

Bedlam Fringe Report 2008

Colleen Patterson

1. Introduction

In this document I am aiming to give an overall sense of what the Fringe team 2008 did over the summer. Bedlam ultimately belongs to the good people of the EUTC so I feel it is my responsibility to keep everyone informed about what we did with the EUTC's money and building. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to be entrusted with running the Fringe and I don't think we did too badly. A Fringe report has not been produced in a few years so I am following no precedent and I hope it is not too long.

2. Major Changes from 2007

- Business Manager: On the advice of my predecessor Matt Wieteska I decided to expand and change the role of the accountant/finance assistant. The reasons for this were to have tighter control over our financial situation with EUSA and to solidify one person as having absolute responsibility over cashing-up. In order to encourage more responsibility and contact time in the building it was decided to raise the pay rate and change the name, elevating the status of Business Manager to be the same as Tech, Theatre and Press/Publicity Managers.

This worked out very well. Despite having little precedent to go on Fran Walker did an excellent job and having one person solely responsible for financial matters was incredibly helpful and did a great deal to improve our relationship with EUSA. Another huge advantage was having someone to produce proper, detailed reports in September/October to really solidify exactly what happened (EUSA really liked that this occurred as well). Of course it was at first confusing to sort out exactly what Fran would be doing, how the work would be divided and how myself and the team could best make use of her, but that could be easily ironed out next year through discussion with Fran and myself about what worked and what didn't. I would recommend that we continue to hire a Business Manager and keep the pay rate and title at a high level.

- Sunday afternoons: On the advice of no one, I decided to try opening on Sunday afternoons. My reasons for this were that I felt we lose out on walk-in business on Sundays from Fringe-goers who are only here for the weekend, especially when Fringe Sunday is occurring very near to us on the Meadows. We need to have the auditorium closed for one day of the week to accommodate get-ins (this is unavoidable) but I felt we could at least be using the café in a relaxed, non-show way during the afternoon.

I had a stroke of luck by mentioning my idea to Idil Sukan, who had in 2007 produced her comedy showcase Sketchatron at Bedlam as a one-off performance. She was eager to do so again should there be any space and together we came up with the idea of Sketchatron being performed each of the three Sundays (3, 10, 17 August) in the afternoon. I charged her a discounted rate roughly equivalent to the amount we would be spending on staff to cover Sundays. Idil successfully promoted Sketchatron as a “Sunday residency” and it did very well and got a lot of people into the building. On the third Sunday I programmed a rehearsed reading of a new play called King Arthur, for which I did not charge the company as tickets were free. I also had some live music in the café and a “pub” quiz in the evenings.

Overall I am very happy that we attempted this but it did have pros and cons. We made overall £1316.65 in the café for all three of the Sundays, which was excellent. Also, it was great to have a lot of things going on in the building especially in the café where we don’t often have events as it’s a non-theatre space. And, as I said, Sketchatron did very well and having comedy is great to add a bit of variety. On the bad side, however, the managers found it quite stressful to never have a full day off to do maintenance etc. The tech/theatre managers had to come in for all of the get-ins and the café managers had to make food all day, which was a tiring way to start the week for them especially after the end-of-week parties on Saturday nights. Also, we were open from 1pm-10pm which was a very long time to fill and we had a fair amount of dead time. Ultimately it will be up to the next VM whether or not they think it is worth it to carry on Sunday afternoon openings, but I would definitely say that it is only worth it if you have a big show like Sketchatron to pull people in, and I would recommend shortening the amount of time open.

3. Money

- Projected budget: My original budget (one of the first things I did after being hired) was based very heavily on 2007 and was quite conservative. Here are the basic figures from it:

EXPENDITURE

Staff Costs:	£19,098.00
Fringe Programme listings:	£580.00
<u>Departments:</u>	£6,100.00
Total Expenditure:	£25,778.00

INCOME

Venue Hire:	£23,766.50
EUTC 1 Profits (Imps):	£1,500.00
EUTC 2 Profits:	£500.00
<u>Café Profits (after bonuses):</u>	£6,500.00

Total Income:	£32,266.50
PROFIT	£6,488.50

- Actual profits: It is always a good idea to budget very conservatively and I definitely did that. At the end of the day my budget was a good guideline but of course there were unpredictable successes (Eight, the café, etc) which one cannot budget for. This happens every year. I would also suggest changing certain parts of the department budgets but that will be up to next year's VM.

EXPENDITURE

Staff Costs:	£19,419.07
Departments:	£6,656.93
EUTC Show Expenditure:	£3,152.70
<u>Café Expenditure:</u>	£7,249.79
Total Expenditure:	£36,478.49

INCOME

Venue Hire:	£19,560.00
EUTC Box Office:	£11,478.41
Café Takings:	£17,224.52
<u>Misc. Income:</u>	£100.00
Total Income:	£48,362.93

PROFIT	£11,884.44
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4. Shows

On the whole our shows did very well. We had seventeen shows comprising of the two EUTC shows, eight shows from companies who were returning/companies we know, and seven shows from completely new companies.

It was an especially good year for the EUTC shows. The Improverts had a near-sell out run and the usual spate of good reviews. Eight, by Ella Hickson, won three awards- a Fringe First, an NSDF Award and the Carol Tambor Award, as a result of which they will be touring in London and New York over the coming year. Due to its good press, Eight managed to sell out the last week of its three-week run (I had decided to allot three weeks rather than the usual two to the EUTC show to make up for its time slot being earlier in the day than usual). So that was good and brought in some box office takings money.

5. Tech/Theatre

This was a big year for building projects. At the beginning of the summer the seats, carpet and auditorium rake were replaced by term-time. During June and July Theatre Manager Mal Mead (with some help, but mostly by himself) completely redid the café servery, replacing all the cabinets, doubling the amount of workspace, changing the layout, re-flooring it, increasing the shelving space, and numerous other improvements. I shan't go into them here because Mal can probably tell you about them in detail in person if you want to ask him.

Meanwhile Tech Manager, Sam Hansford, moved the lighting store to its new location which works much better for set storage/workshop space. He also painted the rig black and spruced up the joint. I was particularly pleased with the purchase of a BEDLAM THEATRE 49 gobo to shine on the box office floor which looked hot. We also had a working Front of House sound system, easily controllable from multiple sources including the tech box, which worked a treat.

We had little or no problems with the standard pre-Fringe building maintenance such as reskinning the stage, painting, rigging sponsorship banners, dealing with shows, etc. Mal and Sam did an excellent job helping the building run efficiently and smoothly during August and I was very happy with their attitude and enthusiasm especially since (having been Theatre Manager in 2007) I know what a stressful job it can be.

6. Press/Publicity

I have nothing really to say about Press and Publicity except that Press/Publicity Manager Becs Kamp did an excellent job. We had a lot of reviewers this year especially from some more "official" newspapers and obviously had a great deal of good press resulting from Eight's awards. I was pleased with Nick Kay's graphic design as well and we got him to do a few more things than usual (posters for front of the building, café menus, etc) which was nice. We had a lot of programmes left over but this happens every year; Becs recommends that we decrease to ordering 3500 programmes (although it is the same price as 5000).

On the subject of sponsorship we were again sponsored by Caledonian Brewery. I was very happy to continue this because I like the association of a Edinburgh-based company in our café and the deal is very good (so is the beer). I think they are keen to continue in the future and I would recommend that we do so.

7. Box Office

The major development in the box office this year was the new ticketing system XTS (eXtensible Ticketing System), which was written by Box Office Manager Xander Macmillan to replace NEWTS. The major reason for this was to create a new ticketing system which can be expanded to include different features and for which the code is easily accessible to those who want to do so. It

also has a number of improved features such as the ability to easily handle card transactions, a better system of takings reports, and a user interface with a lot more options. Most impressively of all XTS can be run from any computer or web browser meaning 2008 saw the landmark event of the first ticket sold by iPhone. I was very happy with XTS as it was a project that had been talked about for a while and made a major impact on the way we run the box office, allowing us to be better informed, more efficient and help minimise discrepancies.

Apart from computer-related improvements the box office was kept very organised and run with a great deal of efficiency by Box Office Manager Lauren McLeod even in the face of Fringe Box Office problems (see section 9). The float was increased to £300 to allow us to make change easily and although this was confusing at first, once it was decided that only the Business and Box Office managers should ever handle the money it worked well. Although not perfect our record on discrepancies was very good.

8. Café

There were obvious major physical improvements to the café this year in the form of a renovation of the servery area, as well as some smaller projects like stripping and re-varnishing the floor and re-covering the stools with material from the old seats. I think these have significantly improved the way that the café looks. Aside from that I was very keen (along with Café Managers Ellie Harrison and Cat Hobart) to keep up the good reputation of the Fat Cat Café with home-cooked food and a nice selection of affordable drinks. The menu they came up with was excellent and involved at least one hot meal every day along with the usual complement of soups, sandwiches and baked potatoes. There were also good vegetarian options and breakfast food, which I was very pleased about. After some confusing negotiations with the council over whether we needed a separate license (we don't, although this may be changing) they also did "happy hour" pitcher cocktails, with a different cocktail each day, before Improverts.

The main problem we encountered in the café (which happens year on year) was simple overcrowding, which can be attributed partially to the good food that the café managers were cooking and partially to the coincidence that the shows we had on at lunch and dinner time were some of our best-selling shows, creating a "rush" at certain times of the day. The fact that the café was doing a lot of hot food also created a washing-up problem as both Café Manager and café staff member were busy serving and dirty dishes would pile up. The best way to deal with these problems would probably be to have an extra staff member on hand during certain hours of the day but this would be very tricky to do since it's hard to predict exactly when the rush will occur. One thing that did help was getting other staff members to assist – outdoor hall collecting plates and glasses, duty manager or box office manager doing a bit of washing up – but that is an imperfect solution. I don't have a perfect solution, otherwise we would have implemented it.

Overall I know that café is probably the busiest and hardest job to do during August and can often get overwhelmed and be the first thing to “slip,” and I was incredibly impressed with Cat, Ellie and all of their staff members for working extremely hard to keep up high standards of efficiency, cleanliness and service.

9. Problems

- Fringe Office: This year the Fringe Office switched to a new box office system and there were a lot of problems with this. I won't go into them here (because they were pretty boring) but around July it was thought that as a worst-case scenario the Fringe Box Office would not be able to print any tickets sold through them, which would also mean they would not be able to send any pre-sale tickets through the post. Luckily, Bedlam is very well-situated to deal with problems of this nature as we are small enough to not have to hire any extra staff to deal with crowd control, etc, but large enough to have an independent box office system and not have to rely solely on Fringe Box Office sales.

To deal with the possibility of a Fringe Box Office collapse, Xander wrote a feature into XTS so that we could check reference numbers against Fringe Office bookings (they provided us with a list of names and references for people who had booked tickets through them for our shows). Fortunately, the FBO sorted themselves out and we used this feature rarely, if ever. However, the system problems meant that the FBO in general was a lot less organised than it has been in previous years and we had a lot of problems doing normal box office functions such as stopping sales. After overselling a few Improverts shows in week one we made the decision (with the Improverts producer) to stop FBO sales for Improverts altogether and only sell tickets through Bedlam, which seemed to be fine as we consistently sold out the rest of the run. For the other shows, we just had to be extra-vigilant about dealing with the FBO and confirming everything.

- Break-in/Security: Sadly we got broken into during week two. The intruders got in through the dressing room window, and then attempted to bash open both the café and box office tills. Eventually they found a set of keys for the box office cupboard, got in there and took £300.00 from the float cash box. Despite multiple laptops, bags and other personal items left unsecured around the Front of House area they didn't take anything but the money, nor did they damage any computer or technical equipment.

We obviously could not have anticipated this, and normal security measures (locking up the building, takings money in safe, etc) had been taken. However, in hindsight it is easy to see why the dressing room was particularly vulnerable due to the massive scaff structure behind the building on the adjacent construction site. We also collectively kicked ourselves for having left a set of keys out accidentally, for not having kept the float money in the safe in the first place, and for not having left the tills open so that they weren't forced open and

damaged. These are all very simple things which we don't think about during term-time but are easy to think about during Fringe and should be adhered to.

Having said that, it was very well-handled by the staff who did all the proper procedural things and then worked hard to make sure we only opened 30 minutes late and could then run on time for the rest of the day. EUSA were also very helpful in getting us a new café till and replacing the glass on the window within a couple of days. In the end we were happy that no one had been hurt, lessons had been learned and it was only £300.00 that was taken.

- Flooding: The building leaks. This year, the problem areas were the box office stairwell and the costume cupboard stairwell. The box office was a very steady trickle of water which we dealt with through a complex irrigation/bucket system and a lot of tape/PVC pipes. It wasn't a huge deal and never came near any of the electrical equipment but was an annoyance and got a lot of stuff wet. Backstage was more of a problem as the skylight at the top of the stairwell let a significant amount of water in, down the stairs and into the crypt. The noise of this was noticeable from onstage/the audience and the area was completely unusable for an entire evening. We were also very worried about water getting into the electrics. We got EUSA in by telling them it was an emergency and they did some repairwork which helped.

Again, this is something that doesn't affect us much during term-time but with the building in constant use a few summer downpours can be very detrimental. In future it would do to take a few preventative measures with EUSA such as having the gutters cleaned and having any repairwork done before we open.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, this document probably is too long and I apologise for that, but hopefully if you are that bothered you have just skimmed it. This is not really the time to be eloquent, but I feel I should say I set out to run the Bedlam Fringe as efficiently and enthusiastically as I could and at the end of it all I am very, very proud of my managers and staff who helped me to achieve this goal. It was certainly a learning experience and I made mistakes along the way but overall running a Fringe venue is an amazing opportunity and I am very grateful that I was entrusted with Bedlam. I hereby return it to you, the EUTC, in what I hope is an improved condition!

Regards,

Colleen Patterson
Venue Manager 2008