fledgling theatre group who was about to make its first attempt in Edfringe, this five-month period was bound to be difficult. Yet the passion for theatre and Edfringe helped us overcome any difficulties.

Then came the most realistic issue—costs, i.e., how to make full use of all the resources we held. In terms of personnel, we needed to play multiple roles both on and off stage, as this would have saved us loads of money for the estimated ten-day run in Edinburgh. The issue of venue is also a tricky one. Our school’s rehearsal rooms would meet all our needs and help us to determine the minimum accommodation of audiences for the official performance. An examination of how well the show, the stage, the audience and the off-stage work could accommodate each other will allow us to choose a well-located and cost-effective venue.

Finally, the key is the script. The combination of international students and dreams would be a familiar and inclusive dramatic integration given the lack of staff, because dreams are caused by both logic and absurdity and meanwhile project the vulnerable inner worlds of different international students. We may not be able to present the identity issues of the Chinese diaspora as intriguing as David Henry Hwang’s representation of Chinese Americans in *Yellow Face*; as an international student, however, I hope that the self-deprecating humour and critical spirit can be incorporated into our work: “Is This the Real Life?”—an absurd but real dream.

Some Light

However, creativity has its own limits, for our experiences and perceptions may not be typical of all international students. In order to prevent the creation of a closed book, I started to use the dramaturgy of “Verbatim Theatre” to interview and record the detailed dreams of international students.

These materials, under the theatre creation, gave birth to a person or a label through which most international students can see their own shadows. It has a decadent, dark side as well as a positive, sunny side, and a side on the verge of mental collapse due to the pressure of working on a dissertation. We had therefore created five separate dreams, including one about physical health and religious beliefs, one about socialising and stereotyping, one about employment pressure and being manipulated by waiters, one about democratic freedom and traditional conservatism, and one about transcending oneself to achieve the ultimate fantasy.

Dreams are reality’s projections where we are able to venture into the neglected details of reality because we are omnipotent and unaccountable. In order to restore the most realistic dreams, we broke the relationship between people and space. Moreover, all elements on stage could be switched without logic, thus creating a world where the border between the real and the imagined was blurred in service of the theme. Although the theatrical universe had been built, we still required a formal performance before our Edinburgh debut to receive feedback from the audiences, because our work came to nought without the audiences. Our work should be exposed in advance so that we would be capable of catching the eyes of the audiences among over 3000 performances in the festival. A picture-perfect poster and flyer were none less important than a sophisticated staging. So, over the next two months, we worked intensively on rehearsals, compositions and promotional materials, culminating in two consecutive performances at the University of Exeter’s ‘Term 3 Festival’. To our surprise, most of the Chinese and British audiences were able to understand our English-speaking performances and to give us feedback, which increased our confidence to travel northward to Edinburgh.

Edinburgh



Some Tending

Certain topping treatments and pruning of plants are necessary for their sustainable growth. So does theatre. We were inspired by feedback from different groups of audience members.

Since then, we refined the script by some cuts and also updated relevant current affairs in August in our script, such as the government imposing fake “Red QR code” on certain citizens to block petitioning in Henan and Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan. The goal was to be more relevant to the target audience of the production - those interested in the Chinese student community. The fable ‘Carving the Boat for the Sword’ was also added and attracted more overseas audiences interested in Chinese culture, testifying to the effectiveness of our adoption of dreams. The music and lighting have been simplified due to the configuration of the venue, which also avoided copyright issues associated with commercial performances and maintained operational stability. It also accommodated Edfringe’s advocate for Jerzy Grotowski’s idea of Poor Theatre that pursued a dramatic core with fewer external embellishments.

We further simplified costumes and props, with every single one used for multiple purposes. We had been making adjustments until our last show at Edfringe. Although the quality of each show was different, the new environment and feedback we received from audiences influenced the quality and reputation of the work to some extent. The process also accelerated our own growth and survival in this competitive environment. For example, with the feedback from audiences who suggested the end of August was the deadline for postgraduate theses in the UK, we were able to make a more successful, robust, and sophisticated production. We also incorporated into our play the students’ pressure under theses-writing in a more exaggerated form, combined with the incessant over-services of waiters. All in all, as long as the show is still running, it’s important to absorb audiences’ feedback and make further progress. ■