ENGAGING AND ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL TOURISM?
The case of the Prague Fringe Festival

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This article develops the concept of 'alternative cultural tourism' through an in-depth study of the Prague Fringe Festival (PFF). In doing so, it argues that existing approaches to cultural tourism often fail to differentiate between different forms of culture (i.e. alternative versus mainstream), whilst also interrogating the criteria by which festivals can be understood as examples of alternative cultural tourism. Utilising a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data, involving audiences, festival performers and workers/volunteers, it is asserted that the PFF brings together a diverse mix of cultures, and seeks to create a more participatory and engaging tourist experience. Additionally, its more egalitarian organising structure produces different kinds of work and social relations in the production of art and culture – particularly between various groups working within the festival, but also in the creation of different ideas about audience engagement, performer relations, and engagement with the local community (through the idea of the 'festival participant'). The article concludes by briefly exploring the potential of alternative cultural tourism to provide more meaningful and sustainable models of urban cultural development.

KEYWORDS: alternative; cultural tourism; festival; participant; social bonding

Introduction

While cultural tourism generally, and arts festivals more specifically, have become part of the lexicon of urban regeneration and place marketing (Amin & Thrift 2007), Quinn (2005) strongly argues that we actually know very little about how such events 'socially' engage with people in cities beyond their expected 'economic' benefits (Snowball & Antrobus 2002). This is particularly the case with respect to understanding how alternatively organised festivals might help promote cultural diversity and local engagement, create less hierarchical relationships, and produce social benefit (Quinn 2005); as opposed to cultural events serving only commercial interests and elite audiences (Waterman 1998), being spatially disconnected (McCannell 1973), or producing a 'homogenising urban effect' on cities (Harvey 1989). Utilising the Prague Fringe Festival (PFF) as a case study, this article explores these possibilities through developing the concept of 'alternative cultural tourism'.

As background, the first part of the paper locates the case study within two bodies of literature. First, that concerned with the concept of 'cultural tourism' (Richards 1996; Stebbins 1996), and second, ideas of festivals/carnivals as forms of alternative culture (St John 2000). In doing so, it argues that existing approaches to cultural tourism often fail

to differentiate alternative forms of culture from more mainstream ones, whilst also interrogating the criteria by which festivals can be understood as examples of alternative cultural tourism.

The second empirical section of the paper looks at the case of the PFF and poses the question, to what extent can it be understood as an alternative form of cultural tourism? Utilising a combination of both quantitative (questionnaire survey), and qualitative (semi-structured interviews and participant observation) data, involving audiences, festival performers and workers/volunteers, it is argued that there is evidence of diverse cultural engagement, egalitarian relations and social benefits (bonding and networks) occurring within this event. The paper concludes by briefly exploring the potential of alternative cultural tourism to provide more meaningful and sustainable models of urban cultural development.

Rethinking Cultural Tourism

Any analytical discussion of cultural tourism and alternative festivals needs to be located within wider transformations of culture, economy and cities (Florida 2005; Hall 2000). For instance, Amin and Thrift (2007) have pointed towards the increasing importance of culture for cities, in driving forward post-industrial economies and aiding urban regeneration. One obvious consequence of this emphasis is a visible transformation of the urban landscape, involving 'investment in retail and leisure complexes, heritage trails, museums, festivals, pedestrian zones, restaurant quarters, open-air markets, elaborate place marketing campaigns, and so on' (Amin & Thrift 2007, p. 152). In turn, this phenomenon has also given rise to new forms of urban regeneration focused around tourism experience (Urry 2002; Shaw & Williams 2004). For instance, there has been an explosion in the different types and range of activities that tourists can engage in, creating more 'niche experiences' (Mowforth & Munt 2003), fuelling what has been termed the 'experience economy' (Richards 2001), and helping to foster the idea of cultural tourism (Stebbins 1996).

Richards (1996, p. 24) describes cultural tourism as 'the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs', while Raj (2003, p. 3) defines it as 'travel directed toward experiencing the arts, heritage and special character of a place'. While neither of these attempts offers much beyond traditional definitions of tourism (Urry 2002), not to mention that one can be a cultural tourist 'at home' today (McCabe 2005), Stebbins' (1996, p. 948) approach is more suggestive, when he argues: 'Cultural tourism is a genre of special interest tourism based on the search for and participation in new and deep cultural experiences, whether aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, or psychological'. Related notions emphasising links between identity formation and travel (Stebbins 1997), and the desire for 'creative' tourist destinations (Prentice & Anderson 2003) and activities are also instructive here.

Yet, one of the main problems with more subjective definitions of cultural tourism is that they not only underplay some general political-economy counter-trends in tourism which militate against creativity, but they also fail to distinguish sociologically between different kinds of tourist experiences. For example, it might be argued that in spite of an opening up of tourist experiences and niches (Richards 2001), underneath this 'variety' are processes at work which actively militate against diversity, creativity and a quest for

authenticity. For instance, consider Harvey's (1989) notion of the serial reproduction (sameness) of urban tourist infrastructure, Klein's (2000) thesis about the corporatisation of urban culture, the existence of predictable and high regulated 'tourist bubbles' (Jacobsen 2003), and what McCannell (1973) has referred to as 'staged authenticity' in tourism (attempts to provide 'real' tourist experiences literally through a staged process).

Similarly, despite post-modern analyses of tourism as a 'form of performance' full of mundane but also transgressive possibilities (Edensor 2001, p. 59), and approaches linking it to identity creation (Stebbins 1997), even these authors feel compelled to demarcate 'non-conformist', and 'serious' or 'creative' tourism from other categories. Other writers have also sought to distinguish tourist types based on notions of intent (Hughes 1996), desire for cultural exploration (Crompton & McKay 1997), and the need for sociability and gregariousness (Getz & Cheyne 2002). Whilst all are suggestive, distinctions of tourist experience based largely on intention/motivation, in and of themselves, are incomplete. In effect, alternative forms of tourism might be better distinguished by more general social processes and organisational criteria. The argument presented here is that 'alternative cultural tourism' cannot be reduced simply to a subjective state or identity – despite this 'interpretive experience' being important – but has rather more to do with the different possibilities of engagement provided by alternative ideologies and organising structures provided by certain types of festival events.

The Idea of the 'Alternative' Festival

Conventional cultural tourism definitions also fail to adequately distinguish between commercial tourist provision, and the existence of diverse, non-commodified forms of alternative urban culture in cities, including some festivals (St John 2000). Whilst difficult to articulate, alternative culture for Altman (1980, pp. 116–117), consists of 'all those aspects of apparent non-mainstream social activity and consciousness [including ''counter-culture''] that seem to prefigure a radically different type of social system', while St John (2000, pp. 6–7) defines it as 'a diverse network of discourse and practice oppositional to perceived deficiencies in the parent culture, which is the system of values, beliefs and practices hegemonic under modernity', and which, for him, includes various social movements (including arts movements), new spiritualities, and youth subcultures (also see Hetherington 1997). Interestingly, for this paper, St John (2000, p. 11) also argues that festivals can be viewed as examples of alternative culture, when he suggests that it 'could be argued that festival (or carnival) is itself a universally alternate moment in the life of a people', echoing Bakhtin's (1984, pp. 9–10) classic assertion that historically such events had the potential to subvert the established order of things, albeit temporarily. However, as Waterman (1998) points out, not all festivals are automatically alternative.

Helpfully, St John (2000) sets out a number of sociologically informed criteria with which to judge whether a festival can be seen as alternative. Within this he includes: (a) the event should be non-profit and non-corporate; (b) the administrative structure inclines towards a non-hierarchical, co-operative style of (self)management and collective owner-ship of the event-space is encouraged; (c) the festival should be participatory, with the boundaries between performer and audience being fluid, and finally; (d) it should not be largely dependent on state funding or control.[1] Implicit within points (b) and (c) is the idea that collective ownership and blurred boundaries generate the capacity for 'social bonding' (the creation of a sense of belonging or friendship/family) and networking

(the widening of one's social contacts) between different festival groups. Before turning to the specific empirical case study of the PFF, these various criteria will be discussed in relation to fringe festivals generally.

Fringe festivals have been described as an 'alternative' form of culture and conceptualised as outside the 'mainstream' partly because of their history. For example, the first modern fringe festival, the Edinburgh Fringe, had its origins literally as an alternative to the International Edinburgh Festival, when local performers felt that they were being excluded from the largely 'high cultural' programme, and created their own rather make-shift and more affordable event (Harvie 2003). Whilst retaining some of its original elements, ironically, the Edinburgh Fringe now dwarfs the International Festival in terms of both numbers of performances and tickets sold, as well as being internationally recognised as a tourist attraction, demonstrating how the alternative can indeed become the mainstream (SQW Limited & TNS Travel & Tourism 2005). Various commentators have written critically about how it has become expensive, divorced from its alternative roots, and been incorporated too far into an urban regeneration model (Jamieson 2004).

However, even large fringes like Edinburgh retain a diverse and 'open access' policy (although regarding affordability, see Wray 2007), profits are re-invested back into the following year's event, state funding is relatively tokenistic, it has a relatively flat administrative structure, and it can claim to transform the space of the city and relations between performers and audiences somewhat (Jamieson 2004). Many of the spin-off and newer, smaller fringes have held truer to these original ideals, remaining open arts events, so much so that the Canadian Federation of Fringes (CAFF) operates a lottery system in terms of choosing performers (see http://www.fringefestivals.com/index.html). Most receive only small amounts of state funding, are non-profit and relatively non-hierarchical, run by a skeleton staff and dedicated volunteers, thereby creating different kinds of work relations (i.e. social bonding) and a sense of ownership of the event. To quote a festival box office manager for FringeNYC (the New York Fringe): 'I do this because I get to support amazing artists, and I do it because I love the people I work with. They're like a family – as in, they knew I was getting married before my mom did' (quoted in Blankenship 2007).

This sense of ownership and community, can also extend to the creation of 'spaces of intersubjectivity', to use a phrase from Willems-Braun's (1994, p. 75) study of fringe festivals in Canada, where the 'interaction of patrons, artists and organisations is encouraged' and social bonding and networking can occur. While these phenomena are clearly difficult to quantify, there is some 'experiential' evidence of this in the case to follow. Finally, fringe festival performances invariably take place in unorthodox time slots (short, multiple acts following on from one another) and unusual venues and spaces (bars/ tents/the street, public toilets, etc), not to mention creating places where all festival participants (including audiences) can meet (i.e. a central 'fringe club'). These mimic Edensor's (2001, p. 63) distinction between 'enclavic' and 'heterogeneous' tourist spaces – the former strongly circumscribed, heavily managed and framed, the latter weakly framed with blurred boundaries, multi-purpose spaces – and Bey's (1991) 'temporary autonomous zones' of non-regulated, non-commodified space which break down the producer/ consumer distinction.

In essence, all festivals, including fringes, despite having the potential to be alterative, are susceptible to the contradictory forces of state and capital. As Quinn (2005, p. 927) argues: 'Festivals and events . . . as forms of entrepreneurial display, have come to be constructed as vital elements in acquiring the investment needed for restructuring and

regeneration'. As such, there is always the temptation of corporate sponsorship and its various effects (see Thomas 2008). On the other hand, their part reliance on public funding also implies that they have a duty to provide social and cultural benefits to the local community, and to people who live in the cities where they take place (Cooper 1998). However, if they are to be understood as truly alternative, festivals should engage with diverse communities, provide opportunities for bonding and collective ownership of the event, and aid social networks. A number of these elements are examined in relation to the PFF in the next section.

Studying the PFF: Background and Methodology

The PFF, which opened in 2002 was the first of its kind in Eastern Europe, and was conceived by three individuals from the UK (one now permanently settled in Prague) out of their extended involvement with the Edinburgh Fringe. The festival, although relatively small, has grown steadily from 13 companies performing 63 shows over five days in 2002 to 41 companies performing 242 shows over eight days in 2007 (when this research was conducted), with a corresponding twelve-fold growth in ticket sales. International in content, with 12 countries and six languages represented in the 2007 programme, the PFF is a unique type of cultural tourism as it brings together a rich mix of cultures and groups from all over the world into one location to both perform and consume culture (further details of festival participants will be discussed in the next section).

Despite this growing success, the PFF remains both a relatively intimate festival and one that struggles financially from year to year. Funded partially by public money from Prague City Council and partially by ticket sales, the festival largely operates through the dedication of its directors (all of whom have other paid employment outside of the festival), the enthusiasm of its performers and the zealousness of its volunteers, and reciprocal arrangements with other, largely small businesses. For example, as it is run on a not-for-profit basis, its festival directors (four in total) take no direct salary and deal personally with all the performing companies and audience queries, with the fringe office doubling as one of the director's residences. While the PFF brochure lists sponsors, virtually all operate through reciprocal arrangements akin to what has been called the 'gift economy' (Cheal 1998) – for example, free accommodation for festival staff is offered in exchange for the festival brochure advertising that company. The festival's young, unpaid front of house staff receive free accommodation and unlimited access to shows, while young local Czech technical staff are paid. Like most fringes, the PFF largely operates an 'open' access process of application (online at http://www.praguefringe.com/2009/apply.php), leading to a very diverse programme. Performing companies from around the world must fund their own travel and accommodation expenses, and pay a participation fee up front which goes towards the venue rental and technical staff, and they receive a percentage of the gate through tickets sold. This results in a very flat administrative structure, with companies acting in partnership with the fringe in terms of the promotion of shows.

Finally, the PFF is located slightly out of the main tourist hub of Prague (the old town square area) in the developing area of Mala Strana (translated as 'lesser town'). In contrast to the old town as an area of relatively homogenous tourist consumption, whole parts of Mala Strana are transformed into spaces of creativity, diversity and exchange of ideas during the fringe. While it makes uses of some existing theatres, the PFF also uses a

number of unconventional spaces such as theatre foyers, cellar bars, tents and in some cases even street performances, challenging traditional ideas of where culture should happen. Performances are generally an hour and run from late afternoon to around midnight, extending the conventional temporal aspect of theatre, and because many shows are short and run every day, audiences can easily see multiple performances in one night resulting in a different kind of 'festival experience'. These structures all help produce a more 'heterogeneous tourist zone' (Edensor 2001, p. 63), characterised by weakly framed structures, blurred boundaries, multi-purpose use of space, and greater possibilities for audience engagement and participation.

The methodology chosen to study the PFF case combines both quantitative and qualitative methods, in order to provide a more rounded picture of the event and to produce evidence relevant to the notion of 'alternative cultural tourism'. Data presented here is drawn from an audience (including festival performers and volunteers)[2] questionnaire survey (n = 226) conducted in 2007, designed to collect information on the social backgrounds (gender, age, occupation, country of residence) and experiences of the PFF. The questionnaire also included a comments box where respondents could elaborate upon their experience and an option to leave their email address so the researcher could contact them for more details. While this method produced some useful trend data, which can be disaggregated into simple sub-categories (i.e. 'those associated with the festival' – like performers, volunteers, directors/producers etc, – and 'audience only' for instance), it was also decided to extend and supplement these findings by collecting some additional qualitative data designed to explore participants more 'interpretative' views about the festival and how they saw it working in practice. Twenty semi-structured interviews[3] were conducted with a wide range of groups including festival directors, front of house volunteers, venue managers, technicians, freelancers, show directors, producers, actors and audience members. While the data from this rather small sample needs to be treated with caution in terms of generalising statements and providing hard 'evidence' of events, its main function is to tap into a range of participants' experiences of the festival, an important aspect of the concept of 'alternative cultural tourism'. Additionally, various participant observation methods were utilised by the researcher during the week of the 2007 festival including shadowing festival directors, observing front of house volunteers, directors/producers and actors at work and at play, and interacting with audience members during and outside shows. This form of 'participative' ethnography has been carried out by the researcher with varying degrees of involvement over a seven year period (2002–2009), yielding rich historical data and insights into the festival's evolution.

The Prague Fringe as Alternative Cultural Tourism?

Due to its size, not-for-profit status, and relatively non-hierarchical organising structure previously outlined, the PFF might be seen to encapsulate a range of elements of alternative urban culture discussed previously. A number of these aspects are brought together in the following two quotations drawn from the semi-structured interviews:

> I think it's quite amazing that around forty different theatre companies from lots of different corners of the world land on this small place, right below the castle. There is an

education in it, as well as being able to mix internationally and see these wonderful shows and get these experiences from all over the world. (Steven Gove, PFF director)

Fringe, like an international multicultural festival, is very good for communication between the performers and the audiences. Lots of different artists, actors, dancers, musicians, and lots of different visitors can meet . . . There is huge diversity of culture and there is huge collaboration between people from the whole world. Especially the Fringe is good for communication between performers and audiences thanks to small venues. They can meet face to face here after performances. (Czech male director)

Although the paper will return to many of the elements of the festival mentioned here, one of the most interesting aspects alluded to concerns its apparent capacity to offer rather diverse and unique cultural experiences for both performers, volunteers and audiences (including tourists and locals) (Stebbins 1996). However, rather than being limited to a definition of cultural tourism as travelling to another country to specifically experience its culture (Richards 1996), the PFF alternatively brings together a wide range and mix of people to *engage with each other's cultures*, and certainly this is aided by its taking place in a very diverse and cosmopolitan city. For example, the questionnaire survey revealed that the overall audience (including performers, directors/producers, volunteers/technicians) were made up of a good mix of visitors from abroad (45%) and people living in Prague (55%), of whom 32% were non-Czech's living in Prague and 23% were Czech. Within the survey sample, 26 nationalities were represented, while 12 different nationalities were represented in the 2007 PFF Programme and six different languages were used in performances. Fifty-six percent of the overall sample were female and the festival appeared to cater for a relatively wide age group, with the bulk of them (86%) between 16–44 years old. While nearly 50% of the audience came from the professional occupation classes, due, in part, to the costs involved in travelling abroad (as nearly half the sample was made up of visitors from abroad), there was also strong representation from creative occupations (19%) and students (18%). The PFF thus attracts and brings together, into a relative small social space, a diverse mix of festival participants necessary to facilitate cultural interaction and exchange. Additionally, it appears that there is something rather unique here about the scale and intimacy of the interactions, produced by the organisational structure of the fringe.

Indeed, the PFF's cooperative structure and non-hierarchical ethos is perhaps its most distinguishing feature as a potential form of alternative culture (St John 2000). While the directors are responsible for much of the planning and organising of the event prior to it taking place, the actual day-to-day running of the festival is largely in the hands of a small (28 in 2007), but extremely dedicated set of front-of-house volunteers (in addition to a small number of paid Czech technicians). In terms of social backgrounds these volunteers are largely young university students interested in theatre, drawn from overseas (primarily the UK, but also Canada, USA) and from the Czech Republic (50% from abroad and 50% from the CR). While overseas volunteers pay their own airfare and daily living costs (they are housed free by the festival's accommodation sponsor), they and their Czech counterparts typically work eight hour shifts daily for no remuneration. While one critical interpretation of this situation is that the PFF is simply benefiting from 'discounted labour' and a 'work experience' mentality within the arts (Kreidler 1996), this helped to create a sense of non-hierarchy and 'ownership' of the festival amongst volunteers, as the following quote suggests:

> The social elements of the festival contribute greatly to the personal relations, ethos and work ethic of volunteers. Where I work normally, a traditional cultural venue, the boundaries between artists, staff and audience are rigid. The Prague Fringe blurs these boundaries, the upshot of which is a more participatory experience for all. In my opinion, this increases the feeling of investment for volunteer workers, leading to greater commitment . . . The feeling of team often overrides the effects of hierarchy, but without detrimental effects. (English female volunteer)

Participant observation and survey results appear to support such a positive view of the festival. One hundred percent of the volunteers surveyed rated their experience of the festival as good, and all said they would attend the fringe again, followed by comments such as 'I love it, please let me back' and 'brilliant time'. Additional evidence in support of the commitment to the idea of the fringe by volunteers can be gleaned by the fact that a core group return year after year, some even choosing to work at the Prague Fringe during their annual employment leave.

This non-hierarchical and participatory organisational structure also influenced how directors/producers and performers saw themselves in relation to the festival organisers (also see Johnson 2009). As a spokesperson for one of the festival companies put it, '. . . no one is desperate to make money out of you' (English male director and actor), signalling a very different type of relationship from the typical promoter-performer one. Instead, personal relations, problem-solving and communication issues were emphasised by performers when discussing their relationship with festival directors:

> I've always felt well looked after and supported. (Scottish female performer)

> The festival organizers and all the Prague Fringe Festival staff do very good work and are very nice people . . . Because the festival organisation is huge and difficult sometimes troubles grows up and we need to find a compromise. (Czech male director)

> Communication lines seem to always be open. (Canadian female writer/director)

Notions of 'support', 'communication' and 'compromise' here imply a two-way relationship of obligation, trust, responsibility, and participation in a cultural organisation (see O'Conner et al. 2000). And while the festival directors may have been in charge of the pre-planning and organisation of the fringe, strictly speaking performances are not really curated events, as artists and actors must actively negotiate with technical staff and volunteers in the actual production and running of their show. Additionally, the existence of a 'door split' (on ticket sales) means that companies are largely responsible for their own destiny and self-promotion, which again creates a more participatory sense of ownership amongst festival performers.

The structure of the PFF also appears to create a different artistic relationship between performers. While companies come to the festival to perform, it is also evident that they are there to watch and learn, as evidenced by the fact that they made up a significant proportion of the audience in 2007 (the questionnaire survey revealed that 'those associated with the festival' made up 15% of the total audience surveyed). This group was also more likely than the 'audience only' group to see multiple shows, with 60% planning to see six or more shows. Although sometimes competing for the same audience, participant observation revealed numerous instances of performers supporting each other by promoting and attending each other's shows, as well as exchanging ideas after shows, as exemplified by this statement:

> The relationship between the performers during PFF is very good. Everybody goes to see the other performances . . . I would say they are also the best critics. Communication and personal contact between artists usually happens after the performances. This is good for the new creation of art for all participants. (Czech male director)

This implies a more collaborative notion of the production of art and theatre (Collingwood 1958) than more individualistic and 'auteurist' models suggest. The PFF appears more likely to produce a community of artists who are there to support and learn from each other through constructive criticism, observation and discussion, rather than a collection of individual artists there to compete and maximise their own revenue.

This structure of engagement seemed to extend to other groups involved in the PFF and can be encapsulated in the idea of the 'festival participant', as introduced by its associate director, Carole Wears: 'We prefer to refer to everyone involved in the PFF as festival participants, rather than separate them out into different categories like artists and audiences'. This questions not only conventional distinctions between performers and audiences, but more broadly between cultural producers and cultural consumers (Bey 1991; Chatterton & Hollands 2003, ch. 9). While it would be naïve to believe the mere invocation of the term 'festival participant' melts away all forms of hierarchy and distinction, it is a concept which appeared to be recognisable by many attending the festival, and there are a number of ways in which the audience can be viewed as festival participants. First, because a significant percentage of the fringe is made up of 'one-person shows', there is a greater sense that the performer is interacting with an audience, and that their response is crucial to overall success of the performance. The smallness and intimacy of the venues also creates a sense of involvement. Second, some of the shows actually involve members of the audience, either through dialogue or through them physically going up on stage to become part of the performance (see the 'theatre of the oppressed idea', Boal 1979). And third, as the survey questionnaire revealed, over a quarter of the sample had attended the festival previously, with the average number of years visited for this group standing at nearly three years, signalling that a group of festival 'regulars' probably have a fairly sophisticated knowledge of various returning artists' work. A number of these elements are found in the following quotation:

> Regarding regular audiences I can say that lots of the festival fans come back next years. I meet the same faces. Our stage is under the tent where audiences are near the stage. We have very close contact with them. They are almost participants of our show. (Czech male company director)

Not only performers appear to support this feeling of involvement and interaction. Because of its intimate size, opportunities for the audience to meet artists directly at the PFF are enhanced, as the following joint statement below implies:

> The generally small audiences allow for a strong rapport to develop, initially between audience members and then, quite often, with the performers. We have had many conversations with directors and actors as they get out, quite often leading to longer conversations later over a beer. (English couple, audience members, email communication)

While this direct contact may not be possible for all sections of the audience – for example language itself may be a barrier – and some audience elements, for example those in

professional and creative occupations might have greater ease of access to performers, participant observation revealed a healthy amount of interaction, at venues like the 'fringe club' (a bar/club advertised in the fringe brochure acting as a common meeting place).

Additionally, unlike conventional theatre-going where an audience goes specifically to consume one performance, fringe is all about taking in many different shows a day. The weaving together of a programme of seeing shows over the course of a week is, in itself, a participatory activity and produces the idea of having a 'festival experience'. Questionnaire data showed that over 60% of the audience planned to see between two–five shows, while another quarter planned to see six or more shows. The audience couple, quoted above for example, have been participating in the PFF for five years now, and regularly saw in excess of 90% of the shows each year, a feat which required expert timetabling.

Participant observation over a number of years also revealed some interesting cases of 'role change' of festival identity. For example, another English couple attended the festival over a number of years in completely different capacities – as separate performers, as a performer and a technician, and finally as just audience members. Another more significant transition concerned the experience of a young Czech student called Jurek (name changed). Passionate about theatre, his first contact with the PFF was as an audience member who took his query about whether the festival had a student rate of admission directly to the festival directors. The next year he became a front-of-house volunteer, and the following year he became the student-liaison volunteer when the festival adopted a student discount scheme on his advice. As he explained: 'I think it's a great opportunity for anyone interested about theatre – seeing the shows, meeting theatre people from around the world. There are a lot of experiences going on that would be hard to get otherwise' (Jurek, Student Liaison Volunteer). His changed role, not only increased his social networks, but it also helped instigate a crucial policy change for the festival.

The PFF 'Family': Social Bonding and Building Social Networks

The non-hierarchical and participatory nature of the PFF also appeared to result in the potential to create certain types of social bonding and encourage the widening of social networks, characteristic of alternative cultural forms. While there is some basic questionnaire survey material related to how participants rated the festival and what their social networks were in terms of who they attended the festival with, the bulk of evidence presented here is drawn from the participant observation and qualitative semi-structured interviews designed to capture these more 'experiential' dimensions, so generalisations should be treated with caution. Despite this caveat, in a discussion about her idea of the 'festival participant', Carole Wears, associate director of the PFF, identified some elements of how this bonding process occurred:

> Fringe is more than the sum of its parts; it's the sheer camaraderie as well as the work presented that is the joy of fringe. The brief exchange of hot tips passed on during the dash from venue to venue, the bond between actor, audience, producer, technician, press, sponsor, volunteer, well in to the night at the fringe club.

One of the ways in which bonding within fringes more generally is expressed is through notions of an artistic 'family' (Blankenship 2007) or 'communitas', which can be described as an temporally intense community spirit, solidarity, and togetherness (Hetherington

1997). In his description of the PFF, director Steven Gove invokes this notion of a 'fringe family':

> It's very much a social event, as much as it is an event where you can go and see a theatre show. Performers from each show often go and see each other's shows and chat in the bar afterward . . . People talk to performers in the queue for the next show, and the volunteers and the technical staff and directors and partners of performers, and it all becomes, some fringes use phrases like 'fringe family', and it enhances this concept that it's a real group thing and everyone is together.

The concept of family was also invoked by an English theatre company director whose show was performing at the fringe, both in relation to the organising structure and to how they related to their audience: 'The Fringe is more like family . . . and that is how we treat our audiences back home! If we have a good time, so do our audiences'.

Of course close-knit organisations, because of the type of emotional bonds they develop, can also be plagued by underlying hierarchies and conflicts (see Freeman 1973 and her discussion of feminist groups). These can and, in the case of the PFF, did result in annual conflicts between performers, workers/volunteers and directors, and even between directors of the festival themselves. Despite this, most problems were negotiated and overcome as evidenced by the return of various companies year in and year out, and the fact that all four directors are entering their 10th year heading up the festival. Others preferred the no less contentious phrase of community to describe festival relations. As one regular performer stated: 'Front of house have always been friendly, lovely people usually the same faces come back year after year, which adds to the feeling of community' (Scottish female performer). Despite, the difficulty of these rather subjective terms, they do give some expression as to how the more egalitarian organising structures of the fringe can create positive feelings/emotions of solidarity and togetherness across different groupings (Willems-Braun 1994).

Importantly, there were examples of how this bonding process cut across traditional 'artistic hierarchies' at the PFF, and included interactions between performers, venue managers, front of house volunteers and local Czech technicians. For example, the festival's technical director, Giles Burton, commented on how relations between visiting performers and young Czech technicians did and could develop:

> Overall PFF is particularly good at mixing up visiting artists and technicians due to the location, size and mix of people coming into town. Practical considerations make long term relationships between Czech technicians and visiting artists more difficult – although there have been several occasions when friendships, and more, have developed.

Another specific case observed concerned a developing relationship of mutual interest and affection between an English company and their Czech venue manager. As the English company director stated:

> The Czech venue manager was interested in our work in England and what our philosophy was in playing to our particular working class audiences. We in turn found that she was an interesting person and what she was doing at university [i.e. theatre studies].

Close working relationships between technicians, venue managers and volunteers, and the companies that they support, while created by the rather frenetic and chaotic nature of fringe production (limited rehearsal, quick staging of shows in succession, etc),

were often extended into these various groups exchanging cultural knowledge and socialising extensively post-show. These social and friendship ties can be seen to be particularly important for young Czech workers and artists keen to develop their skills and widen their social networks.

While the relations discussed here may have had temporal and spatial limitations, there was also some evidence of more sustained contacts, cultural exchanges and developing social networks. New technologies, like the internet, allowed groups that met in Prague to remain in contact from one year to the next, either through communicating through the PFF website or through networking sites such as My Space and Facebook, as the following quote reveals:

> We established a little bit of a fan group (audience) in Prague and we even found their Facebook group, so we keep in contact and saw them the next year we can back. (Canadian female playwright)

Technologies such as this allow sustained contact and interaction throughout the year, effectively reducing the impact of space and place, allowing artists and audiences to exchange knowledge and information and to more easily reconnect in the future.

While overseas performers and companies usually already had extensive social networks through links to other performers, embassies and funders, this was less true for Czech companies, performers, workers/volunteers who, however, often extended their networks through the PFF. For example, in the semi-structured interviews, a number of young Czech technicians and volunteers mentioned that the PFF had significantly widened their horizons. Part of this had to do with the social connections between the PFF and other fringes (e.g. two of the four PFF directors also work at the Edinburgh Fringe). So work and social networks formed at Prague Fringe, could also provide opportunities for employment and travel elsewhere, especially for young Czech workers and up-and-coming Czech companies, as the following two quotes testify:

> We constantly hear stories of people still in touch after six years when they first met in Prague . . . Its about networking, its about socialising, sharing ideas and developing your work . . . And there is opportunity for locals working at the fringe to increase their networks, possibilities for work abroad on different fringe projects, Edinburgh, that's happened before. (Steven Gove, PFF Director)

> Thanks to the Prague Fringe we went to Brighton Festival Fringe last year, because organizers from there saw us at the festival. We can go to a fortnightly UK tour this summer also thanks to the Prague Fringe because the manager from UK agency saw our show there. (Czech male director)

In summary, there is evidence that the different organisational structure of the PFF helped to produce not only a unique cultural product and experience for festival participants, but that it also aided different kinds of social, cultural and artistic relations and networks between a wide range of people working in theatre and their audiences.

Conclusion

This article began by echoing Quinn's (2005) point that the emphasis on festivals as markers of economic regeneration, means that we actually know very little about their wider social and cultural effects and benefits. Evidence presented on the PFF case redresses this situation somewhat, by arguing that it brings together a diverse mix of cultures, and seeks to create a more participatory and engaging tourist experience. Additionally, its more egalitarian organising structure produces varied kinds of work and social relations in the production of art and culture – particularly between various groups working within the festival, but also in the creation of different ideas about audience engagement, performer relations, and engagement with the local community (through the idea of the 'festival participant'). Finally, it has been argued that such relations can result in the creation of new opportunities for social bonding, not to mention aiding cultural networks, especially for young Czech workers and performers. Moving beyond the conventional boundaries of cultural tourism (Richards 1996), the PFF approximates many elements of what might be called 'alternative cultural tourism'.

It might be argued that it is difficult to extrapolate from such a small-scale case study. Additionally, even though small fringes like the PFF face the temptation of corporate sponsorship, it could be argued that the shortcomings of existing corporate-oriented models of urban cultural development are becoming all too obvious (e.g. through homogeneity/gentrification, see Chatterton & Hollands 2003; Harvey 1989), and that alternative cultural tourism examples do, in fact, fit better with the more progressive elements of popular 'creative city' discourses (Florida 2005). Additionally, they also square with increasing concerns over the way in which art and culture can engage populations, help create new identities and socially include local communities (Bailey *et al.* 2004). This is particularly important in even 'successful' cities like Prague where conventional forms of tourism can alienate local communities, by either excluding them or by prioritising the city for tourists only (Cooper 1998), and fierce debates have taken place over mainstream versus alternative 'public culture' (see Hollands 2009). As such, it might be argued that cities in general, need more examples of alternative cultural tourism if they are to diversify, sustain themselves, and continue to grow creatively and artistically.

NOTES

1.   Ironically, St John (2000) defines fringe festivals in particular as 'vertical arts organisations' on the basis that they are largely state arts funded, and hence are not independent, a point this paper takes issue with.

2. Although conceived as an 'audience survey' the questionnaire sample is in fact made of two sub-groups – i.e. those 'associated with the festival' (including volunteers, technicians, directors/producers and performers, 15% of the total) and 'audience only' (85% of the sample). However, as all of those in the 'associated with the festival' category actually attended performances, they can also be seen as 'audience' members. At the same time, as the paper goes on to argue, blurred distinctions between performers, workers and audiences also led to the idea that all groups could be seen somewhat as 'festival participants'. For purposes of clarity, when referring to the survey questionnaire data as a whole I will use the term audience survey, however when the data is referenced in term of disaggregated data I will refer to the two categories of 'associated with the festival' and 'audience only'.

3. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted, five during the 2007 PFF, and 15 during the year following the fringe. Of the latter, 14 interviews were conducted by email (email addresses were provided on questionnaires), as face-to-face interviews were impossible due to the dispersal of festival participants around the world post-fringe.

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