

# Minutes

## Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society AGM

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Fifty Second Annual General Meeting of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society Ltd

Company Number: SC046605

Scottish Charity Number: SC002995

Date: Thursday 26 August 2021 at 12pm

Venue: Zoom

### Present

Benny Higgins (Chair)

Apphia Campbell

Colin Adams

Gillian Harkness

Fiona Davis

Katy Koren

Luke Meredith

Miroslava Bronnikova

Pip Utton

Richard Wiseman

Susan Morrison

Stephen Allison

Tari Lang

Tara Stapleton

Toby Mitchell

### Membership

Allan Wilson

Amelia

Bridget Stevens

Chris O'Neill

David Jarman

Gary Staerck

Hartley Kemp

James Turner

Jane Colton

Jose Ferran

Miriam Wolanski

Pete Forman

Stacey Haber

Stuart Powell

Allan Woolfe

Amy Drake

Carol Marsh

Claire Brunton

Elise Harris

Ged Welch

Hazel Anderson

James Seabright

Jessica Guo

Judith Doherty

Oliver Schroeder

Philip Gerrard

Steven Logan

Thom Dibdin

### Apologies

James Mackenzie

Matt Panesh

### Public

Brian Ferguson

Jemma Rowlston

Carl Emery

Silver Man

### In attendance

Shona McCarthy (Chief Executive)

Lyndsey Jackson (Deputy Chief Executive)

Alan Gordon (Registration Manager)

Anne Diack (Head of External Affairs)

Brigid Kennedy (Marketing Manager)

Cerstin Heck (Development Assistant)

Dominique Hughes (HR & Operations Officer)

Elaine Keil (Marketing and Development Coordinator)

Fiona Carr (Development Manager)

Helen Darling (EA to Chief Executive) (Minutes)

John Pettie (Business Systems Manager)

Kevin Kimber (Head of Participant Services - Joint)

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Matt Lord (Participant Projects Manager)  
Niki Boyle (Marketing Content Officer)  
Nina Nicholl (Marketing Officer)  
Rachel Sanger (Head of Participant Services - Joint)  
Rebecca Monks (Communications Manager)  
Sydney Steib (Marketing and Development Assistant)

### **Preamble**

Lyndsey Jackson welcomed Fringe Society members and members of the public to the Annual General Meeting (AGM). Lyndsey requested all attendees to mute themselves and noted that the meeting would be recorded for the purpose of minute taking. After the Chair, Benny Higgins' opening remarks, the meeting will address the formal business and then an open Question and Answer session. Lyndsey noted that voting had closed at 12pm today and thanked the membership for their participation. Results would be issued by email and online on Friday 27 August.

The Chair welcomed everybody to the AGM and made introductory remarks:

Benny noted that we have all lived through quite an unimaginable eighteen months or so and as we start to view the future and the recoveries of our economies and our societies, we should not consider trying to get back to where we were. We need to build a society that is stronger, fairer, more inclusive, more equal; where culture will play an important role in the wellbeing of our society. The Fringe provides a wonderful opportunity to contribute to all of the things we want for the city of Edinburgh, the country of Scotland, the United Kingdom and beyond. It is our cultural identity but more than that, the brand that Scotland is, should be about culture. When he got the opportunity to apply to be Chair, he was thrilled and excited to take the chance. The last few months made him realise that the Fringe is an even more exciting institution than he had previously thought. The people involved were dynamic, energetic and committed. He hoped that going forward, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society could play an important convening role. One of the characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership is going to be collaboration, but collaboration needs to be convened, and when it comes to the Fringe, the Society is uniquely able to do that. In any crises, it is crucial to return to our purpose, not diminish our ambition and hold up the values that are important. The Fringe Society team and the Board are well equipped to do all of those things. We can look forward to next year being the start of a new future for the Fringe and hope we can all work together to make that happen. We will be talking to the Scottish government, the UK government and the different participants in the Fringe whether its performers or venues, and ensure our relationships are strengthened for the greater good. He felt privileged to be part of it and hoped everyone could work together to make the most of something that is very special.

### **Apologies**

Lyndsey noted that Board members Matt Panesh and James Mackenzie had sent their apologies.

#### Notice

The Notice convening the meeting was taken as read and voting closed at 12pm.

#### Minutes of the 2020 Annual General Meeting

The Chair noted that the Minutes of the 2020 Annual General Meeting (AGM) had been circulated electronically and would be taken as read. The Chair asked if there would be any objections to adopt the minutes in terms of completeness and accuracy. The minutes were unanimously adopted.

**Decision:** The minutes of the 2020 AGM were unanimously approved. Proposed by Fiona Davis and seconded by Colin Adams.

#### Audited Accounts

The Chair noted that the audited accounts had been circulated electronically for information and invited Fiona Davis, Chair of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee to provide headlines and answer any questions raised. Fiona commented that in terms of the accounts, the Society had performed as expected. The Society submitted its Business Plan when it secured the loan from the Scottish government and the performance since then both in 2020 and this current year had been aligned to that plan. For the first time in the history of the Society, we made a significant loss but that was a loss that was expected. We received little trading income as there was no income from ticketing, registration, etc. We received some income from funders directly supporting Covid-19 impacts. We also significantly cut the cost base of the Fringe to manage accordingly. Lyndsey invited questions from members. There were none.

#### Chief Executive's Report

Shona McCarthy, Chief Executive thanked and congratulated all those at the meeting who had helped make the Fringe happen this year. That was a small miracle given that as recently as June, we had no idea if live performances were going to be possible.

As of this week, we had just under 1,000 shows registered of which two thirds were live and one third were online shows. This was our first full hybrid event and a landmark moment in the history of the Fringe. The digital platform can only grow and develop and become more robust in future years and add value to live performances in 2022 and beyond. Audience appetite for shows was clear as was demonstrated when we put up a screen at one of the windows in the shop because we were inundated with queries from the public about shows they could see. The feedback from performers and artists who managed to put on a performance this year was that they had really good audiences who were particularly welcoming, tolerant and supportive as they were keen to get back to live shows. 2020 and 2021 have been the most challenging time in Fringe history, the most challenging time for the wider culture sector and indeed for society as a whole. We need to take a moment in the autumn and winter months to reflect, to gather our learning and look at what are the things we will do differently going forward. We plan to engage in a series of conversations with Fringe stakeholders from artists and participants to venue managers, producers, promoters, Edinburgh city residents, funders and supporters to gather intelligence on how people would like to see the Fringe revival from 2022, our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary and what a Fringe renaissance might look like.

We also launched the Save the Fringe campaign this week. Whilst the Fringe was able to come back in some way this year, that does not take away from the fact that everyone who has been a part of it, has been hugely impacted financially and in terms of their well-being in the last two years. And important to note that whilst the Fringe Society had secured a £1m loan from Scottish government to avoid insolvency, £670,000 of that was refunded to artists who had paid registration fees.

We are not naïve to think that recovery will happen overnight. The full recovery and revival of the Fringe will take at least 3-5 years and it will need support. As the convening body of the Fringe we want to take the Fringe brand and use this opportunity to raise significant money to be able to support that recovery. We have set ourselves initially a £7.5M fundraising challenge. We have already been pledged £310K towards that. We have seven core principles around which we are fundraising. The first and foremost is to raise funds to support artists, participants and venues. Other areas include removing barriers, to support deeper engagement within the city, and engaging with young people particularly those who are on the margins or living in impoverished conditions. The last on the list is finding a new home for the Fringe Society to house our team and Fringe Central support services during the Fringe itself. We had shared this in our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary ambitions. If we get to the £7.5M, we would like to raise a further £2.5M to find a home for the Society. We are keen to use this campaign to aid the recovery of all aspects of the Fringe. It is a big target, and we are calling on our alumni, high net-worth individuals, donors, supporters and commercial partners to invest.

Lyndsey presented the review of 2020, and provided a link to the publication on the Fringe Society's website. When the Society was aware that the Fringe was not going ahead in 2020, our key priorities were to ensure we focussed on our core remit to support artists and those who make the Fringe, to help audiences find work that they want to see and promote the festival and its value as widely as we could. In terms of supporting artists, we developed the FringeMaker campaign to support artists and venues to generate funds in 2020 in order to help them put on work in 2020 and to come back this year. That raised over £360K across the landscape largely from Fringe fans and constituents. It included an element called 'Fringe on a Friday'; Fringe showcase shows livestreamed during the festival. Alongside that, we had Fringe Pick'n'Mix and show listings, which focussed on supporting artists who had work that was available during the lockdown period, to find audiences who were looking for Fringe work to see. One of the key elements of last year was making sure that the important conversation in the Fringe between industry, media and the professional services was not lost. We developed and moved online the Fringe Marketplace and the Fringe Exchange as well as Fringe Central which is now called Fringe Connect. These are online platforms in which those conversations can continue, importantly where artists and delegates from across the globe can find one another. In 2020, 400 programmers from 34 countries registered for Marketplace and there were over 120 shows. For Fringe Central last year we had 18 partners and over 150 events. The critical aspect is that they were not just for 2020 and this year, these are key digital elements for the Fringe Society particularly in the year-round space to offer new connections and provide professional development opportunities.

With regards to the Society's work, we lobbied for support for the Fringe Society which was in severe financial difficulty, but also more widely for the Fringe. The Save the Fringe campaign is a continuity of how we can leverage all of the assets and connections we have to lobby and support this remarkable unfunded and largely unsubsidised cultural icon. We are very grateful to everybody who has contributed content research, data, thoughts and opinions because that collection of voices was really powerful and has helped ensure that the right people were paying attention and supporting our work and that of artists.

The team has been very small in the last year. We started 2020 with a full time equivalent of 35 and at this point, we have a full time equivalent of about 25. We continued our work in our community engagement and learning. We have been working with our Fringe Days Out groups for five years and that work has not stopped, and we continue to provide support. We partnered with the Art Festival to deliver art packs that went out to community groups. When it was safe and we were able to do so, we held live small-scale engagements within communities. We sent street performers to different places and organised guided bicycle rides giving people that element of the Fringe, particularly in a year where there was a reluctance or inability to come into the city centre. We have continued with some of that this year because many of them represent the most vulnerable in our society. The Teachers Theatre Club and school engagement programme have been challenging. Schools have pivoted well to digital engagement. We have maintained the core group of 20 teachers and their colleagues who watch how the Fringe works, learn and discuss the work, and visit the children's festival which is a mixture of live and online where possible. This is helping us to embed the Fringe as a resource for teachers and provide a space for teachers to be able to understand how the Fringe works. That project has a long legacy in terms of how we change the conversation around teachers engaging with the Fringe.

The Chair thanked Shona and Lyndsey for their remarks. The Chair closed the formal business and opened the meeting to an informal question and answer session.

### Open Session

**Question:** Silver Man welcomed Benny Higgins, the new Chair. He noted the Chair's remark that it was time to return to the core purpose. He commented that the Society had declared its increasing ticket sales year on year. There were 3,500 shows in 2019, the most ever. It was also the year most people lost most cash. The number of people coming into Edinburgh do not increase but the shows do. The Society is watering down the people that can access the shows. The energy seems dissipated within the festival. Years ago there used to be an energy and a centre which has gone. It seems the Fringe is like the stock market, going up and up. He appreciated the Chair's comment about going back, having a reset and returning to the purpose.

**Response:** The Chair welcomed Silver Man's endorsement and reinforced that scale did not equal success. He noted that it is what we do and how we do it that will count as success. We need to be part of the recovery, but we also need to reimagine and treat this as the renaissance of the Fringe. Part of renaissance is going back to the principles of what you want to achieve.

**Question:** Stuart Powell asked if the Society had formulated a plan to raise the £10M.

**Response:** Shona McCarthy noted that this was in development. The Society has been working with and developing potential donors, supporters, corporate partners and alumni which is how the £310K has been pledged to us. There is a huge amount of work to be done. We have established a sub-committee of the Board and have ambassadors and champions who are helping us with this work. The Chair shared Shona's optimism and commented that in the last few months, he had been speaking to a lot of people who are potential sources of support. Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Fringe Society President was keen to help, and her support was really important. Shona added that this was the first time the Fringe Society had gone on a major fundraising campaign of this nature. People have expected and accepted that the Fringe would have its own self-financing economy. There is acknowledgement particularly in the last two years that it needs support.

**Question:** Thom Dibdin's question related to size not being everything and the number of shows being staged every year. He observed that he had been at the launch of each Fringe programme for over twenty years, and it was largely driven by journalists who need a peg to hang the story on every year and the need to find a headline every year. As someone who worked in the industry for the Stage newspaper, he understood that size was one thing but the size of the audience in terms of percentages was another matter. Ticket sales had been high this year with many sold out shows. He asked for the Fringe Society and its press section to really push forward the idea of changing that narrative. The narrative should not be about numbers but the percentages of seats, numbers of full houses and statistical information and that might help drive the narrative away from the bubble that has been described.

**Response:** The Chair acknowledged Thom's comments and noted that this was a period of important reflection for the Society.

**Comment:** James Seabright thanked the Fringe team for the support for both last year through the difficult times and not having a Fringe, and this year for putting it together in record speed. As a producer it was great to be back doing in person shows and wonderful to see audiences enjoying themselves. He thanked the team and the Trustees for making it happen. He looked forward to the recovery of the Fringe in the years to come.

**Response:** The Chair appreciated James's comments.

**Question:** David Jarman asked how the recent experiences in the fundraising plans related to the Fringe Blueprint. Was the Blueprint still a guiding document?

**Response:** Shona replied that a huge amount of work had gone into a series of conversations and consultations in the lead up to the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Our view of the conversations that will take place for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary will build on from the Blueprint, with many elements carried forward under the seven principles that will under line our Save the Fringe campaign.

**Question:** Chris O'Neill asked why the ticket booking fee had increased?

**Response:** Lyndsey replied that the ticket booking fee this year was £1.25, capped at £5 per basket. Lyndsey acknowledged the bigger jump from 2019 when it was £0.80 per ticket. The Society had already moved to £1 in 2020. The booking fee has increased out of necessity in order to meet our longer-term financial goals and our commitment to repay the Scottish

government loan. For 2021, £0.25 pence of every ticket including VAT will go back to the show or venue that registered the show. Whilst it will not solve anybody's financial problems, it is a small token of solidarity to performers, producers, venues who took the risk to be here.

There were no further questions.

### **Any other business**

There was no further business to discuss.

The Chair thanked Timothy O'Shea, the previous Chair for his sterling service over a long period of time. He knew Tim prior to joining the Board, and his words of encouragement were very important in taking up the opportunity to become the next Chair. The Chair also thanked Susan Morrison and Richard Wiseman, who were stepping down after the AGM. The Chair thanked them for their efforts and commitment, and their contribution was very much appreciated.

The Chair thanked Shona and the team for an incredible performance of bringing the Fringe together. It will go down in history not as the biggest Fringe, but as a spontaneous piece of dynamism. The big task now is to take advantage of this moment of reflection to have a genuine recovery and reimagine a renaissance. Let us look forward to next year which will be a very big year as it will be the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary but will also be the start of what the Fringe will become. He hoped everyone would be a part of that and looked forward to meeting in person.

The Chair thanked everybody for attending the AGM and declared the 2021 Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society AGM closed.