

2021 Fringe Report to the AGM

The last time I formally reported to the AGM as Studio Production Manager was in June 2019. Since then a new season of planned Studio shows commenced in the Autumn of 2019 to be followed by the very disruptive nature of the pandemic with which we have become so familiar. Despite this, we have managed to put on a number of Fringe shows, though sadly this meant vacating the Studio in 2020 due to Covid restrictions affecting capacity and ventilation.

The Studio and Fringe shows present opportunities for members new to directing and others wanting to direct from outside the membership. This is a tradition I have been keen to continue. Fringe shows are an alternative to those in the main auditorium. Often edgy, non-traditional and generally small scale they have created for the QMT, a distinct following from those seeking a different artistic experience. Due to the transfer of some of these shows to the main auditorium that distinction has, unfortunately, become rather blurred over the last year or so.

Before any thought of pandemics, way back in October 2019 Matt Gray directed a riveting production of "Radiant Vermin" by Phillip Ridley in the Studio with Cameron Fraser, Laura Mead and Emma O'Connell in the cast. This darkly funny morality play about the housing crisis implicated the audience as they responded to the way the story played out.

In January 2020 two plays by Janie Sheppard's KickAss plays for women, "Nine" and "commencing" were imaginatively directed by Andy Darley assisted by Lisa Hutchins with Amy Walker, Emma Orr, Hannah Morgan and Louise Pearce. Edgy, original, and darkly comic, these two plays examined in very different ways the tender, funny, often tortuous quest for meaning.

"The One" by Vicky Jones, sharply directed by Rob Hughes, featured Katie Millward, Matt Gray and Emma O'Connell was the Studio production in March 2020. This vicious relationship piece asked some uncomfortable questions about the boundaries of assault in a gripping piece of drama.

Then Lockdown enveloped us, curtailing all shows at the QMT. Instead, Members were entertained and participated in a succession of playlets and workshops. And the term "Zoom" stole into our vocabulary. During this time a sequence of Fringe-style plays especially written for Lockdown by Emma Northcott were available to all via Zoom.

The Fringe season recommenced in October 2020, reopening the QMT, after the first lockdown, albeit temporarily, with "Heisenberg: The Uncertainty Principle" by Simon Stephens and directed by the sure-footed Keith Swainston. This two-hander with Claudia O'Connell and Rory Reynolds was an intriguing play about love and physics. Performed in the main auditorium under social distancing seating as our Studio was now out of action due to capacity and Covid associated ventilation issues.

Another virtual lockdown prevented any further Fringe shows until June 2021 and "Bull" by Mike Bartlett about office bullying and energetically directed by Maisie Brooker with Laura Mead, Doug Brooker, Jordan Clarke and Rob Hughes. Staged at Woodside Theatre where the space enabled the play to be set "in the round" creating an highly immersive, yet uncomfortable audience experience as the writer intended.

In August 2021, "The Retreat" by Sam Bain and eagerly directed by Russ Hurn with Harry Harding, Will Hextall and Emily Walls was performed in the main auditorium. This was an outrageous comedy with a hidden soul and some classic one-liners.

In 2019, I reported that ticket sales for Fringe shows, overall, had increased by 12.5%. Given the disruptive nature of the last couple of years and although audience attendances have been relatively high, it is difficult to make any comparisons with previous years.

Many thanks to the Technical, Backstage and Front of House teams for helping to keep the Fringe shows alive, during what has been a difficult period for all.

Let's hope that we can return to our Studio during the next season to full capacity seating to provide that intimate Fringe experience.