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THE ONLINE ISSUE

NOISES OFF

NSDF 2020

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Theatre and Covid-19 // Under review • Baptism of fire • Shattered but in focus • Stucka, unstuck

Theatre and Covid-19 // Slow connection • Enduring Rose • Feeling overwhelmed

Photography: Brett Chapman

Theatre criticism

Under review

Shanaé Chisholm delivers a call to arms for theatre critics in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic

Writing about theatre is the hardest part about writing about theatre. At least, it was until the outbreak of coronavirus.

It took me a while to realise that another obstacle in my writing process was about to make itself known, alongside the original obstacles of procrastination and writer's block. Restructuring your thoughts and making them coherent for public consumption is a hard task. Does it make sense? Is this really what I think? Am I being fair to the play and the creatives? Throw in a tablespoon of self-doubt and you're staring at a blank Word document a week and a bit after seeing the show. But what happens when the first ingredient is missing? What happens when there is no theatre to watch?

What I enjoy about theatre is its immediacy. The audience are active participants in an emotive experience that is unique, despite how many times it is performed. Theatre can be made by anyone and it doesn't need to be extravagant or ground-breaking to have an impact. There are many moving parts to a theatre production and as a critic or a blogger, it is both a privilege and a responsibility that you earn when you decide to write about it. Your perspective provides insight into something that only ticket holders can access, an opportunity to share a story that might not be told again. So, when I write about theatre, I feel like I have a purpose, like I am completing an important mission. Finding a show to watch and physically going to watch it gets me out of the house, keeps me busy and aids my mental health. Now that the theatre industry has had to shut its doors and turn off its lights, what role do theatre critics play? How do we contribute?

Amazingly, but not surprisingly, theatres have begun to share content online as a means of combating the temporary loss of live theatre,

and it's great. The relationship building between audiences and theatres as a result is a step in the right direction, especially in a time when being isolated is both a blessing and a curse. Getting free access to shows that you may have missed due to lack of awareness, cost or timing, is a priceless offering that is keeping theatre lovers engaged and hopeful. As a critic, it gives me new writing opportunities, but it also makes me think about the future of theatre and whether there is a greater need for online streaming services. Once we're past the need for social distancing, is there a world where live theatre has a permanent home online? What do we lose, and what can we gain, in this eventuality?

Not only does streaming theatre online give theatregoers something to watch during this time, it also opens theatre up to those who might never have been able to attend it before the outbreak. Streaming content or at least having an online archive for it, makes live theatre more accessible for those who need captioned performances or BSL interpreters. Moving theatre online, also enables those who cannot travel to a theatre, a way of engaging with the work, without having to compromise their health. In turn, theatres which may not be able to provide the equivalent amount of captioned or BSL performances would have a means of doing so without the cost of providing this level of access for every performance. With this in mind it's plausible and exciting to imagine a future in streaming theatre online post-Covid 19.

We would then have to take into consideration where the funding for captions, BSL translators, videographers and editors would come from and whether theatre online is sustainable financially. Would it be free or would you need to register as someone who requires this service? Would it deter people from physically going to the theatre? Would we lose the essence of what

makes theatre one of the most human ways of communicating with audiences?

At the very least, moving to online theatre starts a conversation about increasing access. It highlights that there is a potential gap in the market that isn't being tapped into, one which will still be in high demand once we get through this period of uncertainty. The prevalence of online theatre in times like today shows that there is a community behind the plays that are being produced, regardless of how long ago the show was performed. Online content has uncovered an international theatre community that wants to thrive and stay connected.

So what does this mean for theatre critics? Coronavirus has shown us that we crave a sense of being heard and being seen, we want to feel like we are part of something.

If you write about theatre at a time when theatre isn't as readily available, your voice on the matter holds even more value than you think. If you're feeling something, someone else probably feels the same way. As a critic or reviewer, you are able to put emotions and experiences into words, you are a translator of all things lighting and sound, cast and creative. You put pen to paper in situations when people leave their seats speechless. The reason why you write about theatre is bigger than the stage, what you have to say, how you say it and why you say it, is the driving force behind your desire to write. Theatre is a mix of the replication, reinvention and representation of stories that have been lived and continue to be lived today. Tap into that. Re-engage. Your voice still has a purpose. What can theatre tell us about the now?

Graduation

Baptism of fire

Graduating without a final show is like emerging without being immersed, says **Lucy Donaldson**

A fortnight ago my university shut its doors and we entered the abyss. An abyss filled with new deadlines, new digital platforms and a new version of what graduation may look like. I am a finalist student studying Drama and Theatre and most formative moments of my degree have been cancelled.

For the first few days it was raw. We processed our lost energy, creativity, and performances. We had the most collaborative and all-encompassing aspects of our degree severed by the pandemic, at the end of the process with no performance to show. Of course, I recognised the need for this to happen, but the overriding fear, shock and numbness of the escalating global situation was overwhelming.

Over the last few days my peers and I have started to adapt our work into digital formats – challenged to harness our talents in more specific ways and through new means. Digitising set design, developing sound cues and projection with the spare time we now have – we have stretched our ideas to the edges of what is defined as theatre. Although challenging, archiving our work has proved somewhat rewarding as we see our concepts come to life. But a laptop screen will never be the same as a stage. You can't recreate an ensemble's

sharp intake of breath before the adrenaline of performance takes over – no matter how many zoom calls you have. My peers and I have missed the final negotiations and finishing touches of what we imagined our final performance would be. I miss the shared experiences, space, anxieties, and mistakes. I've missed the debates about whether the green wash was green enough, or whether the sound was too sharp or too soft. We've missed knowing what our audience would have understood from our work – knowing the success of our creative decision and gaining trust in our own creative intuition.

But whilst we miss the true and intended ending of our degrees, we also miss the cautious baby steps into the industry. We've spent three years preparing to transition into an industry that at this very moment has fundamentally changed. And whilst working digitally has allowed me to become more assured of the career path I want to take (producing), I don't know what I will do with this once the world opens up again. Where will this year's graduates go? Will there be space for us to intern and carry on learning? How can we reshape the most formative stages of our education for our own gain and fulfilment? Will we create more immersive work that reflects our collective craving for connection? We can adapt and overcome all we like, but until there is space

for us to emerge into again, it is hard to imagine where our constricted creativity will end up. The theatres are closed, the fringes are cancelled and our introduction is paused.

Of course, these things will start up again and we always have next year, but my anxiety lies in whether we will be visible. With the artists that came before us also having to re-establish themselves and their work, will there be space for the Class of 2020? At the moment it's impossible to know where we will go and what new challenges we will face.

Having said all of this, we have two things to our advantage. Firstly, we have had to creatively adapt to an unprecedented situation as we teeter between the roles of 'student' and 'artist' – a unique predicament for us all. And secondly, we have each other. An entire year group faced with the same circumstances and a drive to emerge, maybe not this year, but in the years to come. Although we will emerge without being fully immersed, we will bring fresh eyes, digital skills and an unprecedented ability to adapt and overcome extreme pressures.

☞



What's with the solo?

Issy Flower weighs in on the abundance of monologues on our stages and screens



From *Fleabag* to *Bojack*, *Dot Cotton* to Ian McKellen, the monologue is everywhere at the moment.

It's understandable – monologues allow for close insights into character and situation that is rarely found in the hustle-and-bustle of contemporary theatre and television. They allow an audience to move into the mind of a character and share with them their private thoughts and feelings, those that are perhaps only revealed through subtext in previous encounters. However, with accusations of narcissism, plagiarism, financial ulterior motives slithering in alongside the praise, do we really want a theatre entirely populated by them?

Admittedly, the monologue provides, and has provided, an attractive prospect for writers looking to flex their muscles by fully inhabiting a character, and for theatres looking to appear supportive of this. Despite the mass of resources the National Theatre possesses, they still chose to put on a one-man show, *Death of England*, reflecting their commitment to top quality acting and writing as well as spectacle which recent shows, such as *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, have demonstrated. *Death of England* allowed the audience to get inside the mind of a man who feels disenfranchised in his own country, a thrilling move when the Brexit divide has chucked these issues to the top of the mile, and so the monologue allowed the theatre to explore themes and values that can be lost in an increasingly digital and technical theatrical

world, even if that means using some of the theatre's fund in something that might lose money.

However, there's a thin line between this and just putting on a vanity exercise. Ian McKellen's recent tour combined interviews and anecdotes with speeches ripped from their original contexts and used as trophies. Surely it's enough for McKellen to demonstrate a lifetime of theatrical skill without presenting tired-out monologues to an audience that's more hungry for stories about Peter Jackson than Henry VIII. Shakespeare wrote monologues for a reason: to connect his characters with the audience and reveal their inner workings. The reason was not a victory lap around regional theatres, no matter how laudable that aim might be.

Similarly, the preponderance of female-led monologues seems to be a blessing and a curse. This can be attributed to the incredible success of shows such as *Chewing Gum* and *Fleabag*, which started as short fringe pieces and catapulted their writers to stardom through the clever mix of taboo topics and recognisable situations. It's difficult not to like the witty voices of Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Michaela Coel, who speak to young British women in a way that a lot of art has struggled to before, and watching it as a teenager I really connected with the trials and tribulations of their lives. However, as the Royal Mile from last year's Fringe can attest, everyone seems to have jumped on the bandwagon. You cannot move in small-scale theatre for one or

two-woman shows discussing periods, mid-life crises and sex stories, in a way that is meant to be shocking but can't do anything but become wearing. Of course we want these stories to be told, without them there'd be a distinct lack of freshness and flair, but there are ways to tell them that don't copy Phoebe Waller-Bridge.

If you look at the sources, film, television and theatre have been delivering both epic largescale work – like the recent Marvel CGI-fests – and monologue shows, for decades upon decades. Shakespeare was attempting to deliver battle-based spectacle in the 1590s, and BBC and ITV were producing weekly plays and serials at the same time they were importing *The Incredible Hulk*. The sudden jump in monologue based shows receiving awards is only an indication of the current trends. These shows have always been here, have always been well written and acted, and their visibility is only due to fad.

The real question is whether we really want this fad to continue. True, we have gained some incredible pieces of television, film and theatre from it—but what we've got alongside them is as a dull market saturated with monologues all saying the same thing or drenched in vanity, put on to lower costs or to challenge the predominance of the blockbuster. The monologue may be here to stay—but I for one would like to put it in the rubbish.



Wiley, windy moors

Sam Ross interviews playwright Flora Wilson Brown on her NSDF-selected show *to the moors*



What playwrights have really inspired the writing you've done?

Obviously everyone, a lot of young women especially, say Alice Birch. I went to see *Anatomy of a Suicide* with [my friends]. I remember all of us sitting outside the Royal Court for like ten minutes after it finished just completely staggered in silence, because we just couldn't talk about the magnitude of what we'd seen. Also Nina Raine I really love – I love her characters. And Nina Segal as well – I love how it feels like her plays are really happening in the room, like they would happen differently if you weren't there.

Both your plays which were selected for NSDF (*Tanya* last year, *to the moors* this year) are inspired by classic literary texts (*Eugene Onegin* and *Wuthering Heights* respectively). What draws you to working from these starting points?

It's interesting – I've been thinking about this recently. The reason I wanted to do *Tanya* was because [*Eugene Onegin*] made me really angry. I really loved it and I really hated it at the same time, and I wanted to see what that story would be now. With *to the moors*, I really wanted to work with Lizzie Carpenter (the director) and I knew she really loves classic texts. I gave her three texts that I was working on. She chose *Wuthering Heights*, because she loved the Brontës.

But also I think it's about making a canon –

taking works that we all love and we all study as children because they are brilliant, and then making them more for us now. And also it's definitely about centring a non-male perspective.

What themes interest you most when writing?

I think love is a big one: different kinds of love; the boundaries or limits of it; how it cracks and changes under different pressures. Capitalism is a big one for me, and the effect that it has on humans and on our relationships – how transactional our lives are. And the environment has become a bigger one in the last year. I think at NSDF last year someone said that if your play doesn't talk about climate change at all then you're talking about it by emitting it. I don't know about you but it's literally at the forefront or somewhere in my mind all the time. People our age, we're always thinking about it. So I think it would be weird if it wasn't in my work.

There are quite a lot of adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* this year, such as Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre's recent production and Emma Rice's upcoming staging with her company Wise Children. Why do you think there's been a renewed interest in the story now?

I think part of it is probably that we are as a culture looking for more female voices. Not that they are necessarily getting commissioned in big spaces or getting the attention they deserve,

but there's definitely a lot more attention being paid. So I think all these classic texts by women are being revisited. But also it's such a powerful story, and every generation is going to have their own attachment to it. It would be strange if it wasn't get revived every ten years or so.

What should audiences familiar with *Wuthering Heights* (and those who are not!) expect from *to the moors*?

So there's two stories in *to the moors*: there's a modern-day story set on the moors, and there's the story of Cathy and Heathcliff. There are no other characters from *Wuthering Heights* in it. It's more about the cultural impact of [the book], and how it's changed the way that we perceive love. It's a lot about the landscape, and about loving someone so much that it becomes unhealthy – what that looks like now and what it looked like then. And it's a bit about Emily Brontë. She is really cool! It's quite lyrical. It's quite visceral, quite intense, but I think it's got a hopeful ending.

Favourite Kate Bush song?

I'm gonna have to say '*Wuthering Heights*', just because we listened to it a lot when we were making *to the moors*, and now I have a lot of really nice memories associated with it!



SHOWS THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN

Testimonial

Unseen

The cast of *Seen*, one of the selected shows for NSDF this year, are still hopeful, says **Annie John**

Photography: James Shaw

There is trepidation as the cast step on stage to perform *Seen* in front of eighty year olds in a secondary school in Plaistow on a cold morning in January. It's still a work in progress. We have no set. Or lights. Just some bodies in a room. And eighty expectant faces waiting for something good to happen.

It started in autumn 2019 with a provocation from Zest theatre company to create a short response to the concept of 'Youthquake', the subject matter for their upcoming (and brilliant) production. After sharing a short scratch performance with Zest in October, we developed the piece and by February we had toured it to hundreds of 14-16 year olds in and around East London.

We are based in a sixth form college in Newham, which has both the youngest as well as the most ethnically diverse population in the country. Over five years of extreme austerity, Newham was forced to reduce its spending on youth services by 81%. The fallout from this was our starting point. We had no idea how personal and

angry (and sweaty) the show would become.

In the early stages we play games. We make lists. We tell each other stories. We listen to Kendrick Lamar and Nina Simone. We laugh (and sometimes cry). And then the piece is pulled into sharp focus by external events.

In November, Moses is late to rehearsals because he has been stopped and violently searched by two police officers on his own street. It's not the act of searching him that upsets him, it's the disapproving looks from the neighbours' windows that hurt him the most. Brexit rolls on as Boris describes Muslim women as 'letterboxes' and black people as 'piccaninnies'. We meet the morning after the Tory landslide. There is genuine shock and despair at the result. We create a scene in which two actors just fight and keep fighting until they can't go on. It's durational and sweaty and painful to watch but it ends in an embrace that is tender and full of hope. And that's what we hold on to. We want to tell our stories but not just through the lens of the victim or the voiceless or the violated.

We decide to end the piece with a moment of cleansing, kindness and hope (and some very loud Kanye West, obviously).

Halfway through the show in Plaistow, George plays 'Never Have I Ever' with the audience. He picks up strips of paper at random from a pile on the floor. 'Never have I ever lied to my mother'. There is laughter as hands go up in the audience. 'Never have I ever tripped in public and acted like it was intentional'. More laughter. 'Never have I ever been followed round a shop by a security guard'. There is a silence as the majority of hands are raised in grim recognition.

After the show in a feedback session, a boy says 'I felt like you were speaking just to me. I've never seen a show that talks about our lives like that'. The teacher asks the group to summarise the show in one word. 'Hope' comes the response. We would have loved to have performed this show at the NSDF, but for now, this is enough.



SHOWS THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN

Testimonial

Brighter stories

Director **Tom Garrett** on *Nice Weather's Re:Woyzeck*

We're Nice Weather, we're from Birmingham, and we made *Re:Woyzeck*. A lot of people know *Woyzeck*. It was on the A-Level syllabus, it's performed everywhere – and it's pretty infamous as being messy. We tried to refine it into something a bit more palatable.

In writing, we cut a lot of the original. Non-integral characters, the military and all the bits with live animals were stripped away, and we focused on the tiny little kernel of a love story that's at the core of the play. We then built it back up, layering on live cameras and a blisteringly loud soundtrack and rattling through the thing in 70 minutes to make a finished product we're super proud of.

Re:Woyzeck isn't a particularly happy show. Working from such heavy original material, it

was never going to be. But there are definite moments of lightness in what amounts to a very real, and at times beautiful, story about love. I'm not saying it strikes this balance between light and shade perfectly, but when making it we landed on something that has blossomed into my core belief when making work: that optimism in storytelling holds huge importance – and that I'm a little bit sick of sad shows.

I think there's a definite pull towards telling darker stories. And that's fine! People can be awful, and it's only natural that that's translated onto the stage. But I think dark stories greatly outnumber positive ones, and I'm not sure why more of a balance can't be struck. Thinking about shows I've seen, I'm hard-pressed to find much

that's genuinely uplifting that isn't in the realms of family shows or musicals. And that's a shame.

Particularly at present, I think there's a strong temptation to focus on the bad. But shows can do a lot more than reinforce how rubbish everything is – they can warm, or inspire, or just pull out a bit of hope in an otherwise miserable classic.

At the moment, life might be a bit shit for a lot of us. It looks like it might be a bit shit for quite a while longer. But with *Re:Woyzeck* – and the rest of our stories – we're going to keep trying to look on the bright side, and we'd love for you to join us.

Shadowing

Playwright **Dan Sareen** on *Shadows*, which *Want the Moon Theatre* were due to perform at NSDF this week

Nineteen months down the line it is equally intriguing and cringe-worthy to look back on a play that began life as a scene between two people smoking and talking about Radiohead.

Working on our second show together as a company, we at *Want the Moon* set out to make something that would explore relatable and personal themes for our generation, and challenge us technically. The end product, our show *Shadows*, came from the idea of exploring modern day romance through exposing the difference between expectation and reality.

In its current state, *Shadows* is a play about dreams. The development process to get to this conclusive statement probably took a good 8 months and 3 redrafts, and the script only really resembles the shape it is in now because

of a complete overhaul that took place during the first two days of a two week rehearsal period before our first performance – the very performance we had invited NSDF selectors to attend. Somewhere along the way, the two characters quit smoking in that scene, but yes, they do still briefly discuss Radiohead.

This piece is hugely important to us, and has been well received. But it took a long time to define what it was that we were trying to say – whether or not we believed it was harmful to indulge in the dreams we have, may they be lifelong goals or a workplace crush. What started as a simple romance became a way for us to highlight the frustration and distraction inherent within our peer group. The remarkable thing, 19 months later, is that we still don't feel finished with this theme. I don't think any one of us thinks that the current draft of the script is

perfect, and what a joy it would be to be able to continue to develop a piece that we love – about people and their dreams.

Looking back, it is difficult to feel anything other than extremely grateful for the support we've received: from actors happy to help out with a reading or a day of development, and from other artists and industry professionals who gave us their honest opinion. Looking forward, we are so excited to try and start working on something new – to develop something from scratch that we are passionate about, and to work with more brilliant creatives as we do so, even if it means writing yet another scene where characters talk about Radiohead.

Oh goodness!

Ashley Sharpe and Geraldine Gibbons interview themselves about their show, *Good Grief*

Who are we? Ashley Sharpe and Geraldine Gibbons from Arch SixtyTwo. A four-person theatre company based in Worcester, creating theatre that is unconventional and true to the creators.

What did we do? One show, forty minutes, three parts: death, grief and funerals. A light-hearted look at death and how it impacts us all. Yes, you too! Even if you don't know it.

How are we holding up? We face scary times and being part of a community is now more important than ever. Now is a time where we look for things that connect us, rather push us apart.

Theatre has the ability to bring a group of strangers together in one moment. A sense of connection. Ironically, this is what sparked the beginnings of *Good Grief*. The idea of a subject

that connects all of us: Death.

The show runs an unspoken parallel. It is as much about life, and performance liveness, as it is about exploring the topic of death. We (Gerry and Ash) are loosely scripted, though the script acts mainly as a through line, a guidance. Additions of audience participation, songs, spontaneous wit and improvisation keep the show feeling alive, and therefore mirroring the unpredictability of life.

Stylistically the show is very much a product of who we are. Ash has a background in musical direction and Gerry a background in authentic performance and comedy. We, and consequently the piece, are very transparent. It was important to us that *Good Grief* was an honest

show about people, including ourselves, and a celebration of life.

A normal devising rehearsal would be spent chatting about death/funerals and all that comes along with it; the music, it's weird quirks. We wanted the show to be conversational, so we would often record our chats and unpick the ideas. Once collated, we reached out to have these conversations with others via Skype, online surveys and letters. We then present those on stage, carrying on the conversation with the audience.

We will still be continuing with this project and are eager to listen and share as many stories/memories relating to death, grief and funerals as possible. If you feel you would like to share, please get in touch.



Photography: Rachel Baker

Photography: Milly Muxworthy

Musical escapism

Mark Smith reflects on *Spring Awakening* and the power of musical theatre in uncertain times



It's a scenario any student invested in musical theatre is all too familiar with. Perhaps the thought of young people doing jazz hands while trying to make sense of Sondheim arrangements is too much for older, more 'experienced' theatre audiences. Musical theatre kids have become a meme of their own on social media these days and it can be hard denying their accuracy.

It's true that you will always spot the musical theatre kid in a crowd. Involvement in amateur theatre can vastly improve confidence levels for students: the ability to talk in front of large groups becomes second nature for these thespians; presentations are less daunting, leaderships roles easier to fill, and the day-to-day performance of a social life is injected with new fervour.

Musical theatre awards a myriad of invaluable skills and opportunities that students can carry with them beyond their university years. From experience with music theory, choreography and physical fitness, to playing in an orchestra and the wealth of roles backstage in the technical team. Aside from all this, the necessity of musical theatre boils down to the fact that it is fun. It brings people together in the very joy of being part of an open community where everyone is seeking out their creative outlet. The stage is escapism: a niche for a generation trudging through a sombre society, tucked away from the ubiquitous dysfunctionality of modern life.

If the uncertainty of the last month is anything to go by, with our ways of life across the globe coming to a dizzyingly abrupt halt, these sources of comfort and happiness are becoming more poignant than ever. It has been, undoubtedly, a gruelling month for theatre lovers: West End and Broadway productions across the board have been cancelled for the foreseeable future over fears of audience and artist safety, and the ambiguity surrounding how long this radio

silence will last has certainly stirred anxiety amongst passionate thespians. The arts, however, have still been kept thriving with the buzz of online classes, free streaming events and virtual concerts. The necessity of the arts has been emblazoned across social media with the global threat of a pandemic laying bare the way we, by nature, seek out narratives for reassurance and contemplation amidst upheaval.

One particular narrative from NSDF's 2020 line-up whose silence will be felt is the typically raucous *Spring Awakening*: the indie-rock musical that earned creators Duncan Sheik and Steven Slater critical and commercial acclaim and a plethora of awards, including the Tony award for Best Musical at the 2007 Tony Awards. The musical centres on the morose journey taken by eleven schoolchildren as their sexual awakenings become entangled with their sheltered adolescent lives. The show has since become synonymous with its brooding 19th century German setting; while this might not seem the most immediately accessible backdrop for today's millennial audience, *Spring Awakening* still manages to propagate a devoted fan-base of teenagers and young adults.

Sheik and Slater's musical holds a mirror to its audience, forcing us to witness the universal whiplash effect puberty has on the once stable worldview we look at through the prism of innocence and youth. These characters, growing out of the safeguards placed on them by parents and teachers, put the show's exhilarating score to use as their own personal safe space. Handheld microphones are wrenched from out of school uniforms, as thrashing guitars explode in songs such as 'The Bitch of Living' and 'Totally Fucked' – every bit as mutinous as their titles imply. The music in *Spring Awakening* is a momentary release from oppressive societal structures enforced upon these kids: not necessarily advancing the plot in the traditional sense, but rather allowing the characters to fulfil the role of rebellious pop-

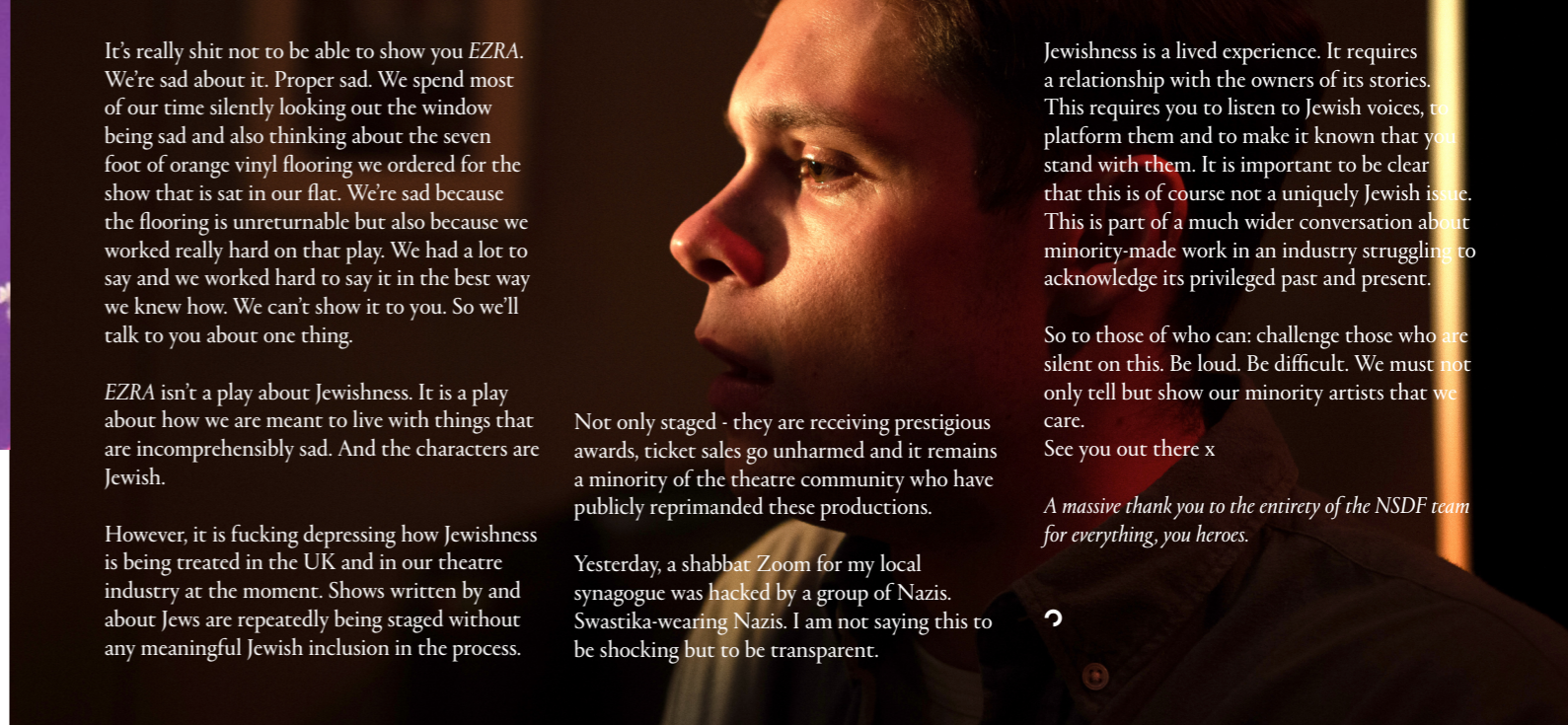
rock idols – if only for a three-minute frenzy.

In a conversation with the musical director for Showstopper's production, Benjamin McQuigg, he elucidated what he believed to be one of the show's core thematic concerns. "The issues that were prominent then are still relevant now," and that, furthermore, the score allows these characters to "bridge the gap between then and now, bringing them and the issues they are dealing with into our time." Benjamin raises an interesting paradox about the power of theatre: its ability to act as an escape from issues in the world, while simultaneously functioning as a political spearhead charged with the intent to change these same issues. For many young people with a love for theatre it is more than escapism; it is also empowerment.

For the students of Showstoppers Southampton, who do not have the option of taking theatre courses at their university, "this community is purely made up of people that love making theatre just for the fun of it," as Benjamin tells me. While the future of this production hangs in the balance, the process of its production, and the message this company wanted to share, will always stay with those involved. Happy endings and warm, fuzzy sentiments may seem incongruous to a show such as *Spring Awakening*, but it still, nonetheless, foregrounds what is so important about musical theatre for student and teenage performers. These sweet, sporadic moments of escape, and the community they can share these moments with, are the foundation of a stable ground when it feels like the world is being pulled out from underneath us.

Definitely ready

Writer and director Stella Green on *Definitely Fine's EZRA*, one of the shows selected for this year's NSDF



It's really shit not to be able to show you *EZRA*. We're sad about it. Proper sad. We spend most of our time silently looking out the window being sad and also thinking about the seven foot of orange vinyl flooring we ordered for the show that is sat in our flat. We're sad because the flooring is unreturnable but also because we worked really hard on that play. We had a lot to say and we worked hard to say it in the best way we knew how. We can't show it to you. So we'll talk to you about one thing.

EZRA isn't a play about Jewishness. It is a play about how we are meant to live with things that are incomprehensibly sad. And the characters are Jewish.

However, it is fucking depressing how Jewishness is being treated in the UK and in our theatre industry at the moment. Shows written by and about Jews are repeatedly being staged without any meaningful Jewish inclusion in the process.

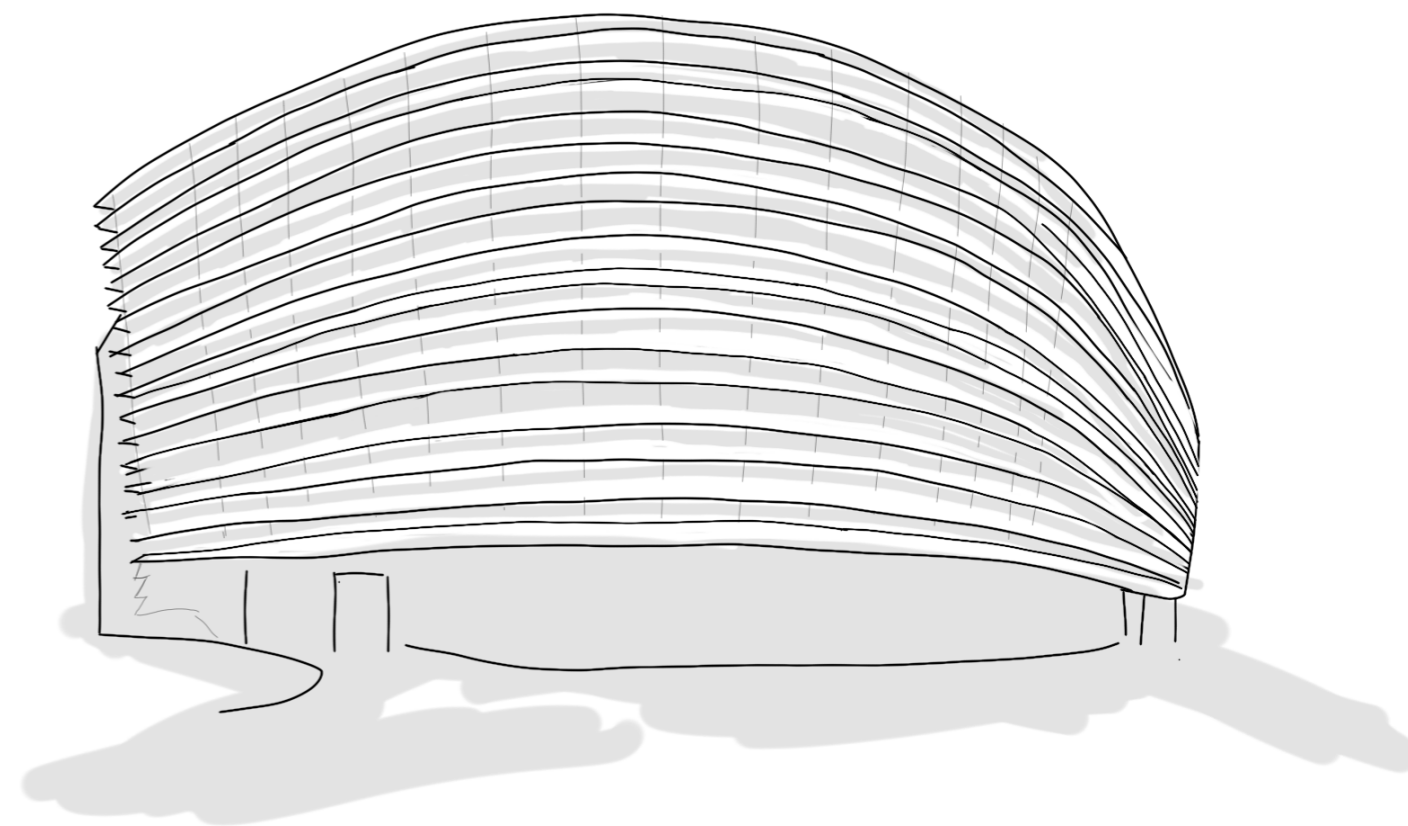
Not only staged - they are receiving prestigious awards, ticket sales go unharmed and it remains a minority of the theatre community who have publicly reprimanded these productions.

Yesterday, a shabbat Zoom for my local synagogue was hacked by a group of Nazis. Swastika-wearing Nazis. I am not saying this to be shocking but to be transparent.

Jewishness is a lived experience. It requires a relationship with the owners of its stories. This requires you to listen to Jewish voices, to platform them and to make it known that you stand with them. It is important to be clear that this is of course not a uniquely Jewish issue. This is part of a much wider conversation about minority-made work in an industry struggling to acknowledge its privileged past and present.

So to those of who can: challenge those who are silent on this. Be loud. Be difficult. We must not only tell but show our minority artists that we care. See you out there x

A massive thank you to the entirety of the NSDF team for everything, you heroes.



Photography: *The Other Richard*

Testimonial

Slow connection

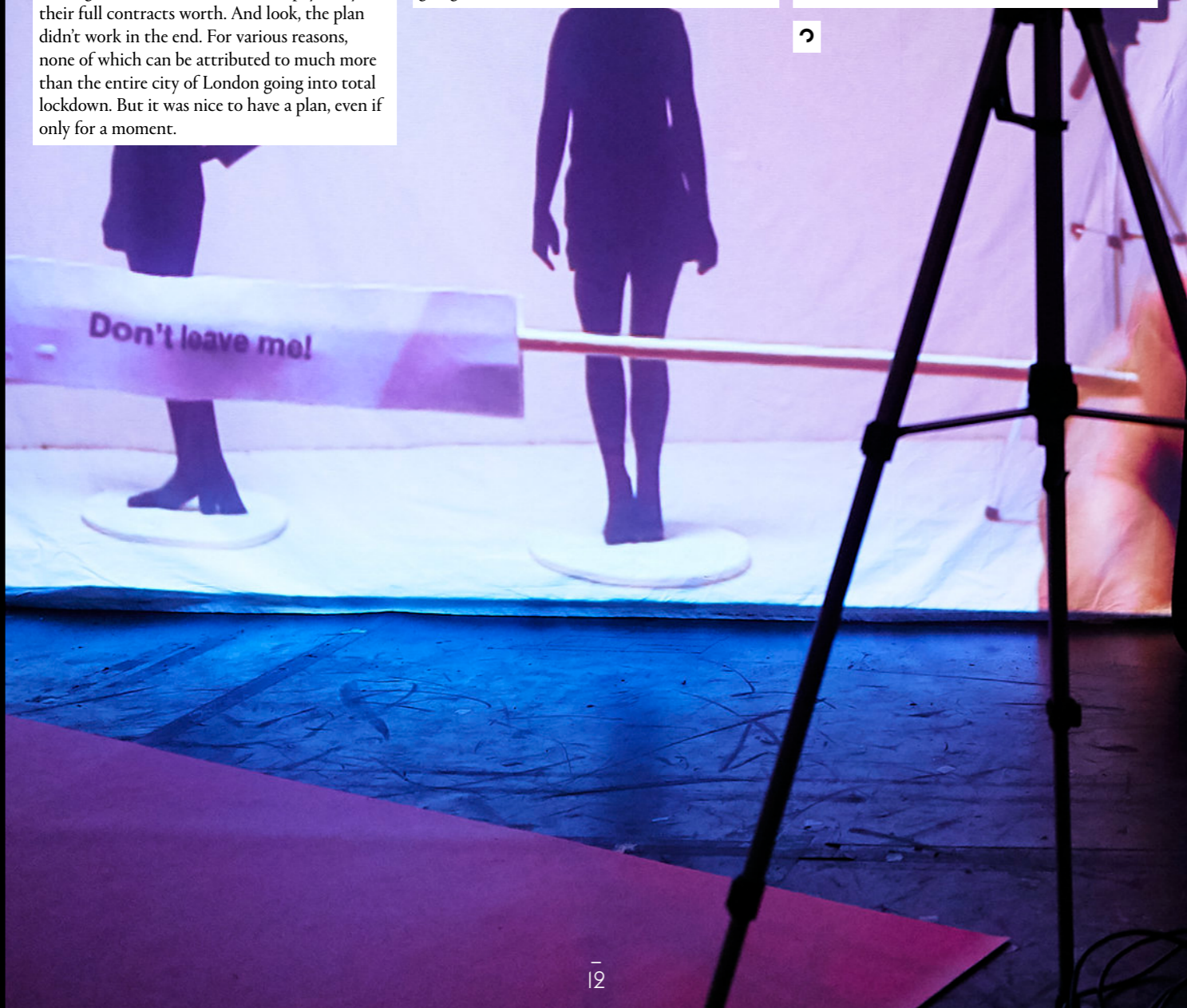
YESYESNONO's **Sam Ward** reflects on how the pandemic has affected the company's tour of *the accident did not take place*

Here's the concrete: there was the Monday when we found out the New Diorama Theatre was closing, quickly followed by various other venues that we were due to be performing at. Rhian (our company producer) and I talked about livestreaming the show to an empty theatre in London.

We asked the rest of the team if they were up for it, and when they said yes we got in touch with the Bunker who said they could host us. There was this period of a few days that felt genuinely exciting. Like trying to outrun an avalanche. We had a great team around us. We had a plan that changed minute by minute, and we had some sort of focus as the world seemed to be careering into slow-motion. Our Arts Council funding and the fact that the New Diorama and the ARC Stockton Arts Centre paid their guarantees in full (legends!) meant that we could pay everyone their full contracts worth. And look, the plan didn't work in the end. For various reasons, none of which can be attributed to much more than the entire city of London going into total lockdown. But it was nice to have a plan, even if only for a moment.

Here's the less-concrete: I spent a lot of time thinking about livestreaming *the accident did not take place*. I spent a lot of time talking about how it's actually the *peeeeeeeeee* show to livestream (Mum!) because it's about the mediation of information via the digital, via screens. But at the same time, our work is designed for the live experience. We make work that functions by juxtaposing the digital with the fleshy, organic, oh-shit-we're-all-in-this-room together. I am, deep-down and for totally-personal-I-can't-prove-or-explain-it, overtly suspicious of the digital, of its ability to simulate connectivity whilst actually affecting separation. Maybe all this means that livestreaming can be harnessed to properly explore that digital ennui which I seem perpetually interested in creating in all my work. But I don't know how to do that when I'm stuck in a house all day. And I'm not sure anyone is going to want to see that when this is over either.

I keep rewriting this last paragraph to try and end on a more positive note. I'm not a total pessimist. I just feel a little lost. They will most likely reinstate project grants at the end of this year or in 2021. But are there any theatres that will want to commission an experimental theatre company? Theatres are going to be tightening their belts and looking for solid, risk-free work to build up their resilience again. No shade. Our government doesn't fund the arts properly. We are a philistine culture. I'm not sure when we'll be able to make a show again and right now that's sort of okay. It's not like theatres were lining up to commission us before all this. But there are shows we want to make. And there are cool lighting effects we want to try. And there are leaf-blowers we want to use to try and make a sort of petal whirlwind effect. And it would be a shame if we never got to do any of that, you know?



Testimonial

Enduring Rose

Christopher Haydon, Artistic Director of the Rose Theatre, Kingston, on what it means to close down a building

I took over as the artistic director of the Rose Theatre, Kingston in January this year, and if there's one thing I have learned about the building so far, it's that it blooms with activity.

The stage is alive pretty much every evening of the week – with drama, family and children's shows, music, and comedy. In the last few of months we have hosted everyone from Stormzy to the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra to our Youth Theatre performing *Treasure Island*.

And it is not just our main stage that pulsates with life. Our studio is in constant use by Kingston University's drama course. Students can often be seen rehearsing in our foyer while young mums gather in our café to chat, breastfeed their newborns and watch as toddlers totter about in the dedicated play area. Every Tuesday a group of OAPs meet to sit together and knit. And on Sundays? Well, that is when the church meets for worship in our 800 seat auditorium, before the evening is given over to some of the best comedians in the business: John Bishop, Bridget Christie, Ahir Shah.

And then...? A little over two weeks ago, as the pandemic unleashed pandemonium, it all stopped. We sat in our office listening to Boris Johnson advise that all businesses should remain open but the public should stay at home nonetheless. There were gasps of anger from my colleagues as he said this. How the hell was that supposed to work? It costs money to stay open and if we have no audience and no one buying drinks and food in our bar, we would soon fall off the edge of a financial cliff. But, no sooner had he finished speaking, we received a press release

from SOLT/UK Theatre (the industry body to whom we are affiliated) announcing that, on the advice of DCMS (the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport), all their venues would shut with immediate effect. So that is how we found out we were closed until further notice.

Since then, as my team work from home and speak everyday via conference call, our work and planning has fallen in to two distinct boxes: short term and long term. When you have no idea of when you will reopen you can't really think in the medium term. In the short term our focus is on the welfare of our staff and our freelancers, and on making sure we can stay afloat financially. We are furloughing all those who can't work so that we can claim 80% of their wages from the government (though we have committed to topping up everyone's pay beyond this so no one will be out of pocket). And we are rapidly rescheduling all of the shows we had coming in, in order to ensure that extraordinary creativity of all the artists we work with is honoured and will find an audience eventually.

And despite all this frantic activity (it's amazing how busy an empty building can be!) my job is to keep my eyes firmly fixed on the horizon. I am continuing to plan for my first season which will happen next year. I am talking to actors, to directors, to writers and to producing partners. My job, while all hell is breaking loose, is to calmly imagine what the future can be. Because when we get through this – and we will – our audience is going to be hungry for more great art. They are going to want to come to the Rose, as they always have, to laugh together and to cry together; to celebrate together and just to be together.

That is the unique and curious thing about this crisis: it stops us doing the one thing that humans always instinctively do when things go wrong – we congregate. At the moment we are all having to do this virtually. But Twitter, Instagram and Facebook are no substitute for bodies being together in a room.

So I am hopeful, because current events are demonstrating precisely why theatres are such vital and important places. And when this crisis is over, our foyer, our bar, our auditorium will be thrown wide open once again. And everyone will be welcome.



Shuttered but in focus

Beatrice Debney, *Noff* photographer, asks what she can do without any theatre to photograph

I was in my final year of university and was constantly being asked that never-ending question: what are you going to do now? I suppose I was one of the lucky ones, I did have a somewhat succinct answer: 'I want to be a theatre photographer!' I would say confidently to whoever asked me, which would then be met by:

1. Blank confused stare
2. Full on misunderstanding
3. Oooooooh..... is that a job?
4. THAT SOUNDS AMAZING YES DO THAT

I came to the decision to combine the two passions I have for life – theatre and photography. I was asked to photograph a third-year student's final major project and I kid you not, I (almost) got paid! There was some suggestion that money might be involved, and wow, did that open my eyes to the fact that I could make a career out of doing what I loved. Of course, in the end this was a student production and there was no budget for a lowly second year, but nevertheless the seed had been planted and I had a goal to work towards. I volunteered to photograph every production I could, I got a job at uni photographing the end-of-year arts festival and I even photographed a few productions outside of the university bubble.

When I got the job to be the *Noff* photographer at NSDF 2019 I was ecstatic. The best part about being a theatre photographer is that you are allowed to see so many productions for free, and you don't even have to critique it at the end. You are paid to watch the show and then afterwards you get to relive it all over again as you edit. You could write a 1000-word article on the nuances of the play or you can just say it was nice and have done with that*. It truly is wonderful. There are never two productions alike. If I am lucky, I will have photographed a rehearsal ahead of a dress run and therefore have some idea of the production's style and know the characters somewhat. Other times, however, I go to shoot a show completely blind which is both terrifying and exhilarating because what makes a truly good theatre

photographer is their ability to predict where each character will be in the next three seconds and where you therefore need to be so that you don't miss that most crucial shot.

During my first year out in the real world I have continued to photograph as much as I can, I now manage the photography at my local playhouse and whilst that may be voluntary, it is a fantastic experience. I am building momentum and some



days I almost feel good enough to contact Leeds Playhouse or York Theatre Royal.

But now all the theatres are shut, and my camera is gathering dust. And it is weird. It is difficult enough trying to make a career out of a job that no one ever advertises for, now try and do it when no one is on stage by law. It feels as though I am stood in the auditorium and the stage manager has clunked all the lights off, and I am stood, camera in hand, waiting for something to happen. I know that I should go home, no one is coming for a while. I know that I could go and edit the photos from the last production I squeezed in before the mass lockdown. But I can't. Not just yet.

Because for the last year I have been preparing for the greatest marathon. I am ready to photograph and edit 11 shows in less than a week and live in the whirlwind of drama and workshops and conversation and theatre and ... nope. How do you tell yourself to just stop? That culture high of NSDF I was ready to ride isn't going to come, not in the way I was preparing for anyway. So, for now I am a theatre photographer with no theatre to photograph. And that's ok. There are also a lot of actors who no longer have a stage. Costume designers with no characters to design for. Technicians with no one requiring their technical brilliance. All we can do is use this time to prepare, and come out the other side of this with a vengeance. If this experience is teaching me anything, it is that as soon as you can't do something, the desire to do it burns so much more strongly. So, I am going to edit those photos. I am going to contact those theatres, and I am going to make sure that after this I become a theatre photographer inside a theatre again because that is who I am and that is what I do and it is so much fun.

*sorry theatre critics, please don't shoot me



Stuck, unstuck

Emma Rogerson comes to terms with the Edinburgh Fringe's cancellation

there's a post-it-note on my bedside table which outlines the structure of a day, a promise of productivity made to no-one but myself. from 9 til 5, the hours are blocked off and designated "food", "rest", "uni work", "writing", "social time" etc, which is lovely and very nice but it's not what my day really looks like.

currently, my life is waking up at half twelve and wondering whether to start the day with breakfast (conforming to my body clock), or lunch (conforming to societal expectations – but who THE FUCK wants to do that?). then, i watch drag race, bake, delve deep into youtube to compile comforting, anti-social Morrissey quotes or weave in and out of the rooms of my house, neglecting to tidy up and popping in to chat to my parents at regular intervals – "d'ya wanna brew?" ad infinitum.

yesterday, this routine was put on hold by the email from one of my best mates + producer of our fringe show with a subject heading (in block capitals): "CONFIDENTIAL – EDINBURGH FRINGE" and all i could think was:

here we go boys.

here we fuckin' go.

the cancellation of fringe is not a surprise to anyone. for everyone involved – makers, make-happeners, spectators, locals – it would have been grossly irresponsible, impractical and unfeasible to expect a creatively and commercially fulfilling

fringe in the current climate. but rationale isn't enough, because all the logic and evidence in the world doesn't fight the pricklingly childish feelings of injustice – it's not fair. the courage and compassion of arts organisation blows my mind, and too many people have had to send too many emotionally charged emails like this. in these circumstances, it's just not possible to separate facts from feelings.

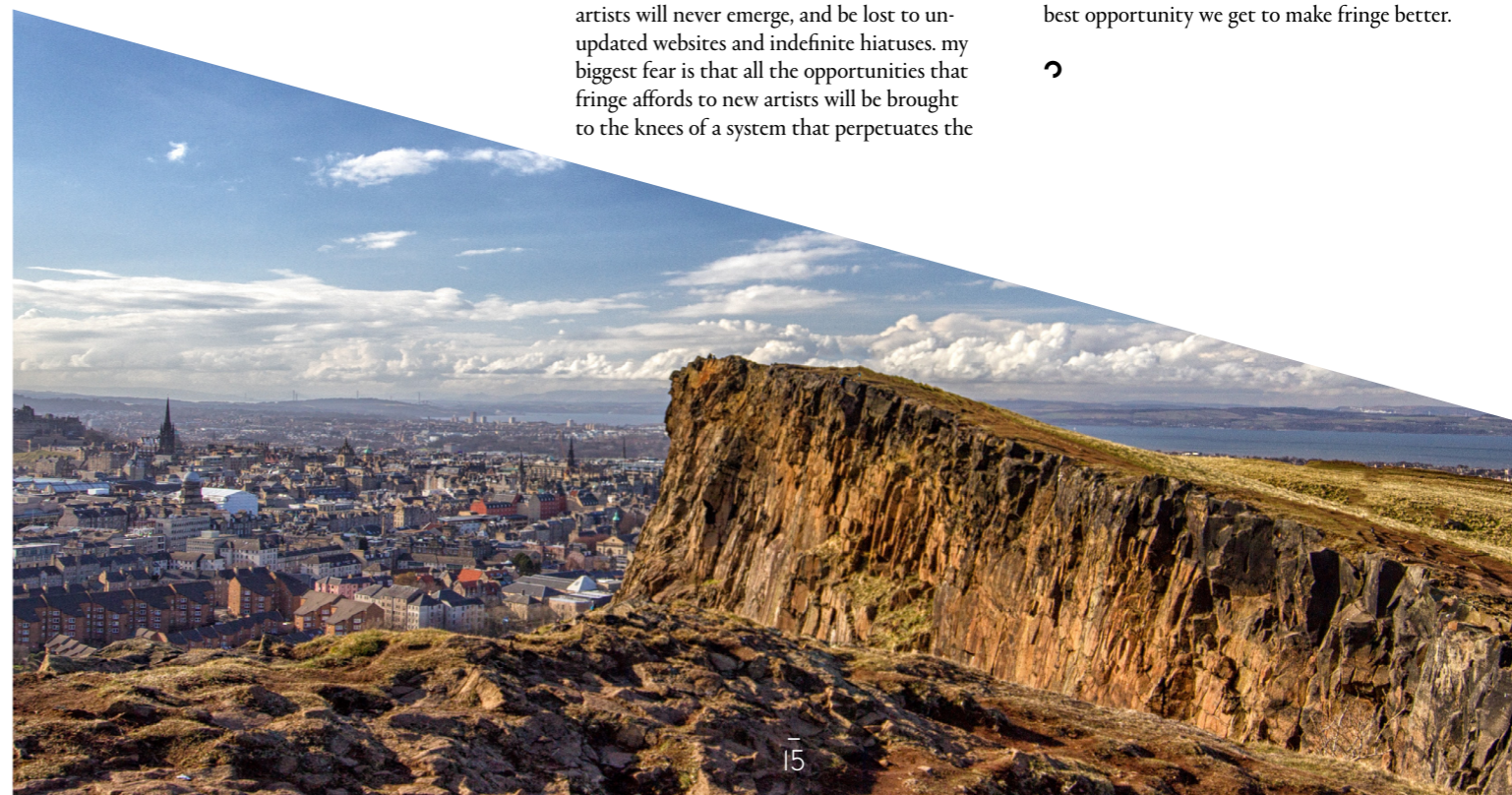
but in spite of my personal disappointment and nostalgia for all the warmth i feel when looking back at my memories of fringe, there are other feelings brewing beneath them which i can't ignore. excitement is too much, relief isn't enough, and the broader implications of the cancellation of fringe are conflicting. they present the opportunity for change, much needed change, and the little anarchist devil on my shoulder is burning with all these colourful, dangerous sparks of ideas, designs and aspirations for a new fringe. one that isn't over commercialised, one that is economically accessible to emerging companies and one that prioritises the physical and mental health of its participants. i love fringe, and i love what it does for people, but it has felt like a game for the well-connected and well off to play between themselves for too long, with all other artists struggling beneath them.

of course, there's another side, a voice on the other shoulder, that whispers that this could be the end for fringe. that the big companies will survive, and the little companies will crumble over the financial burden, and the emerging artists will never emerge, and be lost to un-updated websites and indefinite hiatuses. my biggest fear is that all the opportunities that fringe affords to new artists will be brought to the knees of a system that perpetuates the

opportunities of established ones. and that's before any geographical considerations – we absolutely can't depend on Vaults or London-centric festivals for chances. it's complicated and a bit scary, and so i don't think these feelings of confliction are solely the result of a fluctuation between pessimism and optimism. we've got time, more time than we're used to, to reflect on ourselves and think. this is a time for positivity, negativity, radical ideas and some dangerous thinking. it's a mixed picture, but the compassion and empathy that i've seen in the last few weeks from our creative community is so characteristic of the strength and resilience of those working in the arts today. if that's anything to go by (and it is), then this mixed picture is set to be a beautiful one.

i used the sticky top of the post it note to fold my unrealistic hour by hour plan into itself so i don't have to look at it anymore. i can't pretend to go about life as normal, because this, right now, is not normal life. things have changed and things are not the way they were, and we shouldn't try to make them so. it's my hope, above all, that this will consolidate what performers and emerging companies have been saying for years. that the economic structure of the fringe is inaccessible, damaging and, crucially, u n s u t a i n a b l e. and that the community, the living community of artists that sustain the festival, are the beating heart of our industry and must be protected.

i don't know what the answers are, but i want to be part of the conversation. this might be the best opportunity we get to make fringe better.



It happens

The Noff team investigate the phenomenon of happenings, and offer you some to perform in your own home

Happening, n.
A thing that happens, like an event or performance.

The boundary between art and life has always been fuzzy at best. Art is meant to imitate life – or maybe vice versa. But no movement has ever come closer to infringing on the messy intersection between life and art than Happenings in the fifties and sixties.

Happenings were installations or pieces of performance art meant to blur the boundaries between art and life so resolutely that the two would become indistinguishable. They were unpredictable, unrepeatable and above all, zany: Alison Knowles' piece *Make a Salad* invited the audience to toss together a gigantic amount of lettuce in tarpaulin, accompanied by live music. Simone Forti's Rollers featured three performers sitting on boxes with wheels on – they could be pushed and pulled around by the audience, while Allan Kaprow's *Fluids* featured groups of participants building structures out of large blocks of ice around Los Angeles (the fact that they melted under the hot California sun as they were being built was part of the spectacle).

Anything was possible. Happenings could be huge community works of art open to all, or very private: a parallel movement, called 'Fluxus', posted out cards with instructions for acts of performance on them. One especially avant-garde one written by George Brecht in 1961 simply reads "Exit".

It's hard to know how these might have gone

down with audiences in the fifties and sixties, and any records are patchy. Writing about his 'furniture comedy', Push and Pull, critic Allan Kaprow claimed that some 'older women' were so disturbed by the mess and clutter made by other audience members that they 'began to straighten things up, as if they were cleaning [a] house'.

We wanted to make some of our own happenings, minus a housework gender gap, so we've done just that. These are for you to perform at home with your household or whoever you're isolating with. Most of them can be performed by one person. The more the merrier, but they don't strictly need an audience. Peter Brook wasn't right about everything.

Try out the ones we've written. Adapt them. Even better: make up some of your own.

Recreate Alison Knowles' *Make a Salad* if you have an abundance of lettuce and a large group of people. Or try doing it with coffee.

Wrap yourself in something as tightly as you can: a duvet, a towel, a sleeping bag. Curl up tightly, making sure you can still breathe. Ask a friend to 'untie' you. Resist them.

An adaptation of Allan Kaprow's Push and Pull: A Furniture Comedy. For as many or as few people as you like. To be played across one or two rooms. Using the furniture and objects around you, create a new room to live in. Furnish it.

Marry your iPhone.

WORD EVENT

● EXIT

G.Brecht
Spring, 1961

We want you to write your own happenings, or send us adaptations of ones you've read about here. Make them better. Come up with your own. Then pop them in the mail (noff@nsdf.org.uk) or send us videos (@noffmag) and we'll include them in our zine, out later this week, which anyone will be able to print off and make by themselves (just like a happening).

Pros and cons of a virtual festival

Long-serving Noff funny man Jack Ellis weighs up the bright and dark sides of an online festival

Pros:

- It is much more difficult to get lost in Leicester now that the festival is not happening in Leicester.
- 100% chance someone giving a workshop will accidentally turn on a filter and be unable to turn it off.
- Don't have to worry about staggering back to your accommodation after a heavy night networking.
- No longer have to fumble around for your Curve membership card.

Cons:

- Can no longer watch Chris Thorpe take control of a discussion room.
- Harder to make someone corpse during a serious discussion.
- Can no longer marvel at just how tall Alan Lane really is.
- It's much harder for me to write stupid questions that don't just look like your Gran asking how to use Google. ☹️

NSDF ordinarily features FOR-U-ms, small meetings for festgoers to check in with each other. While the festival is virtual its queer family wants you to know that they're available throughout the week. Let us know if you want to be put in touch.

Meme of the day

Sam Ross

Having a show selected for NSDF and feeling excited about the opportunities it promises:



Sitting stuck in quarantine as NSDF is cancelled because of coronavirus:



Super Photographer

This is how you build a superhuman theatre photographer, says Beatrice Debney

1. **Super strength:** A typical theatre production lasts 2 hours, a Canon 5D MK III weighs 950 grams, a 70-200mm lens weighs 1490 grams, so that's you carrying two and a half bags of sugar at arm's length for 2 hours – time to get those reps in.
2. **Super knees:** Theatre photography positions include squatting for extended periods of time, climbing up onto platforms, chairs and unstable ledges, and leaping across to the other side of the stage.
3. **Super speed:** The actor has just walked down stage left to deliver their big heart-wrenched speech. You are upstage right – RUN.
4. **Super agility:** Theatres are full of obstacles to fall over, causing a large disturbance and distracting the actors, this will always happen during the quiet and tender moments – always.
5. **Super eyes:** The stage may be lit, the auditorium is not, please refer to above point.
6. **Super selective:** By the end of a shoot you will have hundreds of pictures. Marketing managers DO NOT WANT HUNDREDS. Your super selection skill will help you narrow this down to a cool twenty.
7. **Super divination:** A theatre photographer must be able to predict the future if they are to be in the right place and on the right camera settings in the next three seconds.
8. **Super stealth:** A theatre photographer is a fly on the wall, the actors should forget you are there – until, that is, it is time to go home, then you really hope they remember you because super escapology is not one of your special skills.



We are understandably gutted not to be in Leicester, but we think you might be able to help.

We miss the peaceful scenery of the Curve theatre. We miss the sound of the traffic outside. We miss the somewhat unpredictable lighting of the Curve foyer. And the playlist that went round on repeat.

Technicians, you have been issued with your first challenge: help us feel like we're in Leicester. We want your

soundscapes, your designs and your zaniest ideas. Tweet your soundscapes, designs, images or videos to @noffmag or email us on noff@nsdf.org.uk. Please stay inside and stay safe while you complete your assignment.

THE ONLINE ISSUE

NOISES OFF

NSDF 2020

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**THE
SHOW
MUST
GO
ON**