

Everybody has a place: curating stories from the first 40 years of Fringe

For 40 years, the Melbourne Fringe Festival has been both a mainstay and a disruptor in Melbourne's cultural landscape. To celebrate the anniversary of this beloved festival, State Library Victoria teamed up with Fringe for *The rest is up to you: Melbourne Fringe Festival 1982–2062*.

From October 2022 to June 2023, the Library's Keith Murdoch Gallery comes alive with an exhibition of flyers, programs, posters and photographs from the State Collection and an immersive storytelling experience to tell the story of Fringe so far. An online Story Bank was created as part of the festival. Fifty hours of interviews with 40 current and former Fringe artists were also recorded and then made into a gorgeous soundscape (by sound designer Ciaran Frame). Visitors can sit and listen to stories as a quiet, solo experience or share in a communal audio experience, which echoes throughout the whole room. They are also invited to participate in the next 40 years of this very special festival by recording their own stories of Fringe.

Co-curators Simon Abrahams (CEO, Melbourne Fringe Festival) and Kate Rhodes (Curator, State Library Victoria) discuss this original and challenging curatorial project.



Rennie Ellis, Little Big Tops community circus group performing amid the crowd during the Melbourne Fringe Festival street parade, 1993, H2011.150/891

The thing about the Fringe and the way that the program was organised is that our mission was to not say no to anyone. Everybody had a place in the Fringe.

Arpad Mihaly, theatre maker and Fringe co-founder

Q. Why were Fringe and the Library a good fit?

SA. The Fringe and the Library are not on paper a good fit, and that's why it was such a good idea! The Fringe is messy and fast and interested in voices from the margins. The Library is a big, powerful institution. But we're both focused on democracy – the Library belongs to the people of Victoria, and so does the Fringe in a way – and both provide space for people to learn and contribute and to see the world differently.

KR. Many people might not realise that Fringe has an extensive archive and that the first 20 years of that is housed at the Library. It's a huge and important resource that tells the story of the independent arts in Melbourne. And it acknowledges that the story of Fringe is valuable to the story of Victoria.



Rennie Ellis, Melbourne Fringe Festival street parade float with people wearing body paint and feathered hats, 1987, H2011.150/184

We were the very first show for Melbourne Fringe out of the first lockdown in 2020 ... a piece of me came back together that night. And that's a feeling I'll never forget.

Laura Milke Garner, arts producer and former Fringe project coordinator

Q. Did hearing the stories of Fringe change your perspective on the festival's place in Melbourne's cultural life?

SA. Absolutely, and that's surprising, given I'm already the biggest believer in the Fringe's centrality to Melbourne's culture. I already knew that the Fringe is the most democratic platform there is. Most people don't realise that the Fringe Festival is uncurated: anyone can submit a project, and everything is included in the program. It represents exactly what's happening in the artistic zeitgeist at that time – in all its unfettered and messy glory.

KR. The stories confirmed for me that art-making is hard, but that those who do it think about that aspect last. Their drive, often against all the odds, is an incredible thing to behold. The interviews also confirmed for me that oral histories are crucial to making exhibitions about the local past come alive.

For many Deaf and disabled artists, we're not often centred, we're not often in the mainstream, and we're often not running our own events ... We represented our true selves, I think, in the festival, which was really important to us.

Carly Findlay, writer, speaker and Fringe access advisor

Q. Do you have a favourite Story Bank narrative or insight from the interviews?

SA. So many! Of course, listening to theatre director Barrie Kosky wax lyrical about the Fringe's importance in his career and in Melbourne's culture is always exciting. The Fringe Parade (which ran annually from 1984 to 2002) seems to be the thing that people talk about the most. I never attended one, and I loved learning all about it – how Brunswick Street was such an important place for artists and how this event gave them purpose and a reason to celebrate.

KR. There are so many articulate, funny and moving stories about Fringe and how festivals transform space and make us see familiar spaces differently. I was particularly moved by co-founder Arpad Mihaly's stories about how Fringe was established. The first Fringe meeting was attended by just three people! But one of those people was Bill Garner, the playwright and historian, who assured Arpad he should keep on. Well, of course, it continued, and here we are. But it was almost all over from the first meeting.

Q. Why was it important to include audio as part of this exhibition?

SA. The Fringe is made up of its people, and we felt storytelling was central to its curatorial concept. We wanted to capture a history of Fringe through all of the artists who were there, and it felt fitting that the exhibition should be an artwork in and of itself.

A key concept of the exhibition was also imagining the next 40 years of the festival, and that was never going to be found in the archive boxes; we wanted to write a history of the future using the past voices of Fringe.

KR. The inclusion of the audio was a way for us to exhibit people. We exhibited the Fringe archive – the photocopies of flyers, the posters, the guides, the correspondence – but much of this material speaks very softly. It needed a mediating voice: a mass 'display' of voices from the people who have made the festival over the last 40 years.



Left Warwick Jolly, poster for Melbourne Fringe Arts Festival, screenprint on white paper, 102 × 74 cm, Melbourne: Red Letter (Brunswick Work Co-operative), 1983, H83.181/20

Right Felix, poster for Melbourne Fringe Arts Festival meeting, 52 × 39 cm, 1984, H2003.90/481

Melbourne Fringe really provides a very supportive and safe environment to experiment ... Often you'll see work that begins in Melbourne Fringe two years later ending up on larger main stages.

Gideon Obarzanek, choreographer and former chair, Fringe Board