



The Festival Experience

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MY FESTIVAL EXPERIENCE was a huge gamble — literally!

My play *Scarborough* started as a lunchtime pub-theatre piece in Newcastle. It was first commissioned by New Writing North as part of a new writing programme. The development process, working with director Deborah Bruce, was joyous. We connected over the play and at the end of it felt bereft that the play was over. Deborah said ‘this is the perfect Fringe piece’. Something clicked there and then and I knew she was right. I worked at the Edinburgh Fringe in the Assembly Rooms press office during August, and I knew what made a good Fringe play — *Scarborough* was perfect.

I phoned my friend Justine and told her about my predicament. I needed to take the play to Edinburgh but was skint. She agreed to help produce it and I was over the moon. I borrowed 400 quid off my sister, Kath, and booked *Scarborough*’s slot in the fringe brochure. The only problem was we didn’t have a venue.

The play was set in a Scarborough B&B. Mary Shields, programme director at Assembly Rooms, had agreed to host it as a site-specific piece — all we had to do was find a hotel room. But this was at the busiest time of year, in August, when hotels charged a premium. I spoke to another Edinburgh friend who I knew was connected to a chain of hotels. He said that aside from hotels not wanting to give up a room in August, there was a problem with the content of the piece. It was about a weekend in Scarborough between a pupil and a teacher.



No hotel was interested in sponsoring us. I'd paid the deposit for nothing. Then Mary said, 'I've got this really small office at the front of the building, maybe we could transform it into a bedroom and do the performance there? That way it would seem like a site-specific piece but it would have its own venue.' *Wow!*

I contacted a friend who used to work as set designer on TV sets and she'd been looking after elderly parents and wasn't working. So she agreed to take on the job at a cut-price rate.

The next few months saw us beg, borrow and steal to get the play to Edinburgh. These were the days before crowdfunding. So I sent out begging letters. Debbie Horsfield (a great TV writer who now writes for *Poldark*) had been speaking at an event in Newcastle. She said she'd got her first break at the Edinburgh Fringe. I wrote to her and she gave us some money. I badgered my landlord. My landlord sponsored some of the wages of the young actor in the play and gave us free rehearsal space in his office. My friend with the hotel gave us a thousand pounds. New Writing North agreed to pay for the marketing materials. My friend designed the posters for free. People were so supportive.

A couple of weeks before the production, we were mid-rehearsal and I still hadn't managed to secure enough funding to be able to go to Edinburgh. We didn't have enough money to pay for accommodation and to pay the actors and the stage manager, and I was stressed to hell. My mate Bridget phoned up and I burst into tears. The cash flow just didn't add up. I was maxxed out on my own credit, so she offered to get an interest-free cash advance on her credit card for me — that's friends for you! Suddenly my shoulders dropped. I *would* be able to go to Edinburgh, and enjoy the festival experience.

I knew the play was good. I knew it was good enough to win a Fringe First. So I decided to gamble on the outcome. I phoned Paddy Power the bookmaker and asked for odds on a novelty bet: *Scarborough* winning



a *Scotsman* Fringe First. I got odds of 16 to 1 and was going to put all of Debbie Horsfield's money on but they capped my bet at fifty quid.

We arrived at the festival, at the Assembly Rooms on George Street. Jo had worked her magic: transforming a soulless office with a suspended ceiling into a Scarborough B&B with peeling wallpaper.

My sister, our Kath, started flyer-ing outside — she is the best street team in Edinburgh.

Word soon spread and the show sold out. We won a Fringe First in the first week of the festival; *Scarborough* was the hit of the fringe! My festival gamble had paid off.