



BELTANE

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT NETWORK

BELTANE'S FRINGE

AUGUST 2013

EVALUATION AND FUTURE PLANS

DR SARAH ANDERSON

PROJECT OFFICER

BELTANE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT NETWORK

FIRST PREPARED 25TH OCTOBER 2013

REVISED 17TH DECEMBER 2013

PART I: THE 2013 FRINGE

INTRODUCTION

In summer 2013, the Beltane Public Engagement Network, in partnership with Edinburgh University Students Association and Heriot-Watt Engage, curated 22 shows for Edinburgh's Assembly Rooms Fringe. These shows were part of the Sunday Herald Verb Garden that was produced by Fair Pley Productions. All shows featured researchers from or loosely associated with one of the four universities in the Beltane partnership (University of Edinburgh; Heriot-Watt University; Edinburgh Napier University; Queen Margaret University). All events took place lunchtime or mid-afternoon in the Famous Spiegel tent, part of the George Street Spiegeltent.

This report provides an evaluation of the shows the Beltane Network curated for the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe, and outlines plans for summer 2014. The target audience of this report is the performers and curators of the 2013 Fringe shows, plus anyone from an Edinburgh university interested in becoming involved in a Fringe show in future. The objectives and perspectives represented here are those of Beltane.

OBJECTIVES AND BACKGROUND

By running the Fringe shows, Beltane hoped to create an opportunity for university researchers to have a conversation with Fringe-going audiences about their research. We believed that the venue – a beautiful Victorian mirrored cabaret tent with circular seating area – would encourage researchers to move away from a formal lecture format to a more informal, conversational one. We also hoped that using a non-traditional venue sited away from university buildings, in the middle of an open-air bar, would make the researchers seem more approachable from an audience perspective.

In terms of audience diversity, Beltane was aware that a Fringe-going audience is still a relatively narrow, affluent sector of society. Nevertheless, we felt that engaging with this audience would be a new opportunity for researchers: much of the audience would not be from a university or the city of Edinburgh, and the typical Fringe audience member is seeking laughs and entertainment, so we would have to really think differently about our pitch (or else be dismissed as boring).

Beltane's role was to curate the shows; production, including liaison with the Assembly Rooms and Edinburgh Fringe, was done by Fair Pley Productions. The opportunity for the Beltane shows to be included in the Assembly Rooms Fringe came about through Beltane's link with the Stand Comedy Club – the Assembly Rooms Fringe is a sister company of the Stand.

AUDIENCE NUMBERS AND DIVERSITY

NUMBERS

In total, twenty-two Verb Garden shows were Beltane's. These shows took place throughout the whole Fringe season (excluding preview days and the mid-August rest weekend). A breakdown of ticket sales is given in figure 1.

Date	Show	Fringe Box Office (BO)	Assembly Rooms (AR) Box Office (BO)	Free Tickets	TOTAL
2	1530 Embracing Death with Richard Smith	3	12	14	29
3	1400 How to be a Financial Hacker with Brett Scott	3	7	2	12
4	1400 Witches, Quacks and Painted Ladies with Susan Morrison	1	13	0	14
5	1530 Crowdfsource your Neighbourhood with Nicola Osborne and Addy Pope	4	0	0	4
6	1530 Can All Walks be on the Catwalk? with Mal Burkinshaw	2	8	0	10
7	1530 Lighten up about the Sun with Richard Weller	3	9	2	14
8	1530 When Harm is Legal with Lynne Copson	5	8	2	15
9	1530 Unseen, not Unexplained with Jon Stone	3	11	6	20
12	1200 Deadinburgh: Stripped to the Brain with Lewis Hu	0	1	0	1
12	1530 Everyone's Invited - Do they Want to Come? with David Stevenson, Anthony Schrag	2	18	7	27
13	1230 Engagement Overload? with Sergio Della Sala and Seonag Mackinnon	1	6	14	21
14	1230 Theatre for Foetuses with Ben Fletcher-Watson and Rachel Drury	0	9	0	9
15	1530 Demolish Morningside! with Peter Matthews, Richard J. Williams	11	21	3	35
16	1530 Robots Rise with Subramanian Ramamoorthy and Hugh Murdoch	4	7	6	17
17	1400 Red Hair: Truth, Secrets and Lies with Ian Jackson	11	12	1	24
18	1400 Rethinking Rules with Tim Johnson	0	15	0	15
19	1230 Are you Ready? Singing, Dancing, Dying with Deborah Ritchie and Amy Hardie	0	13	0	13
19	1530 George Osborne's Vain Pursuit with David Cobham	8	15	1	24
20	1530 Send the Deaf to Orkney! with Graham Turner, Jeff McWhinney	1	46	11	58
21	1530 Bad Language with Graeme Trousdale	4	9	6	19
22	1530 The Disembodied University with Jen Ross, Sian Bayne and Hamish Macleod	6	19	5	30
23	1530 Smoking in my Private Space - Butt Out! with Deborah Ritchie, James Cant, Neneh Rowa-Dewar	5	32	4	41
	TOTAL	77	291	84	452
	% of total (excl. comps)	20.9%	79.1%		

FIGURE 1: OFFICIAL TICKET SALES FOR BELTANE SHOWS

These official box office figures provided by Fair Pley productions show that a total of 452 people attended the 22 shows, making an average audience size of 21. Both audience sizes and the number of paying audience members varied considerably between shows. Our largest audience was 58 (“Send the Deaf to Orkney”), while our smallest was 4 (“Crowdsource your Neighbourhood”; “Deadinburgh” was cancelled due to electrical problems, so is discounted). On average, 17 people out of our mean audience size of 21 paid to attend their show but, for some shows, over 50% of the audience attended for free.

It is easy to suggest why some shows attracted large audiences. Our best-seller, “Send the Deaf to Orkney”, starred two highly prominent members of the UK Deaf Community, Jeff McWhinney (Managing Director, [Significan’t](#)) and Graham Turner (Chair of Translation, Heriot-Watt University). Both used their extensive networks to promote the show; Jeff did a [promotional video](#) which was posted on YouTube, and shared the event on Facebook; Graham Turner promoted the show to his contacts using similar means. Graham and Jeff had the marketing support of Bob Duncan, a former Channel 4 producer already known to Prof Graham Turner. Bob was instrumental in obtaining support for the show from Orkney Council and their Tourist Board; he also secured an [interview](#) slot for Graham Turner on Radio Orkney, and promoted the show through an [article](#) in the *Limping Chicken*.

Our next-best seller was “Demolish Morningside”; to our knowledge, this show had little dedicated promotion from Beltane and any other source, but it had a great title and pithy, fun description. We consider this latter show to be an example of a good product selling itself.

Where shows did not sell well, however, this does not mean the promotional copy or marketing campaign were wholly to blame. There are certain trends to be viewed across the shows: numbers generally increased towards the end of the Fringe run, and our worst-performing show (in terms of ticket sales) was on a Monday lunchtime. An obvious approach in 2014, then, is to start promotion earlier so that there is already momentum by the time of the first show, and to try and get all shows in a mid- or late afternoon slot. These factors are at least partly within our control.

Fair Pley has done an interesting comparison of our shows compared to its other spoken-word Fringe shows. The other shows got the majority of their ticket sales from the Edinburgh Fringe box office, not the Assembly Rooms box office. This is almost a reversal of the sales proportions for the Beltane Fringe shows – see figure 2.

Other Fair Pley spoken-word shows				
Date	Show	Total tickets sold	Fringe BO (%)	AR BO (%)
2	George Galloway/Graham Speirs	240	76.3	23.7
3	George Galloway/David Hayman	366	74.0	26.0
7	James Morton	211	78.2	21.8
13	Tony Benn/Richard Holloway	655	71.0	29.0
14	Tony Benn/Richard Holloway	662	74.3	25.7
	Average		74.8	25.2

Date	Show	Total tickets sold	Fringe BO (%)	AR BO (%)
All	Beltane	368	20.9	79.1

FIGURE 2: PROPORTIONS OF TICKET SALES FROM DIFFERENT BOX OFFICES

Again, there is a likely explanation for this: Fair Pley’s other spoken-word shows each had individual adverts in the main Edinburgh Fringe programme and website, whereas the Beltane shows, due to factors of time and money, did not. Anecdotally, the paper Edinburgh Fringe programme is **the** resource used by people planning their Fringe viewing, even in these electronic days. From the numbers in figure 2, it seems reasonable to project that individual adverts in the paper Edinburgh Fringe programme could have increased the average audience size by a factor of 3, taking us to an average audience size of over 50, instead of 21 actually achieved.

DIVERSITY

For evaluation, we were limited to a short verbal poll that could be conducted as part of the show; this was fully or partially completed for 15 out of 22 shows. We asked the audience:

- Do you work in a university?
- Are you a friend of the presenter (includes family and good work acquaintances)?
- Are you from out of town?
- Have you learned anything new or changed your mind?

We also monitored whether any audience members stopped to speak to performers after the show.

For the shows evaluated, university employees made up a substantial proportion of nearly all of our audiences, although this figure was always less than 50%. For two shows, 50% or more of the audience was friends of the performer; conversely, for three shows, around 10% or less of the audience was friendly with the performer.

The shows attracted a few international audience members (notably, from Australia), and a number of people who were not from Edinburgh; however, all audiences we surveyed had a majority of people based in the city. Interestingly, for “Demolish Morningside”, a substantial one-third of the audience of 36 people was from out of town – the show’s Edinburgh-specific title clearly did not deter people.

The question about whether or not audience members felt they had learned something new and/or changed their mind was asked at 9 shows; there was great variation in responses. “Can All Walks Be on the Catwalk”, “Unseen, not Unexplained” and “Red Hair: Truth, Secrets and Lies” had a 100% success rate, but there was also a show where the result was zero. Given the small sample size, it is hard to say for sure how effective the engagement was in this respect.

For several shows, a small crowd of people spoke to the performer afterwards, and these were not just their friends and families; notably, after “When Harm is Legal”, 6 people spoke to the performer to continue a heated discussion that had started in the event. In some instances where this did not happen, it did not necessarily indicate the audience was not engaged, but could mean that the topic had already been thoroughly discussed at the show, or the performer simply had to leave quickly for another appointment.

There were some thrilling (from our perspective) audience responses, including the development of some (respectful) arguments between audience members. Stand-out moments for the Beltane team were:

- At “Lighten Up about the Sun”, one audience member said she initially felt like she had “walked into the wrong show”, but she ended up asking a question about a friend who had recently been diagnosed with skin cancer.
- A number of patients attending “Unseen, not Unexplained”, and seemed to appreciate the opportunity to ask questions about their own conditions.
- A lady travelled all the way from Dumfries purely to attend “Send the Deaf to Orkney”.
- At the end of “The Disembodied University”, an ex-teacher in the audience commented that she hoped the events would be back in 2014.

In terms of entertainment, props – robots and builders’ hats – provoked a good response! Susan Morrison, our resident chair, did a great job of balancing entertainment with the sobriety needed to discuss sometimes quite upsetting and personally affecting topics.

PERFORMERS’ PERSPECTIVES

Performers who are still conducting university research and who played a central role in their show were asked to respond to an online evaluation survey. Out of 27 individuals invited to respond to the survey, 20 did so. The responses to the survey were generally positive – 17 respondents said they would do the Fringe shows again, and 3 said they would maybe do so. However, the survey also indicated room for improvement.

THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE

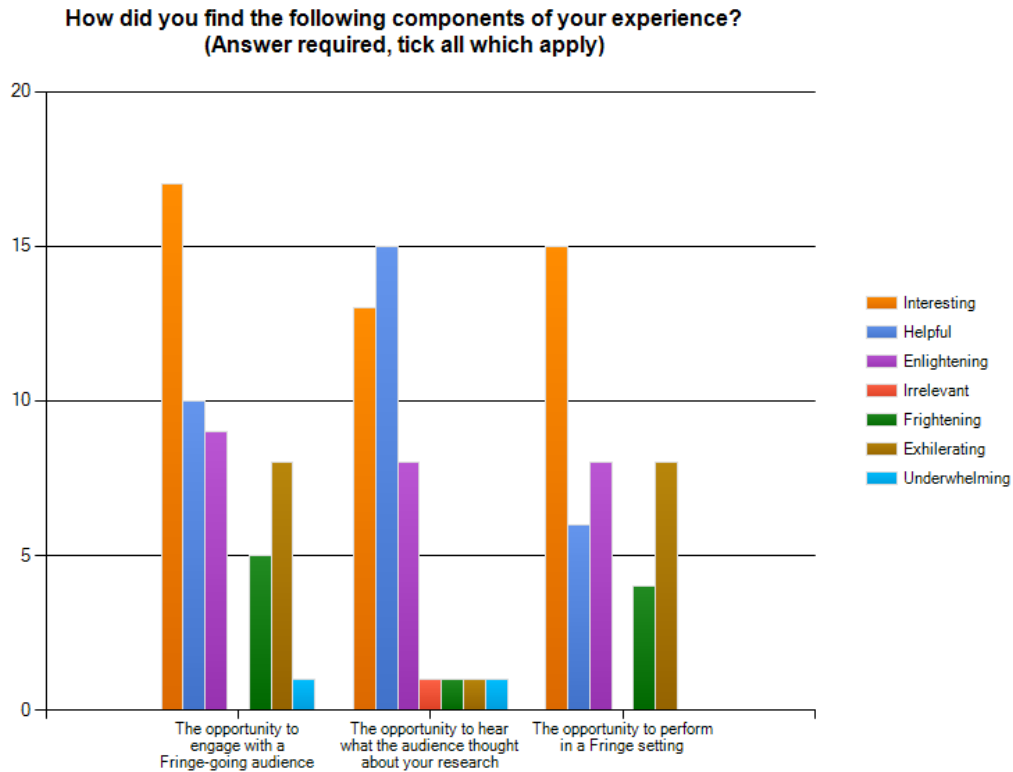


FIGURE 3: THE PERFORMERS' EXPERIENCE

On the whole, researchers seemed to benefit from the opportunity to perform at the Fringe, with the most common responses being 'interesting', 'helpful', 'enlightening' or 'exhilarating'. Respondents commented:

Scary but a really important form of public engagement - good to make us go outside our comfort zone and interact with a different audience. I enjoyed it immensely.

We (or 60 minutes) didn't allow enough time for audience input.

I think it was tough to understand audience expectations ahead of time but really useful to be out of our comfort zone and dealing with a paying audience - which we rarely have the opportunity to do.

Encouraged me to do more public engagement.

Totally new experience. Good to be able to go along to earlier events, and see how other colleagues had approached their events.

I have talked at the Fringe on several other occasions.

For the majority of our performers, performing at the Fringe was a new experience, and they should be applauded for approaching the unknown so positively and flexibly. Now that we at Beltane have more

knowledge ourselves of what is involved performing at the Fringe, we can provide a fuller briefing to future performers – there is no need for the experience to be more scary than necessary.

We also asked performers what was the best part of the experience for them. A number specifically mentioned the opportunity to hear what the audience thought about their research, and the new perspectives this gave them as a result – music to our ears!

ORGANISATION AND VENUE

Our organisational experience was not as smooth as we would have liked. This was due to a lack of appreciation, from the Beltane perspective, about how the Fringe works, including the timescales and workload involved, plus some factors beyond our control (for example, it was not possible to do a venue inspection well in advance of events because the venue was temporary; we were also unable to influence the training of Fringe box office staff). Our performers, however, seemed not to suffer too much because of this, with 19 out of 20 rating the organisation ‘good’ or ‘excellent’, and only 1 respondent rating it ‘poor’. Areas highlighted by respondents as needing further work were marketing, and pinning down the programme further in advance – the latter would certainly aid the former. Organisational matters – again, primarily marketing – were also the key matter raised when respondents were asked generally how their Fringe experience could have been improved.

On the whole, respondents seemed happy with the venue, although a couple did feel it didn’t set the right tone:

[My Verb Garden experience could have been improved by a] more TEDlike venue. Performing in a fringe comedy venue suggests that the audience are going to get a different kind of show to what is on offer. Ideas are not comedy, and should probably be kept separate. A book festival audience and atmosphere would be a better match.

A more specific venue could have been helpful - it was a bit ad hoc. but then again, that maybe was its charm and success!

One venue issue which was raised by a lot of respondents, however, was the background noise from the Spiegeltent’s electricity generator. Although performers did use a PA system which allowed the audience to hear them above the generator noise, there is no doubt that the generator noise was distracting. Short of changing venue (which is not necessarily desirable given the caché of performing on George Street), this is a relatively tricky matter to fix. Something which may mitigate the problem a little is setting up shows on the side of the venue furthest away from the generator; however, this would not be an option with large audiences where the whole venue was required.

SELF-PROMOTION

Beltane did not explicitly request that performers and their colleagues promote their own shows – we assumed, somewhat naively, that individuals might do this anyway (at least, as much as they could with the short lead time they had). In fact, self-promotion is something many people feel uncomfortable doing, so it was understandable that two respondents felt it was not their job to promote their show. One survey respondent noted:

Felt a bit "inhibited" about asking people to "Come along - it will be great!". :-) Just not a approach to what I do that I am familiar with. But think that I would play it differently in the future.

Our survey revealed that word-of-mouth was the method used by most respondents (17 out of 20); a substantial proportion also used social media or asked their academic department to promote their show on their behalf. No performers used show-specific flyers; small proportions used blogs, mailing lists and contacts in non-academic organisations.

PERFORMERS PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR SHOWS' IMPACTS

We wanted to know how performers felt their shows went from the audiences' perspectives. This is shown in figure 4:

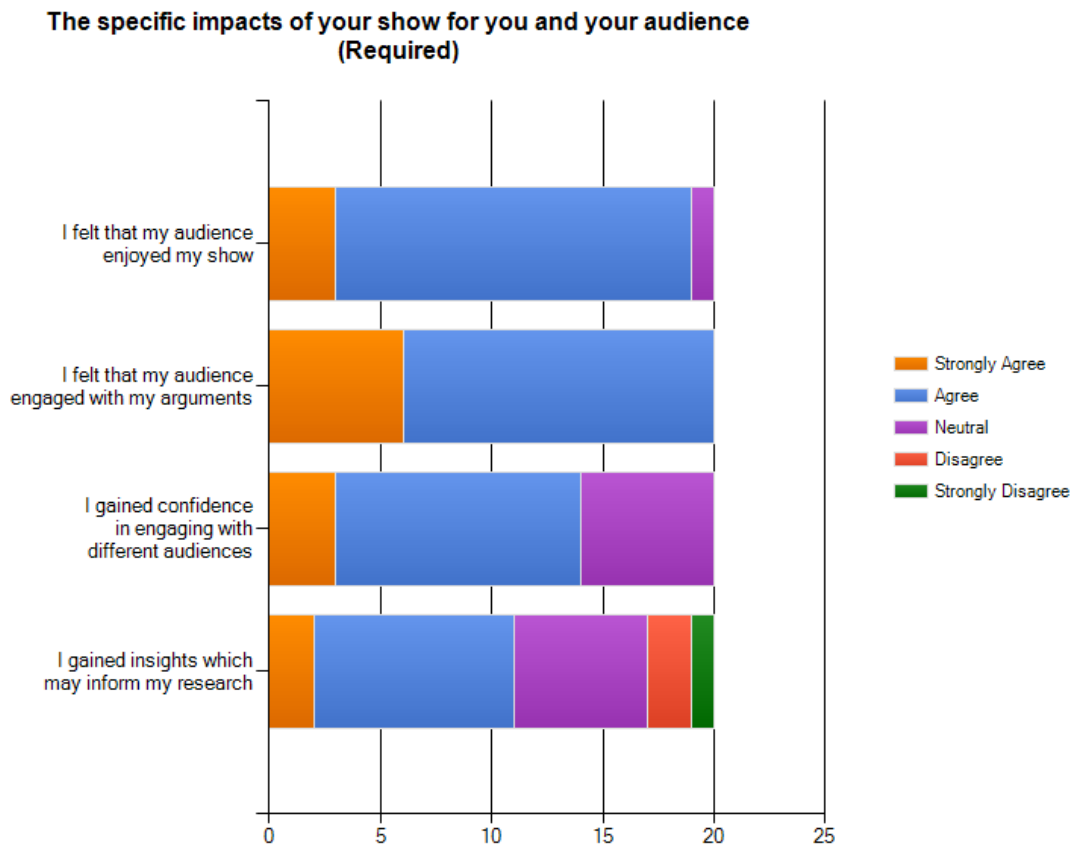


FIGURE 4: PERFORMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR SHOWS' IMPACTS

All performers agreed or strongly agreed that their audience engaged with their arguments, and none felt that their audience did not enjoy their show. These perceptions are largely in line with our own observations: during the whole run, very few people fell asleep or left early; some discussions did appear to become heated, but the people arguing appeared to enjoy this.


The experience boosted the confidence of the majority of performers when it comes to engaging with different audiences – this is great news. Interestingly, over half of the performers felt they gained insights which could inform their research, and we already know of one performer who used these insights in preparing a research funding proposal. Engagement informing research was something Beltane had hoped to see, but we did not expect to see so much of it; it is a testament to the engagement abilities of our performers.

CRITICAL RECEPTION AND MEDIA COVERAGE

We were pleased to get two reviews – and largely positive ones at that.

BROADWAY BABY REVIEW

Et in Edinburgh Ego

Broadway Baby Rating: 

[Print This Review](#)

At first glance, there was something utterly incongruous about the relationship of The Famous Spiegelent - all flowing fabrics and dark wood panelling - and the panelists of Friday's 'Embracing Death' edition of the tantalizingly-titled Verb Garden: The Cabaret of Dangerous Ideas. The setting, like the panel series' title, suggested the decadent, the burlesque, the taboo. The unassumingly-dressed, middle-aged panelists - headed up by Dr. Richard Smith and including physicians Colin Currie, Mary Gillies and chair John Gillies, comedian Arthur Smith and documentary filmmaker Amy Hardie - hardly appeared transgressive. But as the panelists began to discuss the day's theme - the problem of 'dying well' and its relationship to contemporary Western society's approach to end-of-life care - their words soon felt more 'dangerous,' more taboo-breaking, than any cabaret.

We've all lost touch with death, Richard Smith argued, quoting a colleague's bitter appraisal that "in California, death is optional." We devote our time and energy to staving off the inevitable as long as possible, denying its reality up until the very last moment. Modern medicine, according to Smith, may allow us to live longer lives, but at the cost of our ability to contend authentically with the problem of our own mortality. Again and again, the panelists reminded us that we could "go" at any moment, asking tellingly uncomfortable questions of their audience (how would you like to die -

suddenly or over a prolonged period? Burial or cremation?) They - with the exception of Arthur Smith, providing a measure of tension-breaking black humour - remained perfectly serious, perfectly calm; their approach to death is matter-of-fact - even that of Dr. Mary Gillies, whose personal battle with cancer humanizes the panel's abstractions. Yet the squirming response of some members of the audience to such a topic only proves Richard's point: The truth about what awaits us all is one we'd much rather forget.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the composition of the panel (and audience members), much of the discussion around the problem of "embracing death" centered around the role of doctors: How and when to speak to dying patients, how to approach end-of-life-care, the influence of the pharmaceutical industry on doctors' approach to treating patients in their final years or days. Such a focus at times seemed overly narrow: Questions about wider cultural issues, and particularly about the role of religious faith, were sometimes mentioned only as afterthoughts, and a more diverse approach to the question of death would have allowed for some welcome complexity (and divergence of opinion). But, at its core, this edition of the Spiegelent's unassuming afternoon discussion series more than lived up to its grand promise: to navigate ideas that felt truly 'dangerous.'

Reviewer:
Tara Isabella Burton

Tara Isabella Burton has written 8 reviews for Broadway Baby since joining the team in 2013.




FIGURE 5: SHOW REVIEW FROM BROADWAY BABY

ED2013 Words & Events Review: Verb Garden – The Cabaret of Dangerous Ideas (Fair Play / The Famous Spiegeltent)

This series of panels, with a name much more mysterious and edgier than its content, offers thoughtful, learned perspectives on questions ranging from mortality to the financial crisis to the fashion industry. The particular session I attended was enigmatically titled ‘Embracing Death’, and featured four doctors, a filmmaker, and a comedian giving their views on society’s denial of death. Each offered interesting anecdotes and insights in a relaxed, conversational atmosphere that encouraged audience participation, but an hour is simply too short to delve into these broad issues at a satisfying depth. The audience, many of whom also worked in the medical industry, seemed to enjoy the discussion, indicating that this is more of a special interest option than a crowd-pleaser.

The Famous Spiegeltent, until 25 Aug (not, 10, 11), times vary.

tw rating 3/5 | [Elaine Teng]

FIGURE 6: SHOW REVIEW FROM THREE WEEKS EDINBURGH

In terms of general media coverage, this was, to our knowledge, achieved only by the “Send the Deaf to Orkney” team. In advance of their show, Bob Duncan of the team authored an article for *The Limping Chicken*, an online magazine for the UK’s deaf community, and performer Professor Graham Turner was interviewed by Radio Orkney. After the show, Graham wrote about their audience’s response for *Limping Chicken*. The event itself was filmed by the BBC for its *See Hear* TV programme.

- *Limping Chicken* articles:
 - <http://limpingchicken.com/2013/08/14/bob-duncan-round-up-the-deaf-and-send-them-to-live-on-orkney/>
 - <http://limpingchicken.com/2013/09/03/professor-graham-turner-the-great-orkney-debate-what-did-the-deaf-decide/>
- Radio Orkney interview: http://www.beltanenetwork.org/ai1ec_event/send-the-deaf-to-orkney/?instance_id=
- *See Hear* TV programme: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03fgstf>

Without a doubt, the “Orkney” team received this coverage because of the profile of its speakers and the work of Bob Duncan (the former Channel 4 producer who dedicated his time to the event for free).

WAS IT A SUCCESS?

There are definitely things we would like to improve, not least our own approach to such a large production, but we feel that the shows often did meet our objectives of creating conversations with a Fringe-going audience about challenging areas of research. We were delighted that our performers were

able to refine their own engagement practice through their shows. Equally, we were excited to see that many of the shows did seem to affect their audiences, sometimes in quite personal ways.

Key lessons learned for the future are:

- Start much earlier!
- Have enough people behind the scenes.
- Have enough money to support show-specific advertising.
- Spend more time briefing performers – and have a clear vision of what you want to achieve before doing this.

Nevertheless, we feel we did the best we could in 2013 with the time, money and people we had, and we would like to do it again.

PART II: BELTANE FRINGE SHOWS IN 2014

INTRODUCTION

Beltane and the producers of its Fringe shows, Fair Pley Productions, have agreed to work towards putting on a similar programme in the Famous Spiegeltent during the 2014 Assembly Rooms Fringe. Permission to hold the shows is needed from:

- Tommy Sheppard, owner of the Stand Comedy Club, to include the shows in the Assembly Rooms Fringe programme (the Assembly Rooms Fringe is a sister company of the Stand)
- The City of Edinburgh Council, to hold the Assembly Rooms Fringe on George Street
- The Famous Spiegeltent's Spiegelmeister, to hold the events in his venue

We believe support from all three parties is likely to be forthcoming, and would seek out alternatives if it was not.

FRINGE 2014 PROVISIONAL TIMELINE

ASAP	Invite expressions of interest for shows to be part of the 2014 programme
By Christmas 2013	Indicative programme sent to the Stand Comedy Club to secure the inclusion of Beltane shows in the 2014 Assembly Rooms Fringe
Mid-January 2014	Bootcamp for potential performers and show curators
By end of January 2014	Programme finalised
By Easter 2014	Permission from City of Edinburgh Council and the Famous Spiegeltent hoped for by this time.*
By May 2014	Publicity – print and online – started Shows promoted to university students (before they leave for the summer) Printed flyers circulating Shows on Beltane website Information for each show sent for inclusion in Edinburgh Fringe and Assembly Rooms Fringe programmes Social media campaign started

** Whether or not Council permission is received, and when, is completely outwith the control of Beltane and Fair Pley Productions. However, 2013 has shown we cannot afford to wait for this.*

FORMAT OF 2014 PROGRAMME

The 2014 programme will be similar to that of summer 2013: around twenty shows featuring university researchers having a conversation with an audience about the more controversial aspects of their research. However, we will make some simplifications. The 2013 Verb Garden had different strands: the

Cabaret of Dangerous Ideas; Radical Scotland; Radical Scotland Extra; the Decent Chat Show; and more. These distinctions did not appear to be meaningful for customers, made programming and promotion more complex, and appeared to add to the confusion in the Assembly Rooms Fringe box office. The 'Verb Garden' brand will probably be kept for 2014, but there will be fewer or no sub-strands.

One 2013 performer fed back that shows might have been stronger if they had all featured a suitable celebrity, such as the comedian Mark Thomas. We agree with this to an extent, but are also concerned that a celebrity presence can sometimes take control and focus away from the researcher – we do not want our performers to merely be a foil to big names. Celebrity performers may also wish to do things in their own specific format, which would make it hard to ensure continuity across the series. Our suggested compromise for 2014 is to have one event a week which features a big celebrity name, and give this special branding (for example, 'Feisty Friday'). For other events, to ensure continuity, we would provide a non-academic chair to be used by all performers – most probably the comedian Susan Morrison again. In 2013, Susan demonstrated an ability to create an entertaining atmosphere while, at the same time, being able to quickly grasp the core principles of a wide variety of research questions.

PROMOTION OF 2014 PROGRAMME

We have been advised by our producers that numbers for the 2013 shows were acceptable for year one of a Fringe run, but audiences need to be much larger if the shows are to be financially viable in future years. In 2014, we would be aiming for an audience average of at least 50 per show; based on the projections from box office sales given above, we think this is achievable, but only with a greater spend on marketing.

It is clear that the centralised promotion done by the Assembly Rooms Fringe, Fair Pley Productions and Beltane for 2013 was not enough. Beltane and Fair Pley did their best to do additional promotion of individual shows to special interest groups, but we did not have sufficient people or audience knowledge to realise the potential. We will be doing things differently for 2014.

STARTING EARLIER!

In 2013, Beltane started as early as it could given other existing commitments, but this was nowhere near early enough. As is clear from the above timeline, central publicity will be started by May 2014 at the latest, two months earlier than in 2013, and the final programme of shows will be finalised almost six months earlier. Pinning down the programme in good time will allow us to include individual shows in Fringe print programme, and so, hopefully, reach an average audience figure of 50. Starting earlier will also allow timely invitations to be issued to special-interest organisations.

MORE PEOPLE

The support Beltane received in 2013 from Fair Pley, Edinburgh University Students Association and Heriot-Watt Engage was invaluable but, in essence, there was one member of Beltane staff supporting the publicity and organisation of over twenty Fringe shows, which allowed little time for targeted promotion of individual events. Some shows did approach their marketing with zeal, and this paid off: “Send the Deaf to Orkney” had an audience of 58 thanks to the hard work of Bob Duncan. In 2014, Beltane will delegate show-specific promotion to either performers or the university support staff working with them. This will not just boost audience numbers and make central workloads more manageable – it will give performers a chance to get to know their audience, and vice-versa, in advance of each show. Beltane’s asserted function is to help others to engage, not do it on their behalf, so we should be delegating some show promotion for this reason alone.

MORE MONEY

Individualised promotion of each show will take more money. A reasonably-sized advert in the main Edinburgh Fringe programme costs about £80; show-specific flyers will cost a similar amount, and there is also a cost involved with ensuring each show is displayed on advertising boards at the Assembly Rooms Fringe venues. This means that an advertising cost of £200-250 per show will need to be met in addition to the cost of the overarching Verb Garden advertising provided by the Assembly Rooms Fringe and Fair Pley. Assuming twenty-two shows, this makes an additional cost of £4,400-£5,500.

There is simply no way Beltane could meet the entire additional publicity cost, nor could we favour individual shows. It is unreasonable to expect Fair Pley to meet the additional costs – they could just as easily put on a show where the performance is the same every day, thus requiring only 1 instead of 22 adverts. As the 2013 audience numbers show, though, we cannot risk putting on shows which do **not** have this additional advertising behind them. In 2014, performers will be asked to raise £200-250 to cover show-specific advertising; public engagement funds from external grants or university departments could be a source of funds for this.

We appreciate that by asking 2014 performers to pay for and help with their show-specific advertising, they may wonder what Beltane and Fair Pley are actually doing. The answer is: providing, for free, a venue, PA system and event chair; organising, paying for and delivering training; coordinating and, in some cases, paying for centralised advertising; programming all shows; liaison with the Edinburgh and Assembly Rooms Fringes; booking celebrity speakers; introducing people behind individual shows to external organisations for advertising purposes, where we have those contacts.

DIY WHEN REQUIRED

A key frustration in 2013 was that the Assembly Rooms and Fringe websites could not cope with shows where the performance changed every day, or with complex URLs. Rather than having a webpage for each of our Fringe shows, all of the shows were listed on a single Assembly Rooms Fringe webpage.

This meant we did not have space to provide a description for each show; had our performers been household names, we may have got away with this, but most of our performers are only famous in the academic world. Meanwhile, the Edinburgh Fringe website would only allow us to connect to the Assembly Rooms Fringe homepage (www.arfringe.com), not the pages for our specific runs of shows – some potential purchasers will simply have given up.

On the basis of 2013 experiences and discussions, we think it is unlikely that the Assembly Rooms and Edinburgh Fringe websites will be able to better meet our needs in 2014. In 2013, we overcame the problem as well as we could by listing full descriptions of shows on the Beltane Network website, but these wouldn't have been that visible in among all the other information on the Beltane site. In 2014, developing our own dedicated website for the shows, which all ticket vendors could link to, is probably the safest way to ensure that the shows have the web presence they need. Bright Club Scotland took this approach in 2013 with www.FunnyResearch.info, and it seemed to be effective.

2014 PERFORMER PREPARATION

In their feedback, 2013 performers indicated key things they felt could better prepare future performers:

- Video clips of the 2013 shows
- Clear briefing about what is expected (for example, a 50/50 audience/performer speaking ratio)
- Prior access to the venue
- Clear guidance about what audio-visual equipment will be available at the venue

The bootcamp we plan to run in January 2013 will address the first and second points. This event will also address the writing of an engaging show and advertising copy, and being comfortable in a situation where the audience has much of the control.

In 2014, as in 2013, performers will be invited to visit the venue in advance of their show, but if we are in the Spiegeltent again, these visits cannot take place until the very end of July at the earliest, as was the case in 2013. We can, however, share what we learned ourselves from using the venue in 2013.

For equipment, we promised more than we could deliver in 2013, motivated by a desire to put performers at ease in an already alien setting. We found out too late that the venue could not reasonably cope with visual kit: we could not store it in the Spiegeltent overnight, due to space restrictions, so the cost was prohibitive. In 2014, we will not allow performers to use any digital presentations, no matter how much they feel they need them. We feel that, had the performers had appropriate preparation time, all of the 2013 shows could have been done at least as well without electronic presentations, and this would have saved heartache and money all round.

THANKS

We would like to extend a special thank you to all of the following:

- All of our 2013 performers, for getting involved, doing a great job and giving us honest, useful feedback on their experience.
- Nicola Osborne at EDINA (for her help developing 2014 plans), <http://nicolaosborne.blogs.edina.ac.uk/>
- Fair Pley Productions, www.fairpley.com
- Susan Morrison at the Stand, www.thetstand.co.uk
- Johanna Holtan at Edinburgh University Students Association, www.eusa.ed.ac.uk
- Kat Przybycien at Heriot-Watt Engage, www.hw.ac.uk/research/public-engagement
- Bob Duncan, <http://limpingchicken.com/category/bob-duncan/>