

A Conversation With Philadelphia's Own Nick Stuccio

Hope Lanphear 21 May 2012

About the innovator

Nick Stuccio's career in the arts began with an intensive study of classical ballet at Skidmore College, where he also earned a degree in Biology. His dedication to the form led to an apprenticeship with the Pennsylvania Ballet and eventually a position as a corps member with the company where he danced for eight years. At the Ballet, Nick danced under the artistic direction of Ricky Weiss, Christopher d'Amboise and Roy Kaiser. Nick retired as a dancer and began producing full-time in 1995. He co-founded the Philadelphia Fringe Festival (now the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival & Philly Fringe) in 1997 and that same year was named "Person of the Year" by the *Philadelphia Weekly*. He was included in *Philadelphia Magazine's* 2000 edition of "People to Watch" and their 2009 edition of "The Power 50," a ranking of the most influential Philadelphians. His many production credits include co-founding *Shut Up and Dance*, the popular annual benefit that showcases work choreographed and performed by dancers of the Pennsylvania Ballet and raises more than \$100,000 net every year to benefit the

Metropolitan Aids Neighborhood Nutrition Alliance (MANNA). Nick was also the original curator of the Wilma Theatre's *Dance Boom* series and served in that role from 2002-2005. Other leadership roles include producing two dance films and serving on the Philadelphia Cultural Fund board for the past six years. In 2005, Nick was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts by the University of the Arts.

What I believe to be your social innovation is that the Fringe Festival artists/performers do the majority of the work and get experience that way instead of you holding their hand the whole way through. Do you agree?

We have two parts of a whole here: Philadelphia Live Arts and the Philly Fringe.

The works within the annual Philadelphia Live Arts Festival are specifically chosen and invited to attend. We pay the artists, cover their travel expenses, provide them the theater space they need for their work, and cover all marketing, fundraising and production expenses. These are contemporary experimental artists who are pushing the boundaries of their discipline whether it's theater or dance or music or visual art or circus. We bring in the world's biggest and brightest stars. Ten to fifteen Live Arts works are featured every festival; about half are from out of town. We have an amazing cohort of theater and dance

and contemporary artists who are world class.

That really is the core work that we do as an organization, the curated work of the Live Arts Festival.

Philly Fringe is different. I think this is probably more of the social innovation.... There's been this unbelievable Fringe movement. It is like a movement. Its hyper-local and there's Fringe Festivals now everywhere; it's... viral.

The call for Philly Fringe artists takes place at the beginning of the calendar year. We will announce that we are accepting—not applications because there isn't really a process which we use to vet them—just accepting reservations, so to speak. Unlike our own shows within the Live Arts Festival, which we create individual marketing plans for, we will not market or promote individual Philly Fringe shows, just the Fringe Festival as a whole. Each independent Philly Fringe artist takes on their own marketing, publicity, fundraising, production expenses, etc. Our organization supports the Fringe artists through pre-Festival workshops and through box office support.

The Fringe is more or less something we just facilitate. We don't meddle in terms of the marketing, we don't help them with their fundraising; but we do give them an opportunity to join with other artists to present their works, often for the first time. Many of the artists who participate in the Fringe are either new to the performing arts world, or if they're existing artists they might be trying

something new, which is really exciting, or if they're an existing company they may be trying something new in the Fringe Festival to see if they can connect with new audiences.

It is kind of a market system. It is very much that the success is dependent on the artist, the entrepreneur almost. It's not the most nurturing system. Market systems can be brutal. We modeled our festival after Edinburgh. Our role as an organization is to provide the platform. We create a festival, we call attention and we help organize a central box office. We're kind of a service entity. So we have a whole bunch of 'how to' at the Fringe.... And we help you with insurance; we make sure you have insurance.... How to get your show noticed, how to get an audience, how to think of a few key things in production. We help them but we don't do it for them. We don't do the work. They present their own work. So we don't rent them a theater. They rent their own.... It's hard work. The presenting business is a hard business.

Every year we have a couple hundred folks who find their own venue and mount their show. And it mostly is young pre-professional or folks who are just starting, mounting their first professional show. They'll start an ensemble and they'll debut at the Philly Fringe. And it's great. When a show is great, what we [will] do, when audiences are ready for it, is we provide media that's looking for all this stuff. So if you can successfully mount a show it can blow up and there's this mad rush to see it. Or, adversely,

because there's more than 200 shows..., it can be lost in the mass of all that too. That's why it's not for every artist. You can have a great work but you also have to be a great producer. You have to be savvy and entrepreneurial.

Are you more focused on the artists or the audience?

To be honest I think one takes care of the other. It's a situation where we can create a very vibrant artist theme, artist culture where they are supported.... If we can serve [artists] well... people are coming to their shows, the audience as part of the equation, and if they're really interested in what the artists are doing—we mediate that conversation in a great way. What follows is an excellent community. Every world class community has a really great, first-class culture component. And we aspire to have all of that here.

I'm a believer in pursuing the highest artistic goals and quality. And that's our goal, our ambition. And there's the notion of artists doing and making art.... 'Anybody can make art' and that's great, too. The Fringe welcomes that. There's no barrier. That's what's great about ours. Other Fringe festivals often have an adjudication process and to me that's hysterical. The New York Fringe does it, pretty much everyone one in the country has a screen.... Edinburgh was started by some people who didn't get into some big name festival and the folks who didn't get in did their own festival.

How have you adapted the Edinburgh Fringe Festival to fit in Philadelphia?

In the terms of how people participate it's the same. There are no boundaries.... It can scale up to 2,000 or 3,000 [shows]. It doesn't matter because we have no barriers, just like Edinburgh. Yet like Edinburgh we don't produce and we don't present them; they're on their own. Some other festivals have some kind of barrier... or some kind of lottery.

We tried to really look at Edinburgh, that market-based system. We tried to back off as much as possible. Don't judge them on their work. No barriers. But you got to do it yourself, basically. I think we are just about the only ones that I know of outside the Edinburgh. We are the only one that does it the way do.

How does the box office work?

We will facilitate all of the Fringe artists' advance ticket sales through the overall festival box office. We do charge a small processing fee to the customer for each order they place but the Fringe artists get pretty much all of their ticket revenue back at the end of the festival. So we're not seeking to make a profit off of their ticket sales, we're seeking to help facilitate it to them.

Can you talk about your economic impact?

It's pretty cut and dry. You can look at your budget and your ticket sales. There are all these formulas. And then there's a multiplier. Every time somebody buys a ticket, they got a babysitter, went out to eat, they bought a pack of gum and coffee and parking, etc. So [for] every \$25 dollars to spend on a ticket they spend... three times that on the rest of their night.

You spoke about how an artist can have a show that really blows up. What kind of effect does the Fringe have on the artists?

In terms of the artists' careers: absolutely. We certainly help their careers. We give them an annual platform.... Some shows certainly do rise up the ranks. That kind of theater culture is kind of like garage bands.... They do something cool and that blows up and then somebody goes to work for someone else. It's very punk rock culture. The goals are to gain a lot of experience artistically, to have mounted a show, and react to it. Hopefully the smart ones learn from mistakes and then do something better. They may decide they've fallen in love with producing and want to organize a theater. Or they want to work in management. Or they hate it.

Students leave the university and mount the shows with the Fringe; that's a great first stepping stone for them. And for knowing whether they want to be on the making side of the industry, if they want to be behind the scenes....

Would you say you create a lot of knowledge about these venues?

Yeah. I mean I think there is a mutual benefit to the venues. All these bars, restaurants, cafes, even nonprofit institutions that have space for rent; we put them on the map. And there's a definite mutual benefit. So all the coffee shops that want people to come in to buy coffee, they let this little Shakespeare poetry company be a part of their coffee shop. That happens like mad and that's often a great thing.

Certainly there are Fringe artists who choose untraditional venues, as well, whether it is a coffee shop or a cemetery, but we are not involved in the process. That's individual artists finding their own locale. We have annually over 200 Fringe participants; they suck up as many venues as can be imagined. So all the traditional venues get used during our festival. And then at that point people have to get more innovative. Sometimes it's an intentional decision that they want to use an unconventional venue and sometimes it's simply because that's what they had to do to find the space to make their show work.

Is there still anything else you want to accomplish?

We need a home base, a better home base, from which we'll be able to serve artists better, serve audiences better—the institution will grow. We're buying a building; we're

going to build an outdoor plaza. We're going to build a restaurant and a bar. As soon as the theater is closed people can come in to the bar. And I'm totally taking this from 16 years ago, Edinburgh, knowing that's what makes it vital.

Most of the theaters, like the Kimmel Center here or others here or around the country, after the show has ended at 10:23, people go and hang out in the lobby for 6 minutes and then leave. And there's a dude who closes the door and locks it at 11 o'clock. People have tried to put bars in theaters but it's so expensive, it's like an afterthought.

For more information visit www.livearts-fringe.org