

--- All the World's a Stage ---

(Reprinted courtesy of Stage Directions Magazine October 2005)

For 11 years, American teens have flexed their budding theater muscles in an international festival.

by Lisa Mulcahy

Imagine this: you've been dropped into the thick of the world-famous Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland. Upwards of 100,000 artists presenting 1,500 shows pack the festival with eager audience members that cram the streets, for just the right show to see. Your job is to attract attention to your production's venue, put on the best performance of your life - and soak up as much fantastic work as possible from terrific theater companies spanning every corner of the world. All this—and you're just 17 years old!

This opportunity of a lifetime is offered to young people all over the country through the American High School Theatre Festival. In just 11 years, AHSTF has earned a stellar reputation among both theater insiders and educators for introducing secondary school students to dramatic expression on a global scale. Working in conjunction with the Edinburgh Fringe, AHSTF selects approximately 35-40 schools each year to perform a full production at the festival. Students are exposed to eye-opening art and culture they never knew existed, and rack up a host of new dramatic skills.

"The AHSTF program is the best theater trip in the world," enthuses Chuck Manthe, theater program director at Lincoln High School in San Jose, California. "No one can match the excitement, grandeur or professional performance environment of the Edinburgh Theatre Festival Fringe." Manthe's students presented *Grease* in 2002 and *Seussical* in 2005; he feels the creative scope the Fringe affords his students was priceless. "The benefit is that students get to see how far and wide the arts reach around the world. As a director, you never forget the looks on their faces as they step off the bus for the first time on the festival's main street and see the amazing crowd of people and street performers. Their love of theater shines brighter than ever when they're surrounded by 100,000 other people who feel the same way!"

A bit of background

History demonstrates that AHSTF began life modestly, but that its impact quickly grew in leaps and bounds. "Back in 1994, our parent company, which is a student travel organization, was approached by a theater teacher, who asked whether we'd ever considered taking theater students over to perform at the festival," explains Alex Leik, AHSTF's program director. "That's basically how everything got started. We sat down with a bunch of college professors and community theater directors—people we thought could help us determine who could go to this festival. We didn't want to just pick people at random. We wanted to send people over whom we thought could put on a quality performance. In that sense, it became an adjudicated festival.

Our first year, we took over five schools, probably made up of 150 to 200 kids. It went very well. We came back and were able to get the nomination/application process down a little more pat the second year. As word spread, we had a lot more participation from college professors, community theater directors and so forth, who wanted to nominate schools in their area whom they knew might be worthy of going over there and performing. The festival really picked up steam and snowballed, going from five schools in 1994 to now, where we're up to 1,100 kids representing 38 schools for 2005."

The actual application process is quite rigorous. Once a school has been nominated by a state, regional or national theater entity, it receives an application form from AHSTF, which requires potential directors to outline their curricular and creative points of view in great detail. Eight different board members evaluate the applicants. "The big question that they seem to all really jump to when looking at an application is the philosophy of the director in terms of education and the philosophy

of their program," notes Leik. "We do also permit schools to send in either DVD or VHS clips, kept to a five-minute maximum, which can showcase things that they've done throughout the season. Schools aren't getting judged on one show - it's the program that's getting judged. You're looking at public schools, private schools, in small towns, in inner cities - you've got to judge each question differently."

If a school is lucky enough to be selected, here's the itinerary: spanning approximately two weeks every August, the AHSTF tour schedule starts with two days in London spent sightseeing and attending a West End show. Next, participants are spirited to Edinburgh via chartered train, where they spend the next 10 days rehearsing, teaching, marketing and performing their show (with a four-performance run) at the Fringe. Sightseeing time is factored in, as is a celebratory awards ceremony post-strike and a viewing of the world-famous Military Tattoo at Edinburgh Castle, the country's largest outdoor spectacle, attracting an annual audience of 217,000. Students are also encouraged to attend as much live theater at the Fringe as possible. Professional tech support and guidance is guaranteed during every show's prep and run; round-trip airfare, accommodations and most meals are covered.

Needless to say, many schools want to bring performance after performance. Alas, return engagements aren't a lock. "Just because you've gone, you still have to get nominated and apply again," explains Leik. "We've had schools that have gone, but maybe get a new director over a span of three or four years, then apply and don't make it again. You've got to start from point A just like everybody else does, no matter how many times you've done it." The bottom line: consistent quality standards must be met, no matter who you are.

Facts About the Fringe

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe itself could not provide a more vivid—and vast—professional training environment for AHSTF students. Founded in 1947, the Fringe's intent has always been to showcase boundless creativity - allowing its performers the freedom to put on any material they like at a wide variety of traditional theater spaces all over the city, as well as in a huge assortment of unconventional spots (from street corners to public bathrooms). Theater companies and artists are encouraged to stake out their own venues, as well as promote their own productions by soliciting audience members and talking to the press. Nicknamed the "Queen Mother" due to the fact that it's the world's biggest arts festival, the Fringe has given opportunities to the most anonymous solo performers - as well as to major international celebrities like Hugh Grant, Emma Thompson and the Monty Python gang.

Fringe director Paul Gudgin has a terrific reputation when it comes to artist support, something Leik is eternally grateful for. "I can't say enough good things about Paul Gudgin," he raves. "If we ever had trouble finding a venue, Paul would not hesitate to help us. He knows every year we're coming over with over 30 to 40 shows, and over 1,000 kids, and comes every year to our closing ceremony, where we present the kids with certificates and the directors with awards. Every year without fail, Paul takes the time to talk to these kids about theater."

AHSTF staffers implicitly understand the inner workings of the Fringe, and therefore strive to address the questions and concerns of its participating schools' personnel. Leik personally scouts performance spaces by going over to Scotland in January of each year. "The biggest issue is venue space," he admits. "We were comfortable at Churchill Theatre - we've been there for a long time, and we'll continue to use it as long as they allow us to - but we've got three venues this year, a little more Fringe-like. I like the alternative venues, because they allow our groups to be more than your standard American musical, which we still get, but we've also got groups doing improv shows. It's totally transformed from your typical American theater piece or musical. I like that, and it's offering a lot more variety."

Another preparatory step AHSTF makes: "We take the directors [of next year's productions] over in August for a week to show them what they're getting into, and what it's all about. It's so hard for them to go back and convey that to the kids - I think

when the kids get over there, there's about a 24-hour period where they just don't know what's going on. But that's a good thing—they're just taking it all in," says Leik.

Kathy Mulay, drama instructor at Portage Central High School in Portage, Michigan, directed a crowd-pleasing production of *Honk!*, a musical based on *The Ugly Duckling*, at the 2002 Fringe. She appreciates AHSTF's meticulous care. "The organizational staff really keeps in touch with you during the entire year," she says. "When you receive the honor of participation, the tech staff is in contact with you all through the year to aid you in your planning and preparations. You also get a chance to meet with current directors so they can assist you by sharing what their experiences have been. If you listen to the AHSTF staff and prepare your thespians carefully, this will be one of your most rewarding experiences as an educator!"

The Edinburgh Experience

Once AHSTF participants arrive in Scotland, the challenges begin - but are just as eagerly met. The hardest work to be done? "Putting people in the seats," says Leik. "The average audience at the Fringe is seven people. When directors hear that, you can see the color drop out of their faces. Their high school auditoriums hold 1,500 people, and they sell them out every night. But you just have to convey to them, hey, this is the Fringe — this is the way it is!"

Leik helps promote shows by sending reams of press materials to Scotland before the Fringe begins. Once in Scotland, students also enthusiastically pursue audiences grassroots style, as is traditional for all Fringe participants—talking up shows to passersby on Edinburgh's Royal Mile and handing out flyers. "These kids support one another—it's a huge deal for them," says Leik. Cast members from one show are happy to fill in seats at another show's performance, and vice versa.

John Reese, director of the theater program at Deerfield Academy in Deerfield, Massachusetts, staged *A Thurber Carnival* in 2002 and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2005. He feels that AHSTF allows his students to master the importance of theatrical subtlety. "A major challenge is that simplicity of production is foremost," he explains. "You must rely on the script and the quality of the acting, directing and lighting, because you can't take lots of scenery with you. Your scenic and costume choices must be carefully considered and support your artistic vision."

"One thing I love about AHSTF is that our students get to see great theater from high schools all around the country," says Terry Guerin, a teacher at Friends Central School in Pennsylvania and president of the board of directors for Philadelphia's Pig Iron Theatre Company. "It is so exciting to be in this international setting with other American schools." Guerin's students wowed Fringe audiences in 2000 with a production of Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*, and again in 2005 with a revue called *Funny Shorts*.

Indeed, AHSTF inspires students to do their best dramatic work - and just as significantly, provides them with indelible impressions that will influence their lives for years to come. Gregg Sawyer, director of theater at the Academy of Holy Angels in Minneapolis, recalls a defining moment: "One of my students looked at me at the end of the Edinburgh Military Tattoo's performance, which all the schools attend as part of the trip. As the lone bagpiper was playing the national theme of Scotland from the top of a castle, this young man, with tears streaming down his face, said, 'The perfect ending to a life-changing experience.' As a 25-year veteran of theater education, I can't think of a more rewarding and affirming experience for me than to have that to give to a student."

For information on the American High School Theatre Festival you can write to them at 590 Peter Jefferson Place, Suite 300, Charlottesville, VA 22911; call 1-888-882-4783 or visit the website at www.ahstf.org.

Lisa Mulcahy is the author of Theater Festivals and Building the Successful Theater Company (Allworth Press).

October 2005 • www.stage-directions.com