CHAPTER 6

The Fringe
The Rise and Fall of Radical Alternative Theatre

Dan Rebellato with Jen Harvie

In this chapter, we take a broad definition of the fringe as an avowedly oppositional artistic and/or political theatre that experiments with both forms and methods of theatre work, usually taking place in smaller venues outside the theatrical mainstream. Focusing on the first wave of the fringe – from the 1960s into the 1980s – we explore what the fringe was and did, how it came about, why it struggled, and its legacies. Beginning with a review of competing fringe terminologies and historiographies, we then offer three brief company case studies which illustrate aspects of fringe companies' huge variety, their impacts, and some of the internal and external pressures which made them vulnerable to collapse, despite their characteristic boldness and apparent robustness. We then consider in more detail three important reasons why, in parallel with the radical politics with which it emerged, the fringe radically changed, either – depending on your view – becoming diminished, being absorbed into the mainstream, evolving into something else, or simply dying.

Terms

Even the title of this chapter is controversial. There is little agreement about what to call the flowering of new companies, styles, and shows – often playing to new audiences in new venues – that emerged in 1960s Britain to challenge both the commercial and subsidised theatre sectors. In the mid-sixties, it was often referred to as 'underground', by the late sixties as 'fringe', and by the mid-seventies, many people preferred 'alternative'.[1] Other names have included avant-garde, radical, experimental, community, and 'other' theatre.[2]

The name of this new wave of theatre is a historiographical question. What you call it largely depends on what you consider it to have been, which may also determine where you think it began. Those who see it as a radical break with the political mainstream tend to date it to the

countercultural protests of 1968;[3] those who favour its avant-garde artistic credentials may go further back to the Happening at the 1963 Edinburgh International Festival Drama Conference.[4] Others might see continuities between the fringe and the community-focused 'Little Theatre' movement; the 'Independent' and club theatres; or activist theatre from the Actresses' Franchise League (1908) to working-class theatre companies like the Red Megaphones (1932) and Unity (1936). Adrian Henri even places environmental performance and happenings in a tradition stretching back to the Renaissance.[5] The People Show claimed to be less interested in theatrical influences than the radio comedy *The Goon Show*.[6] Each of these genealogies presents a different aspect and interpretation of the fringe.[7]

We have chosen to use the term 'fringe' because it is more specific to the post-war period, emerging at the first Edinburgh International Festival in 1947 as the self-designation of a group of mostly Scottish companies who challenged their exclusion from the main event. The term gained prominence in the title of the satirical revue *Beyond the Fringe* (1960) before being applied to a wave of small-scale experimental theatre companies and venues, among the first of which were CAST (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre, 1965), the People Show (1966), and the Arts Lab (1968). Various theatrical tributaries flowed into the fringe. International influences came from visits by overseas companies, notably the Living Theatre in 1964; Café La MaMa, the Open Theatre, and Jérôme Savary's company in 1967; and the Bread and Puppet Theatre in 1969.[8] Heike Roms and Rebecca Edwards trace the longer influence of European performance art from the 1950s, taking in the Edinburgh Happening of 1963, another in Cardiff in 1965, and events during the Destruction in Art Symposium in London in 1966.[9]

One influence that was often repudiated was that of the Royal Court 'revolution' of 1956. Even though plays like John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) might seem to have pioneered an aggressive, contemporary, iconoclastic challenge to its audience, many fringe pioneers saw the large-scale subsidised sector – including the Royal Court – as the enemy. For Sandy Craig, the Royal Court's challenge was merely a bourgeois revolt, while sixties alternative theatre was a genuinely socialist revolution.[10] The founder of alternative theatre company 7:84, John McGrath, went further, drawing on Raymond Williams's influential formulation[11] to describe the West End, the subsidised sector, and alternative theatre as, respectively, residual, dominant, and emergent, or, in more explicitly Marxist terms, the theatre of the aristocratic past, the liberal-bourgeois present, and the revolutionary working-class future.[12] The new and heavily-subsidised National Theatre was particularly deprecated; as late as 1979, Catherine

Itzin notes that several community theatre companies 'would rather not – as a matter of principle – appear in the same list as the National Theatre'.[13]

Two significant changes to the structural landscape made the 1960s rise of the fringe possible. One was Arts Minister Jennie Lee's 1965 white paper, *A Policy for the Arts – The First Steps*, which aimed to spread access to the arts especially through arts centres.[14] These community buildings both helped create a new network of venues but also, in housing various arts under the same roof, encouraged the fringe's fusions, where performance might combine with visual art and popular music with theatre. The second development was the Theatres Act of 1968 which ended the Lord Chamberlain's role in approving (or not) plays for production. The abolition of this system crucially both displaced the assumption that a theatre show had to begin with a script and also, for the first time, ended the prohibitions on nudity, violence, blasphemy, and strong language, all of which became important tools of alternative theatre.

The fringe was, therefore, not a unified, consistent movement. Early chronicler of the underground Jonathan Hammond conceded that 'it is difficult to discern any kind of common denominator underlying the various manifestations of the fringe'.[15] A survey of the fringe published in 1971 listed thirty-two companies that included an avowedly political countercultural group like CAST but also comedy troupes (Low Moan Spectacular), and companies that performed classics (Freehold), new plays (Portable), children's theatre (Sidewalk), street and environmental theatre (Welfare State), community and applied theatre (InterAction), dance (Incubus), mask theatre (Hanna No), rock-opera (Gate TC), satire (The Flies), and more.[16] When historians try to reduce the sprawling diversity of the fringe to a smaller number of categories, Sandy Craig manages five, Baz Kershaw eight, and John Bull nine.[17]

However, despite having no consistent ideology or theatrical style, the fringe grew quickly. In 1971, *Theatre Quarterly* listed thirty-two companies[18] and London's influential venue the ICA listed sixty companies that had performed in its spaces the previous year;[19] in 1979, the *British Theatre Directory* listed 151 companies.[20] It has been calculated that between 1968 and 1988 over 700 alternative theatre companies came and (mostly) went.[21]

Three Case Studies

To illustrate the diversity of the fringe and some of the – sometimes terminal – problems companies encountered, we offer three companies as case studies: Portable Theatre, the Pip Simmons Group, and Monstrous

Regiment, none of whom, for different reasons, survived into the twenty-first century.

Portable Theatre

David Hare and Tony Bicât started Portable in 1968. They were supported by Jim Haynes's influential, if short-lived, Arts Lab in London's Drury Lane, though their great importance lay in touring. 'The idea', Hare explained, 'was to take theatre to places where it normally didn't go'.[22] This meant knitting together a new touring circuit out of arts centres, festivals, schools, universities, factories, army camps, working men's clubs, and more. Chris Megson notes that in their first year, Portable's touring covered over 30,000 kilometres, and Hammond insists they 'did more than any other group to make the idea of fringe touring popular'.[23] They soon found that their smash-and-grab approach to touring required a similarly aggressive and assertive performance style. Hare told Peter Ansorge in 1972: 'Literary values don't survive on the road. Long, simmering plays can't survive. You must have plays with a strong physical force.'[24]

They found a writer that suited this style in Howard Brenton who wrote the successfully brutal *Christie in Love* for them in 1969, though there are already glimmerings of it in David Hare's first original play *How Brophy Made Good* (1969). Hare's piece has a presentational, choral (but not poetic) style, which is self-aware and somewhat self-mocking. There's a knowing mix of mass culture and politics, high culture and low cynicism, as in a scene between the eponymous Brophy and his girlfriend:

> SMILES. Darling, what would you do without me?
> BROPHY. Masturbate.
>
> *The central passage of Rachmaninov's* Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini *starts immediately*.[25]

The crude juxtaposition of high art and deliberate vulgarity is a specific tactic of early seventies fringe theatre, a situationist approach that seeks to disrupt the spectacular surfaces of capitalist mass culture through aggressive contradiction. Surprisingly, perhaps, given Hare's later evolution into one of the major left-wing playwrights of the era, the play's political stance is mainly nihilistic, creating a landscape of cynicism and depravity from which no positive values emerge intact. Portable's countercultural aim was, Hammond reports, to 'stir the shit'.[26]

Portable did not last long. After a financially disastrous tour of *England's Ireland* (1972), a collaboratively-written play about the British military

occupation of Northern Ireland that few venues were keen to take, Portable went bankrupt in 1973. Some of its residual energy and personnel went into creating the fringe 'supergroup' company Joint Stock the following year, while David Hare and Howard Brenton were soon writing for the National Theatre. Arguably, like a few other individuals and companies, Portable outgrew the fringe.

The Pip Simmons Group

Hammond describes the Pip Simmons Group's style as 'a highly individual blend of pounding rock music and grotesque vaudeville, much influenced by comic strips, pop music and other chunks of American mass culture'. He also notes that critics, 'on the whole, took a peculiarly intense dislike to it'.[27] Some leftist critics also found the company's following cultish, and the shows' abrasive bombardments ultimately apolitical.[28] The Group was beset by bad luck: they had two shows in high-profile venues – *Dracula* at the Royal Court (1976) and *The Tempest* at Riverside Studios (1978) – that might have raised their profile considerably, but both shows were unsuited to the venues and received disastrous reviews.[29] Furthermore, as we come to below, the structures of Arts Council funding did not fit their working methods. Nonetheless, for some, their shows were 'the most original group creations of the entire underground circuit'.[30]

The Group evolved in lurches, both artistically and administratively, first finding their distinctive style with *Superman* and *Do It!* (both 1970). The former satirically fused the comic-book superhero Superman with his Nietzschean namesake to create a cartoonish satire on mass culture, civil rights, and contemporary politics; the latter dramatised the Yippies' invasion of the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago and their subsequent trial in a fusion of street theatre, puppetry, and countercultural energy. Exhausted by touring and denied funding for development work, Pip Simmons temporarily disbanded the company in 1973 and worked in continental Europe for a while.

There he created his best-known work, *An Die Musik* (1975), a more sombre piece that tried to find a theatrical language to represent the Holocaust. The first half took the form of a dumbshow scene of a Jewish family forced by an SS Officer to perform an increasing distorted and perverted Seder ritual, while original music ('The Dream of Anne Frank') was performed by onstage musicians. In the second half, more directly echoing the phenomenon of Jewish prisoners in concentration

camps forced to perform music for the guards, the cast played pieces of German music by Liszt, Beethoven and Schubert, while suffering brutal, humiliating indignities.[31] The show divided audiences. Catherine Itzin felt it skirted too close to the anti-Semitism it criticised,[32] but when the production was revived in 2000, the *Jewish Chronicle*'s reviewer found profundity in its bleakness: 'In offering no hope, no optimism, no redemption, this play could be said to have got closer to the Shoah than any other dramatization.'[33]

The Pip Simmons Group doggedly continued through the 1970s, making shows that pre-empted some of the key theatre innovations of the twenty-first century, including, twenty-six years before Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man*, an immersive adaptation of Büchner's *Woyzeck* at the Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff (1977), and a verbatim piece about atomic warfare, *Towards a Nuclear Future* (1979). But they never quite managed to find funding that allowed them to cultivate a sustainable long-term audience, and their work after 1985 was piecemeal and sporadic. Despite being for some the fringe company *par excellence*,[34] the Pip Simmons Company proved incompatible with and vulnerable to the structures that sustained the fringe, especially funding. We come back to an analysis of funding the fringe below.

Monstrous Regiment

Monstrous Regiment was one of several women's theatre companies to emerge in the wake of the first National Women's Liberation Conference (Oxford, 1970), the publication of pioneering feminist books like Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), and the feminist activism of the Miss World protests, also 1970. The performative invasion of the Miss World event was partly undertaken by the newly-formed Women's Street Theatre Group who also performed a short satirical piece about the sexualisation of women at the International Women's Day rally in London's Trafalgar Square, in 1971. Other companies that formed in the wake of these events include the Women's Company and Women's Theatre Group (called Sphinx since 1991), both of whom emerged from the season of women's plays at the Almost Free Theatre in 1973; the Sadista Sisters (1973); Cunning Stunts (1977); Mrs Worthington's Daughters (1978); and Spare Tyre (1979).

Many of these companies used agitprop. As Michelene Wandor argued, this non-psychological theatre form was ideal in 'placing the individual woman in her social and political context, and presenting the feminist idea

of the developing consciousness of woman from a passive acceptance of her situation to a desire to change it'.[35] By contrast, Monstrous Regiment were, in Wandor's words, 'more conventional ... with no immediate didactic purpose'.[36] Certainly, they turned away from agitprop – but in order to help build 'a body of work by and about women that could be performed by others'.[37] As such, though the company was actor-led, their productions almost always started with a play, whether that was a new play, an adaptation, translation, or revue material.

Named after a 1558 misogynist pamphlet by Scottish theologian John Knox, the company formed in August 1975 as a socialist-feminist collective, bringing together music and theatre, in a non-naturalist style. The founders included veterans of alternative theatre who had worked with 7:84, Belt 'n' Braces, the People Show, and others. They were not a separatist company, having men on equal footing in the collective (though their written constitution stipulated Monstrous Regiment would 'never contain more men than women'[38]). Their first production, *SCUM: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing* (1975), celebrated women's role in the Paris Commune, which had recently marked its centenary (Image 6.1). Their second and perhaps most famous show was the premiere of Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* (1976), set in the seventeenth-century witch-trials, but with songs making connections to twentieth-century women's experiences. A later collaboration with Churchill was inspired by Judy Chicago's artwork *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) and imagined a meal attended by various women from history. This would eventually become *Top Girls* (Royal Court, 1982) but, at the time, Churchill could not find the form in which to write it and instead the company hastily collaborated on an adaptation of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1979) which was, as company co-founder Gillian Hanna admitted, a disaster and nearly precipitated the collapse of the company.[39]

In the Thatcher years, the feminist and socialist politics of the 1970s were in something of a retreat and, as Hanna recalled, 'we all suffered under the backlash of so-called "post-feminism"'.[40] Just as important, though, cuts in arts subsidy hurt Monstrous Regiment, as we explore below, dragging it away from its original ambitions, breaking up the collective, destroying its distinctive aesthetic, and blunting the sharpness of its feminist politics. The company never folded, though they have not produced a new theatre show since 1993 and live on chiefly through a superb archival website.[41] Monstrous Regiment's political and artistic ideals were compromised by the very funding structures supposed to support them.

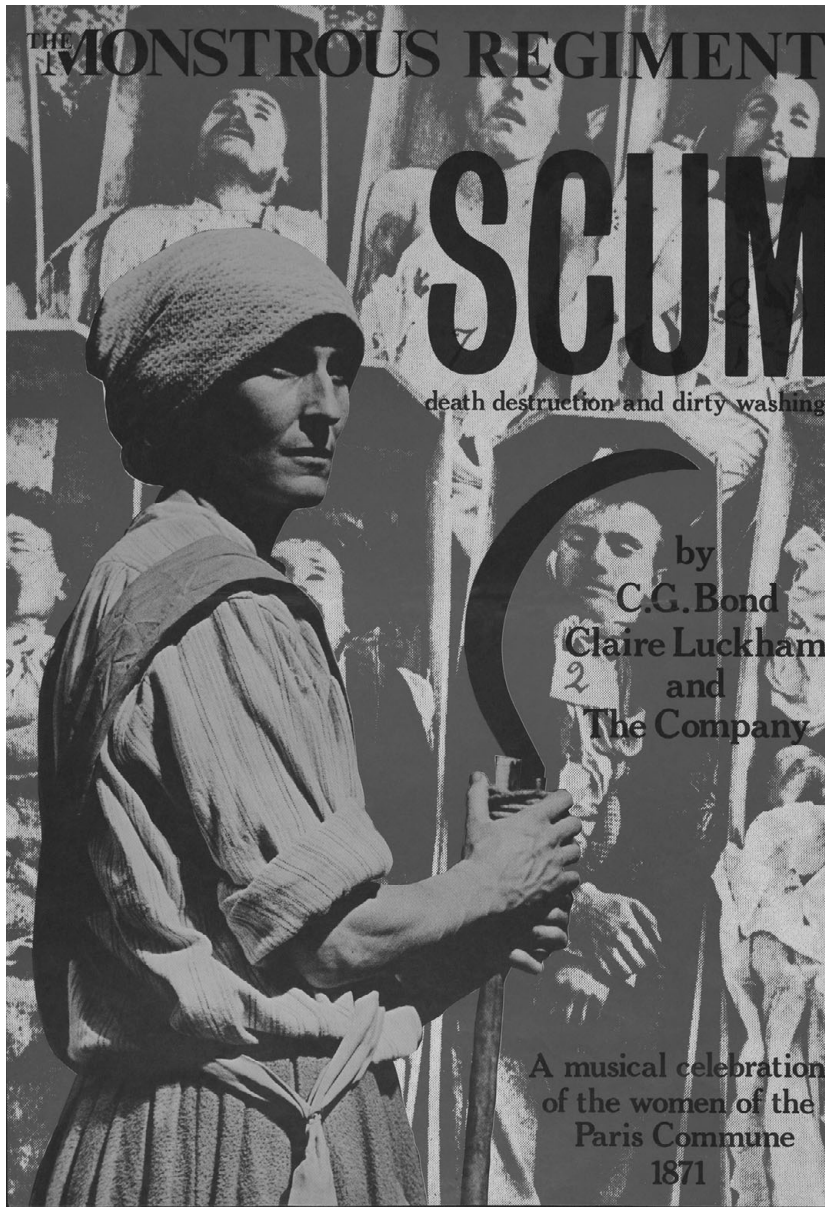

Image 6.1 Poster for *Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing* by Monstrous Regiment (1976), designed by Chris Montag

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Fault Lines of the Fringe

These three companies stopped producing new work in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s respectively. To some extent, these collapses may have been due to internal disagreements and the attraction of other opportunities but in each case, the companies folded partly in exhaustion at negotiating the contradictions and dilemmas that beset alternative theatre in the 1970s. We address three issues here, each of which, in different ways, undermined and arguably defeated that first burst of oppositional energy of the late sixties and early seventies: the lure of the mainstream, the challenges of collectivity, and the effects of subsidy.

The Mainstream

Perhaps what principally distinguishes the terms 'fringe' and 'alternative' is the attitude to the mainstream. For some, the term 'fringe' entails an implicit deference to a mainstream; 'alternative', on the other hand, suggests a rival, even critical rejection, of the mainstream. Joint Stock co-founder David Aukin argued that the point of funding the alternative is ultimately 'to feed itself back into the mainstream of the theatre'.[42] Foco Novo founder Roland Rees rejects such an idea: 'Fringe or New Theatre started with its own philosophy and created its own traditions.'[43]

There were arguments for and against opening fringe work up to a larger, more mainstream audience. John Russell Brown claimed that working on a small scale promoted 'isolation and self-absorbed ways of working',[44] a view echoed by Bill Gaskill, another Joint Stock co-founder, who contended that 'small spaces enabled writers to get away with poor plays' because a small venue's immersive nature suspends 'critical judgment'.[45] Others pursued an ultra-oppositional stance to the mainstream and even the rest of the fringe: Footsbarn Theatre declared in the mid-seventies, 'We are as alternative as you can get – no wages, live in a community, grow vegetables, chickens, etc. Please get off your alternative trip.'[46]

Simultaneous with many of these reflections was the move of some key alternative theatre makers into the mainstream, specifically playwrights David Hare and Howard Brenton to the Royal Court and National Theatre, and David Edgar – who had written for numerous fringe companies including General Will and Portable – to the RSC. It would be simplistic to claim that any of these writers had 'abandoned' the fringe; there is an argument that they brought some of the fringe's politics onto mainstream stages. Hare and Brenton had certainly become frustrated by

the way Arts Council funding decisions seemed determined to trap their work in small theatres, as we shall see. Coinciding with his move to the mainstream, Brenton declared in a 1975 interview that 'the fringe has failed', suggesting that the dream of a counterculture had become a stifling ghetto.[47] Trevor Griffiths, who wrote briefly for the fringe, claimed he then turned to television 'because I realised how impotent [the fringe] was as a mouthpiece to the whole of society'.[48]

A more detailed diagnosis of the fringe's possible limitations came later in the decade in an essay by David Edgar reflecting on the ten years of political theatre after 1968. Edgar responds to an anonymous[49] essay in *The Wedge* that lamented the failures of the fringe, but argued it had become co-opted by mainstream theatre and wasn't oppositional enough. Against this, Edgar argues that, in the absence of a revolutionary working-class movement, alternative theatre has been unable to develop corresponding revolutionary forms and that agitprop, one candidate for this, is too limited because its economic focus crucially prevents it from addressing the key issue of consciousness.[50] Edgar cites Trotsky on the naivety of thinking that aesthetics can be safely ignored as long as you have the right revolutionary content,[51] applauding the artistic richness of plays like Edward Bond's *Lear* and Griffiths's *Comedians*, facilitated by major subsidised theatres, the Royal Court and Nottingham Playhouse respectively.[52]

Edgar's view was met with a strong response from John McGrath, who argued fiercely for the distinct specificity of the fringe as a radically 'emergent' (see above) cultural force, a 'Marxist cultural intervention', even.[53] Unlike major theatres, McGrath argued, fringe companies call upon different talents from their creative teams and speak to different audiences; they are small enough to run as genuinely democratic organisations, while cheap enough to subsidise to a level requiring no compromise with debased mainstream tastes; and finally, being small, these companies can rise and fall with their original impetus, and do not become cultural white elephants like the National Theatre.[54] Against the claims of Edgar *et al.* that fringe artists who moved into mainstream contexts were mounting a Trojan horse intervention into mainstream culture and debate, McGrath argues that the dominant system just turns their work into another 'product'.[55]

It is difficult to adjudicate definitively on this debate about the relative political value of fringe and mainstream. Edgar seems correct in saying that, without a mass working-class movement, the effectiveness of socialist theatre is limited; on the other hand, his claims for the superiority of more mainstream plays is unexplained (as is Hare's vague insistence that

ultimately 'the individual writer can go further' than the collective[56]). Meanwhile, McGrath is understandably chagrined at Edgar's dismissal of the radical potential of popular cultural forms, since McGrath had championed exactly this approach, practically in shows like his company 7:84's remarkable *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973), and would do so theoretically in his book *A Good Night Out* (1981). But McGrath does not address the late-seventies decline of working-class radicalism nor the important issue of consciousness: Edgar makes an important point that feminist theatre, often drawn to intersections between the personal and political, increasingly found the 'purely' political form of agitprop unsuitable.[57] McGrath's largely class-based analysis is a narrow account of alternative theatre that has little obvious room for the Miss World protests, radical drag, the People Show, or *An Die Musik*. Overall, while fringe artists' attitudes towards the mainstream ranged widely, the subsidised sector's facilities and finances posed temptations that threatened to dilute the fringe.

The Collective

From the beginning of the fringe, many theatre companies insisted they were organised collectively. The People Show declared in 1971 that they 'have no director, no leading figure'.[58] Monstrous Regiment's identity as a collective drew on their experience in women's consciousness raising.[59] Michelene Wandor saw the choice of collective organisation as both enacting practical democracy within the group, and also modelling an important feminist opposition to authoritarianism, hierarchy, and divisions of labour.[60]

But maintaining the collective ethos within a company was difficult. Gillian Hanna recalls that being a woman-identified company with men in it demanded tremendous energy in ensuring the men felt truly equal (when it would have been easier – if less collective – to be a woman's company who employed men).[61] In his incisive book about working in community theatre, Steve Gooch notes that the collective principle can become a problem as a company develops: when a new member joins, do they have the same say and ownership as someone who founded the company and has worked in it for five years? Furthermore, if there are problems in a group, often there is no mechanism to deal with it elsewhere (with a producer or manager): every problem stays within the group.[62]

Some of the fringe's collectivity was more evident, or politically successful, in theory than practice. Many companies attempted to dismantle

barriers with the audience – to make them part of the collective. But this will have felt more threatening than liberating when it involved the audience being goaded and berated, a characteristic tone of much early fringe work. Hare's *How Brophy Made Good* ends with the company turning on the audience and portentously accusing it of complicity in the amoral anti-hero's rise: 'He is the hero you deserve.'[63] It is condescending, and, as Sandy Craig concedes, may be contradictory to try to impose equality on an audience by use of '"fascistic" audience participation'.[64]

Modelling an equal society in rehearsal or onstage was not always consistently achieved; or rather, not all inequalities were considered equal. A mixture of leftist orthodoxy that played down issues around gender and sexuality as anti-revolutionary diversionism, and a liberationist ideology that treated all sexual boundaries as bourgeois hypocrisy, often led to women being treated as second class in alternative theatre. The centrepiece of the 1963 Edinburgh Happening was a naked woman, displayed to the largely male crowd. As the audience came in to *The People Show No. 1* (1966), the cast made comments about them that included, according to the published script: 'fancy her with jeans on' and 'what an ugly face'.[65] Portable Theatre's *Lay By* (1972) was based on evidence in a rape trial, about which much unsettling fun was had, pornographic images were passed out to the audience, and while clearly some critique of the objectification of women was intended, that objectification was repeated throughout.[66] In both *How Brophy Made Good* and Howard Brenton's *Fruit* (1970) a character's homosexuality is presented as a moral weakness.

The socialist theatre company, the General Will, was famously 'zapped' in 1975, during a performance of Edgar's agitprop play *The Dunkirk Spirit*, when cast member Noel Greig came out of character to protest the harassment and discrimination he had suffered as a gay man in the company. The uproar this caused, in the venue and afterwards, led to Greig taking over the company and turning it into a vehicle for exploring sexual politics, prior to joining Gay Sweatshop in 1977. It is a fascinating example of the tensions within the left that were perhaps only temporarily hidden by the utopianism of collectivity.

One final difficulty that many companies discovered in operating as a collective was working with the Arts Council, which frequently preferred to ignore the companies' collective principle in favour of talented individual members – such as Mark Long of the People Show or Gavin Richards of Belt 'n' Braces.[67] Arts Council bureaucracy also found it awkward working with collectives, preferring to work with named individuals with

identified roles. Indeed, through the seventies and eighties, the Arts Council increasingly insisted on demarcating roles as a condition of funding, and it is subsidy that helped make and break the fringe.

Funding

Most historians of the fringe agree that the advent of subsidy was, in John Bull's words, of 'supreme importance'.[68] 'Alternative theatre – and particularly political theatre' – writes Catherine Itzin, 'could not have developed on the scale it did in the seventies without subsidy'.[69] As we shall show, however, this dependence on subsidy was not always applauded nor benign.

The emergence of the fringe seems to have taken the Arts Council by surprise and its efforts to find an appropriate response were lumbering. The first structural relationship to the fringe came with the establishment of a New Activities Committee in 1968, which eventually recommended it be replaced by an Experimental Projects Committee in 1970, which was joined by an Experimental Drama Committee in 1971, and then superseded by two smaller panels with a remit to support 'Community Arts' and 'Performance Art' in 1973. Precise distinctions between these sectors were hard to make, with the result that, as the Assistant Drama Director of the Council conceded in 1973, 'an applicant spent more time deciding who to aim at than how to draw the bow'.[70] As a result, a further group, the 'Special Applications Committee', was established to triage cross-arts applications to the various panels.[71] In part, the Council's confusions were the result of the fringe's deliberate troubling of conventional distinctions between arts and its shape-shifting invention of new forms.

The amounts that the Arts Council spent on the fringe were relatively small. The Council's Report for 1976–77 records the largest single grant to a fringe company as £46,450, which went to the Half Moon Theatre, and the entire fringe theatre sector received £1,105,879 (in grants and guarantees), less than half of the grant to the National Theatre in the same year.[72] For certain sections of the fringe and alternative theatre movement, pickings were even slimmer. In 1974–75, £21,235 was the total amount allocated to performance art (comprising twenty-six lucky recipients), compared to £33,900 expended on just seven literary magazines.[73] Nonetheless, the amount spent on the sector increased dramatically – from £7,000 in 1971 to £1.5 million in 1978[74] – and no doubt supported its growth.

Did subsidy blunt the politics of the fringe? Jeff Nuttall certainly thought so, writing bitterly at the end of the seventies that subsidy had

broken the solidarity of 'a formidable phalanx of guerrilla artists' by making them compete against each other.[75] Competition for money doubtless fostered irrational resentments: when the Performance Art panel was established in 1973, some more traditional artists, fearing their own funding would be squeezed, claimed it would be 'easier to get money by standing on a street corner and playing a banjo' than by painting or sculpting.[76] As this suggests, subsidy invited unwelcome scrutiny and performance art became subject to regular public mockery in the 1970s. In February 1976, a group of three performance artists under the collective name Ddart received a tiny grant of £395 to perform a 450-mile circular walk in East Anglia, the men connected at the head by a bright yellow pole. The idea of 'so-called' performance artists being paid to walk around with a pole on their heads became a stick with which the tabloids beat the principle of arts subsidy.[77]

The Arts Council's top-down structure made it a rather distant, undemocratic organisation, especially when the rise of the fringe meant such an expansion of grass-roots theatremaking.[78] In addition, key decision-makers were hostile to the new movement. Roy Shaw became the Council's Secretary General in 1976 and warned in a newspaper article that 'in sponsoring community arts the Arts Council have brought a Trojan horse into the citadel of the arts – one which seeks to subvert this whole society and with it all traditional values in the arts',[79] which hardly suggested the Council's receptiveness to an alternative theatre sector. The Literature Officer in the late sixties, Charles Osborne, was expressly opposed to performance art; his obituarist recalls his distaste for 'lunatics wandering across East Anglia with poles on their heads'.[80] There were artists (including Roland Miller, Stuart Brisley, and Malcolm Griffiths) on some of the assessment panels, though the panels' role was advisory, which led some, like Nuttall, to see their presence as a fig leaf.[81]

At times, the Council encouraged companies in directions they themselves did not wish to go. A good example is Dark and Light Theatre (later the Black Theatre of Brixton), which the Council persisted in treating less as artists and more as social workers.[82] Portable Theatre started as a small-scale touring company but, as their reputation and ambitions grew, wanted to address bigger themes on bigger stages to bigger audiences. The Council, however, threatened to remove funding whenever the company showed signs of departing from small-scale touring.[83] As Portable's exasperated directors wrote in 1972, 'we bitterly regret ever letting ourselves be subsidised by the Arts Council at an unrealistic level'.[84] As a condition of their funding, the Pip Simmons Group were required to do a staggering

120 performances each year.[85] Given the tight margins on small-scale touring, as Belt 'n' Braces also complained, this was hardly cost-effective.[86] It also crowded out the time available for developing new projects (it was the refusal of a development grant that led Simmons to disband the company for the first time in 1973). Relentless touring also made it very difficult for companies to build relationships with particular communities when forced to do a series of one-night stands across the country.[87]

More directly, the Arts Council often forcibly interfered with the collective nature of these companies by, first, requiring them to employ administrators and, later, imposing executives and artistic directors. Monstrous Regiment were fortunate in having an administrator, Sue Beardon, who was sympathetic to their politics but, as she noted, the advent of the administrator brought with it 'the business plan, the strategy, incentive-funding and expensive fund-raising training courses'[88] – a profit-driven business model antithetical to the company's founding principles. Portable Theatre got an administrator at the insistence of the Arts Council and went bankrupt within eighteen months.[89] Enforced restructuring meant that Monstrous Regiment, which in 1980 was a full-time collective of eight or nine company members paid year round, became in 1982 a company employing one administrator with everyone else freelance.[90] At the end of the decade, when the Council insisted that Monstrous Regiment appoint an Executive and Artistic Director, the collective had been entirely replaced by a traditional set of employer–employee relationships.[91] At the same time, cuts meant the musicians who had been so important in shaping the company's aesthetic, and taking it away from mere naturalism, were unaffordable, leaving the shows feeling much more conventional.[92] Alby James, artistic director of Temba, Britain's first theatre company dedicated to producing Black writing, noted in 1980 that with inflation and cuts, small-scale theatre was getting ever smaller;[93] this was a particular problem for Monstrous Regiment, who had fought against the presumption that a woman's theatre company had to be domestic rather than epic. The enforced belt-tightening meant a reduction in scale that seemed to send the company away from the historical and back to the kitchen.

The End of the Fringe?

Jeff Nuttall's confident claim in 1979 that 'the old militancy is coming back'[94] felt, within only a couple of years, extremely hollow. Thatcherism explicitly sought to crush left-wing activism and reduce subsidy in favour

of private sponsorship. Many of the other sources of official and unofficial funding for the arts were eliminated: in the early seventies, when unemployment benefit was at a historic peak of 20 per cent of average earnings, you could run a theatre company on the dole, but successive below-inflation rises saw enormous cuts to unemployment benefit between 1978 and 1982 and again between 1985 and 1990, eventually losing a third of its relative value.[95] Local authority funding was sharply curtailed and the Greater London Council, always a significant supporter of alternative arts in the capital, was abolished by Thatcher in 1986.

As Baz Kershaw notes, the major new 'alternative' companies of the 1980s – such as Theatre de Complicité (later just Complicité) and Cheek by Jowl – were far less obviously political.[96] The same might be said of even more recent 'alternative' companies, such as Blast Theory (founded 1991) and Punchdrunk (founded 2000). Nick Kaye observes that certain performance art companies – he cites Lumiere & Son, Moving Being, Hesitate and Demonstrate – retreated into a more conventionally theatrical register.[97] In some ways, as Kershaw remarks, the fringe proved itself adaptable, even entrepreneurial, two decades of finding new audiences and working with meagre means making the sector resourceful and resilient.[98] Some of alternative theatre's energy and inventions made it into the mainstream, most notably in the rise of alternative comedy, which swept aside a generation of dully sexist and racist comedians. And it is arguably true that some of the gender- and race-based activism of 1970s and 1980s companies including Monstrous Regiment, Temba, Talawa, and Theatre of Black Women infiltrated the mainstream, with the National Theatre, for example, publishing targets for gender and race diversity and inclusion,[99] though this move might alternatively be seen as tokenism in an enduring monoculture. Ultimately, it is the case that some of the totemic oppositional theatres of the 1970s – 7:84, Foco Novo, Joint Stock, and others – folded after being axed by the Arts Council. Likewise, important parts of fringe infrastructure – such as London's Drill Hall, Glasgow's Arches, and the National Review of Live Art – didn't survive.

There is still a fringe in Britain. It continues to offer alternatives to the mainstream, through venues like Camden People's Theatre, Cambridge Junction, and HOME Manchester; festivals, including Fierce, SPILL, and Manchester International Festival; advocacy and producing organisations such as the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), Artsadmin, and Something to Aim For; and companies like Cardboard Citizens, Clean Break, Common Wealth, Quarantine, and Sh!t Theatre, to name just a few. Perhaps even more importantly, there remains an audience for

innovative theatre; and perhaps this audience is even growing, as argued by theatre critic Lyn Gardner in 2007:

> The rise of Theatre Studies A Level that gives as much weight to the work of the David Glass Ensemble and Forced Entertainment as it does to the well-made play is creating a new generation of theatregoers and theatermakers who are at home with experimentation, the devised, the physical and the visual and who instinctively understand the connections between a theatre tradition and a gallery tradition.[100]

But the promise of something huge and revolutionary that shone for a while at the turn of the seventies seems never quite to have been fulfilled, let alone to have triumphed. Even Gardner's enthusiasm gives way to pragmatism: 'Some of the innovations have been integrated – at least superficially – into the mainstream, but most of it has disappeared and along with it the traditions and teachers who could hand down the expertise.'[101] Perhaps, as we have argued, the fringe collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions; perhaps, too, it was starved of oxygen by hegemonic forces that understood the oppositional challenge it posed.

Nonetheless, it has left at least some legacy – and many inspiring examples – of political engagement, artistic experimentation, a vast broadening of the spaces in which theatre can take place, some expansion of the demography of those who participate in theatre, and a vision of theatres, as Ed Berman expressed it, not as 'special boxes for special occasions for special people ... [but] useful spaces for useable purposes for usual people'.[102]

Notes

1 Catherine Itzin, Simon Trussler, and Michel Julian, 'Alternative Theatre: An Editorial Dialectic', *Theatre Quarterly*, 5 (1975), 3–15.
2 Sara Freeman, 'Towards a Genealogy and Taxonomy of British Alternative Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 22 (2006), 364–378, 364.
3 Jonathan Hammond, 'A Potted History of the Fringe', *Theatre Quarterly*, 3 (1973), 37–46, 37.
4 Heike Roms and Rebecca Edwards, 'Towards a Prehistory of Live Art in the UK', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22 (2012), 17–31, 19–21. 'Happenings' are, loosely, improvised performance art pieces, often intended as interventions designed to shake up artistic, social, and political values.
5 Adrian Henri, *Environments and Happenings*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1974, 7–9.
6 Quoted, *Time Out*, 'Theatresurvey No. 1: Guide to Underground Theatre', *Theatre Quarterly*, 1 (1971), 61–65, 63.

7 See Norman Marshall, *The Other Theatre*, London, John Lehmann, 1947; Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain*, London, Macmillan, 1987; Naomi Paxton, *Stage Rights! The Actresses' Franchise League, Activism and Politics 1908–58*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018; Colin Chambers, *The Story of Unity Theatre*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1989.
8 These influences were not adopted uncritically. Critics have suggested that the Pip Simmons Group often satirised and critiqued the po-faced physicality of these companies in shows like *Superman* (1970) and *We* (1978). Kate Dorney, 'Pip Simmons Theatre Group' in John Bull (ed.), *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, London, Bloomsbury, 2017, 195–221, 202; Clive Barker, 'Pip Simmons in Residence', *Theatre Quarterly*, 9 (1979), 17–29, 25.
9 Roms and Edwards, 'Towards a Prehistory'.
10 Sandy Craig (ed.), *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, Ambergate, Amber Lane, 1980, 10.
11 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, 121–127.
12 John McGrath, 'The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre', *Theatre Quarterly*, 9 (1979), 43–54 ,44–45.
13 In John Offord (ed.), *British Theatre Directory 1979*, Eastbourne, Offord, 1979, 327.
14 *A Policy for the Arts – The First Steps*, Cmnd 2601, London, HMSO, 1965, §51.
15 Hammond, 'A Potted History', 46.
16 *Time Out*, 'Theatresurvey'.
17 Craig, *Dreams and Deconstructions*, 20; Baz Kershaw, 'Alternative Theatres, 1946–2000', in Baz Kershaw (ed.), *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 3: Since 1895*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 349–376, 362; Bull, *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 67–120.
18 Time Out, 'Theatresurvey'.
19 Bull, *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 71.
20 Offord, *British Theatre Directory 1979*.
21 Bull, *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 51.
22 Quoted, Richard Boon, *About Hare: The Playwright and His Work*, London, Faber & Faber, 2003, 62.
23 Chris Megson, 'Portable Theatre' in Bull (ed.), *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 171–194, 175; Hammond, 'A Potted History', 38.
24 Boon, *About Hare*, 68.
25 David Hare, *How Brophy Made Good*, *Gambit: International Theatre Review*, 5 (1970), 82–125, 124.
26 Hammond, 'A Potted History', 39.
27 *Ibid*., 42.
28 Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968*, London, Methuen, 1980, 75.
29 Barker, 'Pip Simmons', 20–21.

30 Peter Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain*, London, Pitman, 1975, 30.
31 See Theodore Shank, 'The Pip Simmons Group: Commemorating the Nazi Concentration Camps', *The Drama Review: TDR*, 19.4 (1975), 41–46 for a full account of the original production.
32 Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 75.
33 John Nathan, Review, *Jewish Chronicle*, 15 September 2000, in *Theatre Record* 9–22 September 2000, 1172.
34 For example, Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, 30.
35 Michelene Wandor, *Carry on Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*, 2nd ed., London, Methuen, 1986, 62.
36 *Ibid.*, 62.
37 Gillian Hanna (ed.), *Monstrous Regiment: Four Plays and a Collective Celebration*, London, Nick Hern Books, 1991, xiii.
38 *Ibid.*, xxix.
39 *Ibid.*, xlviii–l.
40 *Ibid.*, lxxxvi.
41 Monstrous Regiment, https://monstrousregiment.co.uk/ (accessed 15 March 2022).
42 David Aukin *et al.*, 'Subsidy', *Gambit: International Theatre Review*, 6 (1974), 15–40, 20.
43 Roland Rees, *Fringe First: Pioneers of Fringe Theatre on Record*, London, Oberon, 1992, 9.
44 John Russell Brown, 'The Subtle Perils of Subsidy', *Theatre Quarterly*, 3 (1973), 33–39, 35.
45 In 'Towards a National Playwrights Conference, Part III', *Theatre Quarterly*, 9 (1979), 65–82, 69.
46 Catherine Itzin (ed.), *Alternative Theatre Handbook, 1975–1976*, London, TQ Publications, 1976, 66.
47 Howard Brenton, 'Petrol Bombs Through the Proscenium Arch', *Theatre Quarterly*, 5 (1975), 2–20, 10–11.
48 Quoted, Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 167.
49 The essay was in fact by Bruce Birchall, an alternative theatre veteran who moved between various fringe venues and companies, including the Cambridge Arts Lab, Guerrilla Theatre, Notting Hill Theatre Workshop, West London Theatre Workshop, and Pirate Jenny (see Bull (ed.), *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 61–67).
50 David Edgar, 'Ten Years of Political Theatre, 1968–78', *Theatre Quarterly*, 8 (1979), 25–33, 28–29. By 'consciousness', Edgar means not just class consciousness but also awareness of other forms of group identity (gender, sexuality, race, etc.)
51 *Ibid.*, 32.
52 *Ibid.*, 31.
53 McGrath, 'Theory and Practice', 45.
54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid*., 45.
56 Quoted, Boon, *About Hare*, 107.
57 Edgar, 'Ten Years', 32.
58 Quoted, *Time Out*, 'Theatresurvey', 63.
59 Hanna, *Monstrous Regiment*, xx.
60 Michelene Wandor (ed.), *Strike While the Iron Is Hot: Three Plays on Sexual Politics*, London, Journeyman, 1980, 9.
61 Hanna, *Monstrous Regiment*, xxx.
62 Steve Gooch, *All Together Now: An Alternative View of Theatre and the Community*, London, Methuen, 1984, 46–49.
63 Hare, *How Brophy*, 122.
64 Craig, *Dreams and Deconstructions*, 17; see also Tynan in Simon Trussler (ed.), *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies: Sixteen Interviews from* Theatre Quarterly *1970–1980*, London, Methuen, 1981, 15, and Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London, Verso, 2009.
65 Jeff Nuttall, *Performance Art, Volume 2: Scripts*, London, Calder, 1979, 9.
66 Howard Brenton *et al*., *Lay By*, London, Calder, 1972.
67 Grant Peterson, 'The People Show' in Bull (ed.), *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 147–169, 159; Kershaw, 'Alternative Theatres', 81–82.
68 Bull, *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 51.
69 Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 152.
70 Quoted, Catherine Love, *Are We on the Same Page? A Critical Analysis of the 'Text-Based'/'Non-Text-Based' Divide in Contemporary English Theatre*, PhD, Royal Holloway, University of London, March 2018, 146.
71 Richard Francis, 'Performance and Arts Council Patronage', *Studio International*, 192 (1976), 32.
72 Arts Council, *Value for Money: Thirty-Second Annual Report and Accounts 1976/77*, London, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1977, 67–69, 63.
73 Arts Council, *Thirtieth Annual Report and Accounts 1974–75*, London, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1975, A51–A52.
74 Bull, *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 80.
75 Jeff Nuttall, 'Subsidy in the UK: The Naked Form of Control Revealed', *The Performance Magazine*, 2 (1979), 17.
76 Francis, 'Performance and Arts', 31.
77 John A. Walker, *Art & Outrage: Provocation, Controversy and the Visual Arts*, London, Pluto, 1999, 79–83.
78 Bull, *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 57.
79 Quoted, Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 160.
80 Barry Millington, 'Charles Osborne Obituary', *The Guardian*, 18 October 2017, www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/oct/18/charles-osborne-obituary (accessed 10 May 2022).
81 Nuttall, 'Subsidy in the UK', 17.
82 Bull, *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 87–88.
83 Megson, 'Portable Theatre', 176–177.
84 Quoted, *ibid*., 178.

85 Barker, 'Pip Simmons', 23.
86 Bull, *British Theatre Companies 1965–1979*, 83.
87 Dorney, 'Pip Simmons', 210.
88 Quoted, Hanna, *Monstrous Regiment*, xxvi.
89 Megson, 'Portable Theatre', 11.
90 Hanna, *Monstrous Regiment*, lix.
91 *Ibid.*, xiv, lxxxvi.
92 *Ibid.*, lvi–lvii.
93 Alby James, 'Alternative versus Mainstream', *Gambit: International Theatre Review*, 9 (1980), 9.
94 Nuttall, 'Subsidy in the UK', 18.
95 Tom Rutherford, 'Historical Rates of Social Security Benefits', House of Commons, 2013. *Standard Note*, researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06762/SN06762.pdf (accessed 10 May 2022).
96 Kershaw, 'Alternative Theatres', 367.
97 Nick Kaye, 'Live Art: Definition and Documentation', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 2 (1994), 1–7, 3.
98 Kershaw, 'Alternative Theatres', 365.
99 National Theatre, *Diversity*, n.d. (accessed 15 March 2022).
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101 *Ibid.*, 87.
102 Ed Berman, *Fun Art Bus: An Inter-Action Project*, ed. Justin Wintle, London, Methuen, 1973, 3.