

Monday, November 22, 2004: Kristen Kelley, Drama Teacher

Often in the course of my work here at Nichols, I will share a story from my life, or demonstrate a vocal or physical exercise, or make an analogy using *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings*, and my students will stare at me, heads tilted, and say “Ms. Kelley—you’re weird”. Now I know we’ve been talking in this community about how hurtful name-calling can be, but I don’t take offense to that label. I usually respond by saying “weird can be good.” I don’t see anything wrong with moving beyond what is expected of you, or what is deemed “normal”, especially if it is not your ego, but your instincts that are driving you. Because of my work as an actor, I’ve always been attracted to the “fringe”—to behavior that is at the very edge of convention. I spend a great deal of my time straddling the line of accepted reality, looking for ways to let what is imaginary *live and breathe* through character. I have learned to be comfortable, and at times even proud of what makes me different, because I know it is the key to my work on stage.

Imagine my joy when my husband Ray and I arrived at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland. We took a trip there this past summer in preparation for our tour with Nichols students this coming August. The Fringe is the premiere performing arts festival in the world—the most respected, well attended, longest running festival of its kind. Every year for three weeks, Edinburgh attracts over half a million people from countries around the globe, all for the same reason: to celebrate creative expression. Without concern for how strange, or scary or unconventional their voices may be, theater artists let their “weird flags” fly high over every inch of this beautiful city.

I was immediately moved by the energy of the festival. A typical fringe day is filled with productions from 11:00 am to 1:00 am the next morning. There is theater representing all human demographics, in every style, language, and genre imaginable. Fringe venues rarely look like the Flickinger Performing Arts Center. I saw performances on a hill, in a church, in a churchyard, in a hotel conference room, in a storefront, in the back room of a nightclub, and in a restaurant. Any space able to house an audience is temporarily transformed into a theater.

My husband and I left Buffalo at 11:00am on a Wednesday, and hit the streets of Edinburgh for the first time at 8:00pm on Thursday. Our jet lag was no joke. As we walked along the cobblestone, listening to traditional bagpipers play next to stomp-like ensembles that beat their drumsticks on city scaffolding, and watching actors on stilts alongside fire-eaters and mime artists, part of me believed I was moving through a dream. But instead of calling it a night like most of the American high school directors I had traveled with, Ray and I decided to be **hard-core**, and see an 11:30p.m. performance of *1984*, a staged adaptation of George Orwell’s famous novel. We saw the play in a space that held roughly 50 people, and we sat in the front row. For an hour we watched up close as the small ensemble acted their hearts out, sweating, crying, fighting, loving, suffering. As soon as the cast took its curtain call, the house lights came on, and the actors began striking the set to make way for the venue’s next production. As I watched this transition, I was moved to tears. It became clear to me at that moment that this experience, like most of my fringe experiences to come, was singular, ephemeral, and

separated from ego. As all Fringe shows are under 90 minutes, actors must work incredibly hard to make the most of their brief time with an audience. What is shared between those in the seats and those on stage feels concentrated, powerful, almost Technicolor. Once curtain call is over, there is no time for the stroking of actors. They have already moved on to serve the next company of players. There was a sense of community between artists like I had never felt before.

This building of community through art was also present at an event called the Edinburgh Military Tattoo. Every Friday and Saturday during festival time, eight thousand people gather in the streets to be admitted to the stands below Edinburgh Castle. Before this international arts spectacular begins, the Master of Ceremonies does a roll call: "Anybody from England? Ireland? Italy? Germany? India? China? Japan? South Africa? New Zealand? Australia? France? The United States of America? Canada? Brazil? Scotland?" After each country was announced, cheering would erupt from different pockets of the audience. It was electrifying to be surrounded by people who had come together from around the world to share in music, theater, and dance. We were treated to a powerful performance from the Scottish Royal Pipers--so many pipers they filled the equivalent of two football fields. As the night unfolded we also enjoyed Scottish dancers, North East Indian Dancers, Rhythmic gymnasts from Estonia, Chinese musicians, British musicians, and finally, the South African Military Band, commemorating 10 years of freedom from Apartheid. The spectacle ended with all of the groups on stage together. The audience joined in for the last song, Auld Lang Syne. Spectators' held one another's hands as fireworks exploded over the castle. Unforgettable.

Beyond the formal performances in official fringe venues, theater poured out into the streets as well. The heart of the Fringe Festival is the Royal Mile, a street that runs for (you guessed it) approximately a mile through the center of Edinburgh. During festival time, the sidewalks, and parts of the street itself are filled with street performers, and actors plugging their shows. Here I learned that at the Fringe, theater is in the moment, constantly changing depending on the imagination of the artists, and the energy of the transient audience members. I saw everything from an Italian man who played Vivaldi on bicycle horns attached to his body suit, to a Scottish man who used a loop of string to launch discs into the air and then catch them, much to the delight of a five year old onlooker, who shouted "Higher! Higher!" In addition to the performers who made their living on the street, actors played out excerpts from their shows in order to lure audience members to their venues. This phenomenon explained why on the Royal Mile, it wasn't unusual to see people walking around fully costumed, whether it be in commedia masks, Elizabethan garb, or flowing robes of the Japanese Noh tradition. The actors were anxious to talk to us about their shows, always handing us a flier or postcard with full performance information when our conversation came to an end.

This personal connection between actors and potential audience members is what led Ray and I to my very favorite Fringe Show. After a chat on the street with a smart and funny Irish actress in a flannel nightgown and rubber boots, we decided to check out *In a Month of Fallen Sundays*, an original work created by 6 Irish actresses who belonged to an all-female company called "The Paper Birds". It was about the Magdalene Asylums:

convents that housed many of Ireland's "problem girls" for much of the 20th century. Girls who were pregnant were placed alongside girls who were mentally ill, or deemed promiscuous, or simply depressed. In this production that took place in one dimly lit room of an asylum, young women popped out of the wardrobe, through the bed and two doors, and from under the bed and chair to tell us their individual stories through poetry and movement. While the actors didn't play off one another directly through dialogue, their performances intersected. It was as if I were witness to ghosts moving in and out of the asylum. Full of surprises, it was theater magic, driven solely by the energy of the artists. I got a bloody nose about three quarters into the production, and refused to step out because I was so compelled by their work. I grabbed a tissue and watched the remaining 15 minutes with my nose pinched and my head cocked. Weird, I know. The ensemble still managed to make me cry. Remember that the next time you think about getting up in the middle of a performance to use the bathroom. You get from theater only as much as you give. It's a communal experience, in which actors and audience are indelibly tied. The play ended with 6 women standing in a straight line on stage, slamming their bed sheets into the ground in a unified act of rebellion until they were too physically exhausted to continue. Very powerful. I will carry that image with me for the rest of my days.

I chose to share my Edinburgh experiences publicly because as a teacher of arts in this community, an actor in Buffalo, and a citizen of the world, I would like you to know that I come back to you with a renewed sense of what theater and the arts mean to us. The Fringe reminded me that the arts reach far beyond entertainment. They are, to me, a transcendent form of non-violent communication. Artists use their imaginations, their intellects, their bodies and spirits to synthesize and respond to the ideas of the age. As was true in 5th Century Greece when modern theater was born, and is true of Edinburgh, art is popular. I don't mean, "I have the most friends" popular. I mean theater was born of the people and remains essential to the people. We rely on art to explore the human condition in a productive, creative, and uncensored way. For three weeks at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, folks are free to be "weird", and free to challenge, teach, amuse, inspire, and empathize without fear of punishment. Now more than ever, it's an event worth celebrating.

I will leave you with two quotes. First, from 20th century German Playwright Bertolt Brecht: "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, it is a hammer with which to shape it." And finally, from George Bernard Shaw, 19th and 20th century Irish Playwright: "Do you think that the things people make fools of themselves about are any less real and true than the things they behave sensibly about? They are more true: they are the only things that are true."

Thank you.