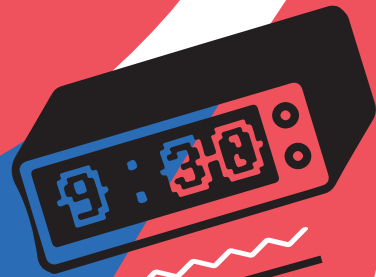


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THE DISTRICT'S EVOLVING CULTURE SCENE

WORDS BY COURTNEY SEXTON

The past 10 years have brought a wellspring of change to D.C. in almost every arena imaginable, and that change has been reflected in our city's evolving culture. 2020 has brought us to a precipice. Those who have been working behind the scenes to build "the scene" are wondering: with all of this growth, what will survive and what won't?

In 2005, Julianne Brienza co-founded Capital Fringe in a Columbia Heights group house. The next year, she and fellow members launched the first Capital Fringe Festival – an opportunity for performing artists to gather over the course of 10 days in theaters, vacant buildings and other unconventional "fringe" locations, to create 96 productions in a "stripped down,

unprocessed organic social environment."

"The whole reason I started the festival was to have a community hangout," says Brienza, who moved to D.C. 18 years ago. "It was so hard to meet people and it was all business-casual happy hours."

This July will mark the 15th anniversary of the Capital Fringe Festival, with more than 100 productions featuring more than 600 artists in Southwest D.C.

"It really gets down to freedom of expression. It's about taking someone who might have no experience, and letting them think maybe they can create something."

Despite her excitement to celebrate the achievement and

services Fringe has provided to artists over the years – including arts education and arts management workshops – Brienza can’t help but ask, “Does D.C. even need a Fringe Festival anymore?”

Brienza worries there may not be room for the gritty kind of bootstraps art that Fringe has championed.

“I have been thinking about how the city has really changed a lot in rolling waves,” she says.

“With the last wave came opportunities for a large number of people. But there are also missed opportunities for a large number of people. Which of those camps you fall into and how to move between them is becoming harder to navigate.”

Brienza points to D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities grants as an example. The process to obtain artistic funding is challenging, and the commission’s structure and services completely changed this year, and will likely do so again.

“The city is less livable and when the services are changing all the time, it makes it harder.”

She isn’t the only one to recognize the impact a dynamic populace and local economy has on the arts and on community building, in general.

Amy Morse has spent the past 12 years in D.C. working for the Environmental Defense Fund. She doesn’t think we are losing physical space for the arts; rather, that it is expanding and contracting, so we must work to find and curate it.

“You send out a signal and you start building a community,” says Morse, who last year co-founded PAKKE, a platform to curate and organize collaborative, multimedia arts and cultural events. “I basically had to design events for myself. I want to talk about art, shit that’s awesome, things people are reading – it’s about living a multisensory experience.”

Morse takes the helm of many creative happenings hosted at The Cheshire, a former auto garage in Adams Morgan that was transformed into an events space for local artists in 2018. There, creators and residents gather to learn and collaborate.

“When I build events, it’s around curiosity and it starts there,” Morse says. “It’s not about commercial space. I see new people over and over. You have more art on the walls, you have more communities coming together. It’s an organic connecting. If you’re curating a good show, you’re bringing different people in.”

Morse is the assistant curator to Shamini Selvaratnam, founder of Recipes for Resilience. She describes Selvaratnam as an inspired activist who “in the Trump era, looks at stories of resilience as being stories for all of us.” A portion of the proceeds from Morse’s Each for Equal Garage Art Party at The Cheshire on March 7 will go to local groups protecting refugee and migrant communities.

“There are vibrant rivers of secret lives in D.C. just below the surface,” Morse adds. “I think there are a lot of people here who want to change the world.”

Morse is among a set of contemporary curators, artists and cultural placemakers in D.C. who Teddy Rodger describes as “a rising tide of people hitting their stride [and] doing creative work in a new context.”

Rodger, the public engagement and events manager of International Arts and Artists (IA&A) at Hillyer, says that in addition to new cultural startups like PAKKE, it’s the individuals at “foundational D.C. cultural institutions [who] are doing some of the most important work available to us right now.”

Combined with the presence and perseverance of such individuals, Rodger believes gaining global perspective in the arts is key to developing the next stage of the city’s cultural identity.

The international community in D.C. is often taken for granted, and its mere presence doesn’t guarantee that it’s properly weaved into local culture. Creating art in and of D.C. is one thing but using said art to engage in conversation with people and cities across the world is another. Rodger asks of 2020, “How do we lean into something different from the comfort of the built-in ‘worldliness’ of D.C.?”

Rodger’s previous role as programs manager for Georgetown University’s Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics (The Lab) showed her a, “sad reality of our limited perspective” due to systems that keep artists from coming to the U.S. Like Brienza, Rodger agrees that circumstance, let alone finance, isn’t a barrier that should keep people from participating in the arts, at any level.

“They’re doing more interesting, creative avant-garde things elsewhere and they’re all talking to each other and we cut ourselves off from that fountain,” Rodger says. “Even in the nation’s capital, it’s really hard to bring artists from other countries here, so we lose out. Only the most privileged can leave and only the most privileged can exchange.”

The IA&A at Hillyer team is finding ways to engender a “more prismatic look at the way arts relate to our lives.” Through intentional curation and public programming, they are celebrating artists who make work in response to D.C., artists living in and around the District who don’t fall into traditional cultural categories, and those who harness a cross-cultural understanding of the arts.

Among this year’s roster, Hillyer will show work from Media and Arts for Peace artists Yasmine Dabbous and Manaf Azzam; classically trained dancer Lindsay Doyle; and figurative artist Lee Nowell-Wilson, whose work focuses on maternal creativity. The common thread is elevating voices that bring together broader understanding and peace.

“Very few people outside of the U.S. are in one lane and we’re really excited to have a space that is more reflective of the rest of the world, where the arts aren’t segregated – visual versus auditory. We have a center that is more aligned with the reality of practicing artwork that is more multidimensional.”

Rodger is hopeful for D.C.’s ability to be innovative in the face of change – climate, political and economic – especially when it comes to the arts.

“I would love to see the city rally behind those who are creating safe spaces [like Brienza and Morse], as well as spaces where people can be risky and have a reason for real criticism that isn’t competitive, but collaborative to the core,” she says, pointing to Amir Bowter and Homme DC at the 52 O St. Studios, The Inner Loop, Halcyon Arts Lab and A Seed is Growing, as exemplars.

This innovation will ultimately determine what shapes our culture, or what survives and what doesn’t. It’s clear that whatever does survive will be fueled by genuine curiosity and a desire to bring people together. Our city is being watched the world over and it’s imperative to be aware of that spotlight, especially at a local level, where we can shine it into corners worthy of exposure.

*For information about Capital Fringe, visit www.capitalfringe.org.
To learn more about PAKKE visit www.pakkesocial.com.
To read more about the cultural offerings by IA&A at the Hillyer visit www.athillyer.org.*