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See table of contents

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"Festival Sites: The Civic and Collective Life of Curatorial Practice" An Interview with Deborah Pearson and Joyce Rosario

KEREN ZAIONTZ

What follows is an interview (over Skype) conducted by Keren Zaiontz in December 2017 with Deborah Pearson, founder of Forest Fringe, an artist collective she runs with Ira Brand and Andy Field, in the UK, and Joyce Rosario, Associate Artistic Director of the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival in Vancouver. At the time of this conversation, both Pearson and Rosario were in a series of remarkable professional transitions. Rosario, then Director of Programming, was at the helm of PuSh as interim Artistic Director. Norman Armour had stepped down from his position in April 2018, after fifteen years of managing the festival. Since the appointment, in 2019, of Franco Boni to Executive and Artistic Director, Rosario has moved into her current role as Associate. In 2017, Pearson and her Forest Fringe co-directors had rounded off ten years of curating groundbreaking work at the Edinburgh Festivals. They are currently producing an experimental narrative feature film, shot on location in the Channel Islands, as part of a company residency at ArtHouse Jersey.[1]

KEREN ZAIONTZ: In this interview we'll be talking shop about two very different organizations, Vancouver's PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, and Forest Fringe, which ran a free, curated venue at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Deborah, Joyce—can you speak briefly to the respective mandates of Forest Fringe and PuSh and what distinguishes them from other organizations or international festivals?

DEBORAH PEARSON: It's interesting to describe Forest Fringe as a festival, because I probably would describe us as an artist-run curatorial collective. As practicing artists, we're constantly trying to think through different ways of curating our work, the work of our contemporaries, and those in our communities. One of the ways that Forest Fringe started was by running a free venue for artists and audiences at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The Fringe is such a valuable experience for artists in some ways, but it is also an extremely costly and emotionally taxing experience in other ways. We wanted to see if there was a way that we could keep everything that was good about the Fringe and do away with everything that was bad from an artist's perspective. What made that venue unique within Edinburgh was the fact that it was volunteer-run—artists would have to help us run the venue as a way to keep it going—and volunteer-managed through an art collective. We would do quite a lot of fundraising throughout the year to get together enough money so that we could provide

accommodation for the artists, and so that we could do the work in Edinburgh without necessarily losing money. For a couple of years, we were able to pay ourselves five hundred pounds each. But then we actually stopped paying ourselves even that nominal amount, so we were unpaid, but made sure to budget for our train travel or accommodation, so that we didn't pay to go up to Edinburgh.

Because it was a hard thing to sustain, and because I think our main interest was making space for what we needed, and what our colleagues needed as artists, we started extending that, and doing things like the microfestivals. The microfestivals happened all over the world, and it was a way of enabling ourselves and our fellow artists to tour small to mid-scale performances. It's not so much the case anymore, but for a while, internationally, it seemed that most of the touring works from the UK were large-scale productions by very well-known artists. We wanted to find a way to take the budget that might go towards touring one large-scale work and apply that to five or six small- to mid-scale shows. Soon different festivals started to approach us and ask whether we could tour smaller-scale pieces first performed at Forest Fringe as a group, as a kind of playlist of shows. As artists who curate other artists, the collaboration between Andy [Field], Ira [Brand], and myself often revolves around creating a context for both our work and the work of other artists we know. We elected early on not to become a national portfolio organization, i.e., not to go for regular funding. That means that we've never actually had to define ourselves, and it's kept us constantly free to be creative, and reinvent what Forest Fringe is.

JOYCE ROSARIO: It's interesting that we're bringing the PuSh Festival and Forest Fringe into conversation. As artist-founded organizations, the same DNA runs through both. I heard you say the word "context" a couple of times, wanting to reset the context in which work was being presented. In your case, that context was Edinburgh and everything that goes along with that kind of pressure-cooker situation. In Vancouver, when Norman [Armour] and Katrina [Dunn], two practicing theatre artists, started the PuSh Festival in 2003, the context of making and producing art in Vancouver was quite different than it is now. Going east-to-west, works would tour across the country and stop at the Rocky Mountains, or things would tour north-to-south and stop at the Canada-US border. There simply weren't a lot of international works coming into the city, and therefore a kind of dialogue with the artists here was missing. That is my understanding of the beginning impulse of PuSh. Although very different beasts, the artist-led beginnings of PuSh and Forest Fringe differ from say, something like the Luminato Festival of Arts and Creativity in Toronto. When you look at the history of Luminato, it came out of the city really wanting to reestablish itself after SARS, right? There was a big infusion of resources at the very outset, whereas PuSh didn't even have its start as a festival, but as a series of three shows.[2]

KZ: I appreciate the parallels you are drawing between PuSh and Forest Fringe as artist-led organizations that sought to change the broader performance scenes in which they belonged. That move beyond traditional ways of producing performance is also coincident with the withdrawal of state arts funding throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, which drove organizations and independent artists to devise alterative systems of artistic support.

DP: When I started Forest Fringe, I was twenty-four years old, and I was willing, for the first five years, to sleep on my friend's floor for three weeks, in a very messy apartment. That was one of the things that sustained us: our artists were also willing to sleep in really, really weird situations, like, really horrible apartments where several people would be sleeping on the same couch....things that people in their 20s will do, that other people won't do! That made it a lot more costly as years went on, because people stopped being willing to deal with the same kinds of sleeping arrangements that they'd been willing to before. In the second year, we didn't even really have an accommodation budget. We spent around a thousand pounds and asked a lot of people for favours to let people sleep on their floors. I think in our last year of running Forest Fringe, the accommodation budget had grown to £16,000 at least, because suddenly everybody wanted a bed. It makes sense, that's fair enough that everyone wants a bed! But when people are in their 20s, for some reason they're willing to not sleep on a bed, which makes it significantly cheaper to accommodate large groups of people.

There's also the energy we had in our 20s, which we don't necessarily have in our 30s. In our 20s, we were less cognizant of some things that are actually really important to us now. The issue of accessibility, for example. When we were young we were simply less aware that it was important to make the venue or our events accessible. And when we realized that we were being ignorant, we had to make changes. That costs money, and it changes things for the better. But then the last thing, which is just very, very practical, and definitely played a part—Andy was funded, for three years, to do a PhD at Exeter University, and then I was funded for three years to do a PhD at Royal Holloway, University of London. So, the fact that both of us had, basically, salaried positions that didn't require us to be in a particular office for a particular number of hours, or in a particular place, meant that we had more free time to put into Forest Fringe.

JR: What you described around Forest Fringe and its beginnings reminds me a lot of what Kris Nelson and I did when we started PushOFF back in 2011.[3] There was this hole, a void that needed to be filled. We both had other jobs. We weren't getting paid, we couldn't pay artist fees, but PushOFF continues to this day, and that's still the spirit in which it's organized. Theatre Replacement and Company 605 run it now. I'm not sure if they've gotten to the level where they're paying honoraria or fees, but *what happens when you cut out the money, the transactional part?* It's always incredible to me—now that I'm here at PuSh and dealing in a different economy of scale that includes tech riders, fee conditions, and all of that—what they're able to accomplish on an artist-to-artist level.

DP: I think that so much of that has to do with whether or not the artists see a different kind of value. In PushOFF, there's very clearly a different kind of value, particularly for local companies, because it is very good at getting a group of international programmers into a room to see people's work. That is an invaluable experience for people, and I think in Edinburgh it's a very similar situation: companies will go into debt, and *pay* to perform in Edinburgh, just because they see it as an investment in future touring. I don't want to romanticize people not getting paid, yet at the same time, when there's no money involved, there is a different kind of atmosphere that builds up around a venue that can feel much more generous. It's almost in the same spirit as putting on a play at university. Everybody is there because they want to

be there, they love it, and choose to be there. So it can be a very positive atmosphere, as long as it's very clear that nobody's being exploited.[4]

JR: Yeah, I think you find different forms of caretaking in those models.

KZ: Deborah, how did Forest Fringe raise funds to produce work in Edinburgh?

DP: When we first started Forest Fringe, time and again we were told by people, "Don't try to apply for money because nobody will fund the Edinburgh Fringe." It doesn't fit at all within the funding mandates of Arts Council England or Creative Scotland because both those organizations were, at the least at the time, very audience-focused, bringing work to audiences that would not otherwise see it. There were two thousand shows on at Edinburgh so the audience didn't need more shows, they already had enough. So we wrote to every rich person or philanthropist we could think of, asking them to fund us. I had gone to the Herstmontceux Castle when I was in my second year of university at Queen's, and I met Alfred Bader [(1924-2018)] very briefly. I wrote Alfred a letter and he liked the idea.[5] He and Isabel Bader were really generous and helped us financially, and kept helping us nearly every year, between 2009 and 2013.

We also got some small grants from Battersea Arts Centre, and a pretty significant grant for five years, between 2011 and 2015, from the Jerwood Foundation. When we wrote an application to bring artists to Edinburgh, we would use a different approach each time. One year, it was about artists curating each other. So every single artist who we curated then curated one of their peers, and also did a workshop (and Jerwood funded that). Once our relationship with Jerwood and the Baders came to a kind of natural end point, we did a crowdfunding campaign. In 2015, we basically raised almost the entire budget needed for the year through a WeFund site. In 2016, we decided we didn't want to crowdfund again. Instead, we wrote to several British venues that regularly supported different artists we were curating, and often came to Forest Fringe as one of the sites they looked to for their own yearly programming. We asked them all to make a one-time donation of between five hundred and a thousand pounds. We also sold some ad space in our program to university programmes, cobbling together our 2016 budget that way. So every year we funded the venue differently. It was never straightforward. In addition to all of that, during the year we charged a producing fee for the microfestivals, and then put a little bit of that fee aside to help fund Edinburgh later.

KZ: Joyce, does PuSh have operating funding through the various arts councils at all three levels of government?

JR: We do, save for, oddly enough, the Canada Council [as of December 2017]. As both of you know, they've done a significant overhaul of all of their programs. In the previous suite of programs, we could never receive sustained operational funding. We received an ongoing grant from the Inter-Arts section, for our Club PuSh program, and then we would apply to the dance section for dance tours, theatre section for theatre tours, audience and market development to bring in international presenters.[6] So, all combined, it would be anywhere from between, I guess, $20,000 to $70,000-$100,000, depending on what projects were

slated for programming, and our level of success in any given year. In that regard, our funding from the Canada Council fluctuates significantly, although this may change any moment now. I think this is the position of the entire arts community in Canada, on all levels, and in all disciplines. But yeah, we're now going into our fourteenth festival in 2018, and there is operating money from all three levels of government. Our funding is roughly combined of a third public sector revenue, a third private (foundations, corporate sector and individual giving), and a third earned revenue (ticket sales, partnerships, that sort of thing). It's a healthy distribution for a festival.

KZ: Can you tell us more about the type of work you produced before you joined PuSh and your current role as Director of Programming for the festival?

JR: The Director of Programming is a very new role for both me and PuSh. Previous to that [August 2017], I was Associate Curator, a position that's been part of the organizational structure for many years, but only a full-time, year-round position in my tenure. When you invest time and money in a new position within an organization, it changes things in ways that you can't imagine. The Associate Curator role was a part-time contract. You come in for the production period, you work on the festival, then you leave. What has changed with it being an ongoing role is that I'm able to have an eye going forward, as opposed to just what's immediately ahead. In terms of the mix between artistic and management responsibilities, prior to coming to the PuSh Festival, I was the Executive Director of two different, smaller-scale organizations. One of those companies was New Works, a hybrid organization that combined the management of small dance companies (with an emphasis on emerging artists) and the presentation of a contemporary dance series, which was inclusive of non-western forms. So I was working quite closely with a bunch of different artists, providing a shared management model. I would say that experience has really influenced how I work in this particular role at PuSh.

KZ: I think your experience speaks to the larger working conditions of curators who find themselves in permanent contractual arrangements. How, within an organization that you've given a lot of time and creative energy to, do you move up the ladder, when you've essentially been positioned (for years) as a self-employed contractor?

JR: In terms of moving from Associate Curator to Director of Programming, in the many years that I've been here at PuSh, I've had colleagues that come in, for example, in marketing or communications and there's a clear progression in how you grow in the role. You step in as an Associate, and then a Manager, and then maybe you become the Director. There had never been that thinking applied to the curatorial department. What could this role be, and how do I develop in it professionally? Would it be different if it were someone else in the role? So it was something that I put to our Managing Director Roxanne [Duncan] and our Executive and Artistic Director Norman [Armour] in my last performance review: What do we do from here? How do I grow in this role? I shared how I was feeling about how other departments work and said, I feel like I've done some good work here. How do we recognize that?

KZ: How is your curatorial practice shaped by the wide-ranging demands of artistic production, from venues and funding, to collaborating with producers, companies and other festivals from across and beyond Canada?

JR: The curatorial process is complex, there are many different factors in consideration to get the mix of programming for the kind of festival that we are—in terms of the incredibly eclectic range of scale, and forms of work, from year to year. You can find a through line between the works we've presented over time, but in a given year it's so widely diverse, from one-to-one performances in a site-specific location to a big concert in our largest civic theatre. To be able to keep that matrix in mind, there's a lot of tracking, and we use spreadsheets. I never thought that would be one of my primary tools as a curator! The curatorial process is a bit like panning for gold, continual sifting, until you get to the essence. Because we work so much in partnership with different venues that curation not only encompasses the stakes of artistic production but financial feasibility, marketing and getting bums in seats.

KZ: From your description, programming a given season is closely bound up with so many core operations to running the festival proper.

JR: I work really collaboratively with Norman: we work together as a team, and that sifting analogy comes from what I've learned from his process, what I've distilled from the five editions of PuSh we've worked on together. We see a lot of work, all the time, covering as much ground as possible. We're an organization that invests a lot in travelling to see work, to be there in person, which is so necessary for live performance. That's the best way of encountering the work that we want to bring here. Watching documentation on video, that's hard. So we're continually seeing things, we're continually reviewing what our priorities are, and asking what the work we program needs in order to be presented well—and finding the sweet spot in all of that.

DP: How do you guys handle trying to find the unknown—the artist you've never heard of before, or the person who's made their first piece, or the artist who's making a weird piece in their garage in Winnipeg or something?

JR: That's the hardest part, isn't it? You constantly have to feed yourself information, and constantly seek outside of the usual, to find what's at the edges. That's really important. It can be so easy to get stuck in already-existing platforms and networks. Also, it's important that what may be a discovery to me, may not be for someone else. What is going to be new for audiences in Vancouver may not be the case at all in the context of the international festival circuit and for the colleagues with who we collaborate. Having works from the international repertoire that may be a discovery for Vancouver audiences programmed alongside artists practicing here: that's always been a beautiful kind of comparative exercise. We don't often see parts of ourselves until they are reflected by something other.

DP: In terms of the curating we did at Forest Fringe, we've certainly struggled with and bounced back and forth on producing new work, because there's already a lot there. Even the question

of feeling like you need to be looking for the unknown or looking for the new thing.... There is something that smacks of consumer capitalism about it, "I've got to get the newest thing! What's the newest thing?", as opposed to really maintaining some of your commitments to artists you've worked with for a long time. And yet, we do need to give a leg up to artists who haven't had their first opportunity for international exposure.

JR: It's also colonial. How do you decolonize a curatorial practice that emphasizes prospecting? That idea that "you go out and discover!" There is a whole generation of programmers—really fine programmers who've found a lot of amazing stuff—who also fashion themselves as *the discoverers*. "I have discovered this artist." Maybe it's just a stereotype, but I think it comes from a particular way of working.

KZ: I feel like the politics of producing art in the lower mainland of British Columbia, where there is a general consciousness about living and working on unceded Coast Salish territory, means you cannot take that discovery rhetoric for granted. That fact alone must set you apart from other international programmers, particularly those working in Europe.

JR: Sure, I'd say I have a particular perspective that is informed by land politics, but also body politics. Sometimes my very presence alone is a challenge to the dominant paradigm. I see and feel the difference in how people engage before and after they realize I'm a programmer at an international festival. I find it particularly striking, as a person of colour who reads as way younger than I actually am, the assumptions that people make. Rather than be frustrated, I've learned that being incognito can be a useful tool.

DP: Your presence and mark as a curator challenges people's assumptions about who can claim that role, which needs to happen.

JR: Absolutely.

KZ: Given that we've been oscillating between these traditional and nontraditional ways of programming work, I'm wondering if we could take two steps back and talk about how Forest Fringe went from a showcase atop a café space to an Edinburgh institution of sorts.

DP: The reason I started Forest Fringe was because I was volunteering at an anarchist vegetarian café in Edinburgh the year that I lived there, between 2005 and 2006. The other volunteers within that organization were excited that they knew someone interested in theatre. It's funny to call it an organization, because it's an anarchist organization but, of course, there are always people taking more of a lead than others. After I moved to London, one of the people who ran the Forest Café invited me to come and curate a festival in their upstairs space. He had a few caveats about how he wanted me to do that. One caveat was that he wanted it to be all experimental work. Another caveat was that he wanted it to be free for everyone, artists and audience members. And he wanted it to be all volunteer-run. When I was twenty-four, I really wanted to be taken seriously, professionally, so some of those caveats seemed frustrating to me at the time. Why couldn't we just charge five pounds for tickets, that would

help a little bit, you know? Or the fact that everything had to be volunteer-run. There were so many things about it that seemed frustrating, but actually, as we kept going, the restrictions that the Forest Café imposed on us became fundamental to Forest Fringe's mandate.

In 2008, Forest Café asked me to run a theatre venue for them again, but I wasn't sure I would because it had been so much work. I could not believe how long the days and how tiring it had been. When I told Andy Field they had asked me to do it again, Andy very boldly suggested that he and I should run it together, and I said, "You know what, actually, if we ran it together it would be doable." Later we realized it was too much work for even two people, so we brought on a third co-director in 2011, Ira Brand, who we got to know because we had curated her as an artist. From then on, we've run Forest Fringe together. Our Edinburgh venue took a pause in 2012 when the Forest Café lost their space. They had to move elsewhere in Edinburgh, and the place they moved to didn't have an appropriate place to put on theatre. We were called Forest Fringe because we were the Forest Café's Edinburgh venue, and suddenly that relationship with Forest Café was not the same as it had been.

JR: Is that the year that you guys did the Paper Stages?

DP: Yeah, exactly. We did Paper Stages in 2012. I went to Toronto and I curated the first Live Art Series for SummerWorks. Andy and I came up with this concept called Paper Stages, which was going to be a recipe book for performances, and you could only get a copy of this book if you volunteered an hour of your time for a local Edinburgh charity. The Forest Café had been an Edinburgh charity that had gone into administration because of the 2008 economic crash, so we felt it was important that people recognize that Edinburgh shouldn't just be this horrible capitalist marketplace, but also a place where people could give back if they wanted to, in terms of their time. Our last festival was in 2016. That's a very definitive thing. It's not a pause. We're done with running a venue in Edinburgh for now, but that by no means we're done as an organization.

KZ: It will be interesting to see the direction you three move in now that you don't have the demands of carrying an annual curated festival.

DP: With Forest Fringe, we learned how to run an Edinburgh venue, and then we would try to change it and relearn how to run an Edinburgh venue in a different way, retool and reinvent. Eventually, we reinvented the way we were doing it so many times, that we just had to be honest, and say, "We're running a festival. We're doing a job that people get paid to do, we're doing it for free, and we don't really know why anymore." Artists in the UK and internationally had developed a lot of expectations around us because we had built a reputation. The festival itself became a bit of an institution, but the reality was that we we're still just three people working for free. We realized that we *did* want to continue making work for free, but it needed the same spirit and energy that the beginning of Forest Fringe, the Edinburgh venue, had. The feeling that, "We don't know what the fuck we're doing, but we want to do this. We want to learn how to do this, and that's something we want to do for free." So we decided to start The Amateurs Club, which meets at Somerset House in London. At the moment, it's just a monthly meet up. It's sort of like an after-school club for adults and artists, where

we learn a different skill we didn't know before. Eventually, we're going to retool the club so that the skills are moving towards a big goal for 2019, something like making a feature film, or renovating a house. Some big, stupid thing that we're interested in doing that we don't know how to do. Every single meet-up of the club is going to inform that process. We'll invite a different person to teach us a different skill at each session that we can add to the toolbox, so we can make this big project for 2019 happen.

KZ: Festival venues—ensuring the right location, confirming dates, making sure shows aren't too far apart, managing the site—don't appear to be straightforward ventures in either Vancouver or Edinburgh, for various and distinct reasons. Joyce, can you speak to how PuSh navigates securing venues and, again, how that shapes what you program, from year to year?

JR: Thinking about space issues raises the question of affordability. In Vancouver, this means housing as much as venues. The difference between Vancouver now, and Vancouver even of fifteen years ago, is that it's become incredibly unaffordable to live here, and that affects how people—artists in particular—are able to do the kinds of things that Forest Fringe did, because you don't have to worry so much about overhead, about rent. That has an impact in how we can operate, there are fewer choices and those choices have higher stakes. And yet, the theatre scene in Vancouver has made its mark because of its ability to thrive despite the challenges of space. I'm thinking in particular of how a group of companies came together to create Progress Lab 1422, and before that, Hive made a reputation in Vancouver for being a very collaborative and supportive place to work within the theatre community. This spirit is very much in the air when you're talking about venues and PuSh.

That's just on the indie side. We've been forging relationships with Vancouver Civic Theatres over the past couple of years. Part of the backstory there is that the civic theatres used to have a theatre company in residence at the Playhouse. That's not been the reality for a long time. Now, there's only one game in town in terms of a regional: The Arts Club. So they are kind of this massive entity that, incidentally, we also collaborate with and find a context for working together. We recognize that The Arts Club subscriber audience and regional theatre serve the same thing. So how do we find a balance between what PuSh does and what they do? It's finding that thing that for their audience might be quite edgy in their subscription program, but for our audience is going to be the most straight-up theatre in our festival program. That exercise is the fun part of curating performance. With the new artistic director [Ashlie Corcoran], we're just starting to get to know each other, and what her interests are here in Vancouver.

DP: From an outsider's perspective, although, weirdly as an outsider-insider, because I do feel I have a more intimate relationship with PuSh than most other festivals in Canada (having worked as a curator in residence), it feels like PuSh is a really important part of Vancouver's performing arts ecology. Is that ever too much responsibility? To me, it seems like a lot of work has formed around PuSh, and probably relies on PuSh to get seen by both a local and international audience, year to year.

JR: Yes, I think what you say is accurate. There is a pressure, an expectation, especially now, fourteen years on, being more established, and considered an institution. I feel quite mindful to seek out differences of opinion, even if it's negative or dissenting.... I think this is easier to do when you're not the founder of an organization. I have engaged with PuSh from the very, very beginning, but not from inside the organization. So I think that something I bring to the position is being able to step outside of it, and see it from a different perspective.

KZ: Can you speak further to where you see PuSh not only within the ecology of Vancouver, but performing arts festivals more broadly?

JR: I've been thinking a lot about festivals, the history of festivals, how festivals like PuSh have come about. The model of the Edinburgh International Festival and Festival d'Avignon came out of a post-War effort to rebuild culture and society, and how we get along together. Out of that came the phenomenon of the Fringe Festival, "That's a great impulse, but you were only including these eight companies, and we want to be in that game as well..." I think entities such as PuSh, such as Forest Fringe, even though they're wildly different in so many ways, come out of this *other* kind of impulse, a kind of third wave. When you consider that PuSh also came about at a similar time as, you know, TBA [Time-Based Art Festival] in Portland, Fusebox in Austin, Under the Radar in New York: we're all of a similar vintage, sharing a similar orientation, which I would say is about the relevance of the festival in society today. Of course, there is also the advent of large city-based international festivals in Australia that seem to be constantly jostling for position, like who has the international premiere, for example. But what all of us share on this continent, with the festivals that I've mentioned, has been about something different. It's been about asking what role festivals can play in shaping the city. I suppose, for me, that's my particular lens here in Vancouver. I was born here, I went to school here, I've spent my career, so far, *here*. I finished my BFA at UBC at a time when a lot of people felt that Vancouver was a cultural backwater, a lot of my peers left, and I would say from my experience of staying here, what's been really gratifying is being part of building a community. Being part of something that's not entirely established, and thereby being able to have agency in how it shapes the city. For me, as somebody who's lived here, the site-based works we have presented, or works that are re-situated to reflect Vancouver, are an opportunity to see my city in a completely different way, and to consider different ways of inhabiting that city. That has been pretty impactful, and certainly something that I feel committed to continuing to offer audiences in this particular role.

DP: PuSh makes so many decisions that orbit around building contacts in terms of local programming. That, and the fact that the people who work for PuSh have these quite intimate relationships with the Festival. Norman founded the Festival, and Joyce, you founded PuSh Off with Kris Nelson, a key programming strand of the festival. That means you have a more personal, more intimate relationship to the festival. That investment is very different from, again, something like Luminato, where it feels like maybe there was a top-down, preexisting infrastructure that people slotted themselves into. It's more like PuSh is a garden, and people have planted things and then they get to come back to the garden, and even if it now looks like a very imposing tree, someone still remembers planting it. Forest Fringe is funny because,

you know, I have a lot of love for Edinburgh, but because Forest Fringe has existed in so many different places, it's not about a city for me. This is going to sound really cheesy: but, for me, Forest Fringe is actually about relationships. Of course, one of the things that we were able to do through Forest Fringe is look at cities in different ways. We looked at Edinburgh in different ways. When we came to Vancouver we looked at Vancouver, briefly, in a different way.[7] But for me, Forest Fringe is primarily about friendship: it's about my friendship with Andy, and my friendship with Ira, and the way that those friendships are also creative working relationships. It's also about the friendships we have developed over the years with the artists we've worked with, and how those friendships are things that can't really be quantified in monetary terms. That's one of the beautiful things, I think, about Forest Fringe and what we're able to do, and how those friendships are ongoing. Some of them are new, some of them are young, and some of them are, you know, on pause…[*laughs*] and some of them are ongoing. But for me, Forest Fringe is really about friendship.

KZ: I know, I think it's because "friendship" has this sentimental quality to it, but actually, it resonates with a lot of what we've been talking about here. What is friendship if not social infrastructure, right? Friends have ways of sustaining us, whether it's offering a couch to sleep on, or a means to dialogue and collaborate with. So I think there's a way in which friendship is kind of code for a kind of infrastructure.

DP: Although "infrastructure" is an interesting word because "structure" suggests that there's something set-in-stone. I think one of the things that's really exciting about friendship, compared to maybe a romantic relationship, or even a familial relationship, is actually how flexible, and confusing, and untamed it sometimes is. You have lots of different friends. Different people are your closest friends at different times, and you don't know how often you should call your friend, and you don't know how often you shouldn't call your friend, and you don't know when you're crossing a boundary with your friend. You're sort of discovering that in the moment. And I think there's something around that fluidity that really reflects the way Forest Fringe works. The fluidity, continuity, and lack of infrastructure to friendship has something to do with the inner workings and continuity of Forest Fringe over the years.

JR: One of the questions people often ask me is, "Oh, how do you and Norman work together? What is it like to work with Norman?" I would say that usually my answer involves, you know, "We're really different people, from really different backgrounds, that can share this obsession with live performance." He's originally from Toronto, we're different generations. And that makes it so interesting, and the basis of it is a very deep respect and admiration for each other's work. So those times when we have differences in opinion, or times when we need to make space for each other in whatever way, it comes from that. As corny as it sounds, it's also important because it's about values, it's about people who have made a commitment to this kind of work. It's about agency, it's also about how, ultimately, it's people that drive this. I guess structures are important, infrastructure is important, funding is important, but ultimately it's people that make it happen. If I was in a different position, I would still be doing a version of this work. For me, my role as a curator is ultimately as a caretaker and custodian. I've had very different kinds of work before, but there's always been a through line: it's been

about civic engagement, and how as a citizen I can make my best contribution. This has always been through community arts, art-making, or facilitating other people to be making art, seeing art. I feel it's something that is so important, to feed a city. That's why I see the festival as a civic exercise.

Notes

1 Acknowledgements: My thanks to Sydney Hart for his assistance with the initial transcription of this interview. The conversation has been edited and condensed for publication.

2 While Norman Armour did not take part in the conversation proper, Rosario looped him in following the interview. He had this to say about Luminato: "While Luminato was positioned as a cultural tourism initiative, PuSh sprung from a desire for a new 'context' in Vancouver for the contemporary live performing arts—for artists, audiences, the media, funders and other stakeholders." Rosario's reference to SARS or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, describes an outbreak that occurred in 2003, in Toronto. The populations most affected by the deadly virus were frontline health care workers, but a palpable anxiety was felt throughout the city, which suffered reputational damage as the outbreak lasted for more than six months. Luminato was a civic boosterism effort that followed in the aftermath of SARS, but it was also a marker of new private-public arts and cultural partnerships in the city of Toronto. For more on this point, see the formative work of cultural geographer, Heather McLean.

3 PuShOff is an annual curated platform for local and national artists from across Canada to showcase their tour-ready works and projects in development. The programmed event is independently run by Vancouver companies Theatre Replacement and Company 605, and deliberately coincides with the PuSh Festival in order to capture those visiting artists, artistic directors, producers, performing arts curators, and presenters attending the festival in search of programming content for their own venues.

4 See Deborah Pearson's "the cost of working for free when you're not in your twenties anymore…" and Andy Field's "Welcome to the Fringe." Field reflects on the costs of managing a free venue as well as Forest Fringe's collaborative showcase, in 2015, of Palestinian artists at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. And for an overview of the variety of works and artists programmed at Edinburgh, see Forest Fringe.

5 Pearson studied abroad at Queen's University Bader International Study Centre outside Sussex, UK.

6 Club PuSh is a programming arm of the PuSh Festival that is currently managed and curated by Cameron Mackenzie, Artistic Director of Vancouver's Zee Zee Theatre. A "festival within a festival," Club PuSh programs a multidisciplinary spread of experimental performance, music acts, film, and cabaret by national and local artists. The program runs out of the Fox Cabaret, an independent venue located in the Mount Pleasant neighbourhood in Vancouver and, more recently (2018), began presenting work in the lower mainland at the Anvil Centre in New Westminster. Norman Armour, Tim Carlson (Theatre Conspiracy), and musician Veda Hille co-founded Club PuSh in 2009 and co-produced and -curated the event until 2016.

7 In 2014, as part of PuSh's 10th anniversary edition, Deborah Pearson performed *The Future Show*, a pop-up work first performed at Forest Fringe (2013) as part of the PuSh Assembly. PuSh was also the site of Pearson's Canadian premiere of *History History History*, her solo production, presented in Vancouver in partnership with the Vancouver International Film Festival and DOXA Documentary Film Festival.

Works Cited

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