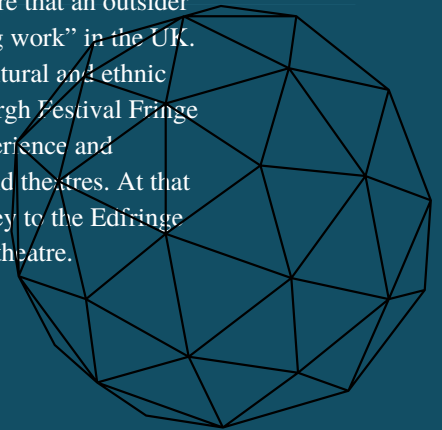


From Viewers to Participants

Guozhao Sun

Before I came to study in the UK, I had watched dozens of videos of National Theatre Live in China, which contributed to my initial impression of foreign theatres: huge stage, exquisite design and epic script. And I was well aware that an outsider like me is impossible to present such a “big work” in the UK. Coupled with my language barriers and cultural and ethnic background, my initial plan for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe was just to be a viewer to increase my experience and understanding of different genres of arts and theatres. At that time, I didn’t expect that this special journey to the Edfringe completely reshaped my understanding of theatre.



FRINGE

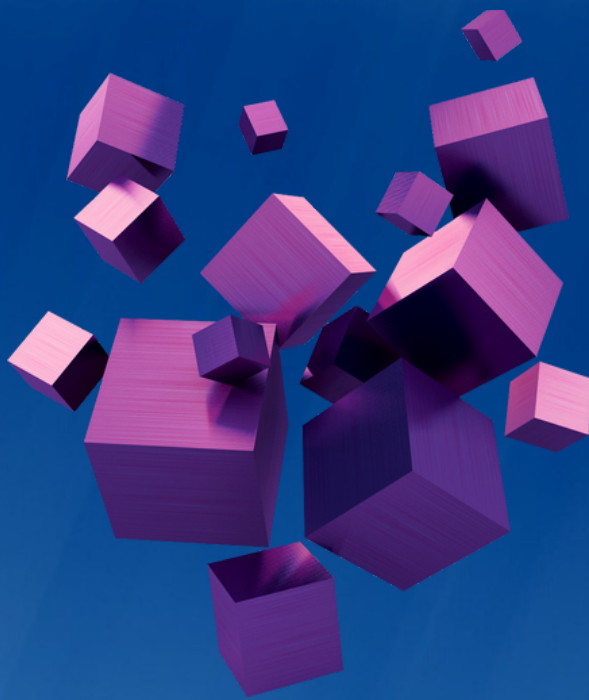
Initially, I didn't have much ambition for our work and only desired to participate in the school's T3 Festival. However, during the creation and rehearsals, my theatre partner Hongye came up with the idea that we made an audition on T3 and finally used this work to participate in the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. When I heard what he said, I was excited at first and worried afterwards. After all, such an exercise opportunity was rare for many domestic students. However, by then I didn't know anything about the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, except that it was one of the world's most famous arts festivals. And as I mentioned before, my understanding of foreign theatre was still superficial. I thought that the performances in the art festival were all supposed to be "big works". Yet in our case, we just have each other. I was worried that we could not display such an exquisite and grand effect. But after I came to Edinburgh, everything I saw and felt broke my scarce cognition. In addition to garbage, the streets and alleys were also full of vivid vitality—acrobatics, band performances, comedy performances, and behind-the-scenes teams that did their best to publicize their team performances. There were even a few warriors who came to Edinburgh alone from thousands of miles away. These performing groups are not limited to college students, children, and professional teams, but also many adults working in multiple fields. I even saw a retired lady disguising herself as Queen and distributing her leaflets on the streets. This suddenly reminded me of the night before our trip to Edinburgh. I read a post written by a Chinese drama graduate student on the social platform. He questioned how long it will take for the theatre to be popularized across the country. During my college years in the UK, I have contacted many foreigners, and I found that they are not much different from us in many ways, which also makes me wonder why their theatre culture is so popularized. I think I found the answer in Edinburgh.

I believe that many people in China, like me, believe that theatre is to present perfection to the audience. However, the vast majority of Chinese people do not have access to artistic training. Most of them have struggled to make a living as adults and have no time to learn and digest new things. When such artistic “perfection” is established in front of them, they will naturally feel a sense of estrangement, which makes them afraid of artistic creation. When we are thinking about “popularization”, we prefer to convince more people to watch the play and accept the theatre. In Edinburgh, however, it presents me with a completely different feeling.

“Everyone can have a chance to watch, and everyone can have a place to perform.” This is the gist of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. During my stay in Edinburgh, I watched the works of the International Theatre Festival, went to the Black Box Theatre of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and also met a variety of artists performing on the street. I realized that in the festival, they did not just identify themselves as viewers, but also added their own voices in theatre, not limited to the venue, forms, or even to any language. Nevertheless many travellers will also complain about their own wrong choices of the performances and the uneven quality of the works at the festival, complaining that they couldn’t understand the elements at all.

For the audience, this is indeed an unpleasant experience; but from the perspective of theatre development, more people with different voices joining the theatrical creation is conducive to its own growth. Some raw works will indeed appear, but this will also provide continuous vitality for non-mainstream dramatic creation, just like the catfish effect. Given time, the creative potential of non-professionals is immeasurable and such a cycle will fertilize the soil of theatre organically.

Festival



I think this is the core value of the Edfringe and an important reason for the high popularity of Western theatre climate. The popularization of theatre should not just attract more people to watch the work and resonate with the work, but also enable them to love this form of art and to understand what theatre can do for them and how they can also participate. Although some audiences are fascinated by the charm of theatre for the first time, the vast majority of people are not willing to invest their energy and money in unknown things. Therefore, I believe that to allow them become participants and truly integrate into the play would be an organic approach to theatre popularization. ■