

PHANTOM PAIN AT THE EDINBURGH FRINGE FESTIVAL 2014

IATL FESTIVAL BURSARY AWARD REPORT

Between 11th-16th August 2014, fledgling theatre company Unhinged Creations performed our premier production *Phantom Pain*, a new play by Warwick Student John Servante, at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The production took place in the heart of the festival, near the Royal Mile, at TheSpace on North Bridge. The production had seven performances and was in aid of the mental health charity Mind, raising over £300 for the charity.

2014 was the largest Fringe Festival since it began in 1947 – in excess of three thousand productions were performed during the main festival! The Edinburgh Fringe is many things to many different demographics – theatre, comedy, dance, circus, performance poetry, solo works, music, cabaret and everything in between are presented to the public, peers, industry professionals and indeed the world.



PHANTOM PAIN

11th - 16th August | 9.40pm | Tickets: £7.50/£6.50

In aid of  **mind**
for better mental health

theSpace on North Bridge, Theatre 2
www.edfringe.com

theSPACE UK
www.thespaceuk.com

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Box Office 0131 510 2386
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Venue
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'When James suddenly dies, his friends are left devastated. Suspicious about his death, his ex-girlfriend Jenny sets out to discover the truth. But Jenny harbours a dark secret of her own. 'A strange, poignant, touching piece of theatre.' (www.nsd.org.uk). *Unhinged Creations and Freshblood Theatre present Phantom Pain, a new writing piece by John Servante. A play examining mental illness in our society; this dark drama explores our ideas about love, death and obsession. Phantom Pain is a play that asks questions about the nature of grief, as well as the destructive sides of friendships and relationships.'* (Synopsis, *Phantom Pain*)

Unhinged Creations was started with a singular mission: to produce socially responsible, didactic pieces of art exploring mental illness. According to a 2011 United Nations report, depression, schizophrenia and other mental illnesses are due to become the leading cause of disease burden, the world over, by 2030. Founded by John Servante, Unhinged Creations seeks to raise awareness about this impending pandemic. By doing this, we hope to promote tolerance, understanding, greater dialogue and better care for those who suffer with these invisible illnesses.

Phantom Pain was developed over the course of about a year. The origins of the piece lay in the experiences of writer and Unhinged Creations founder John Servante, during his time as a student. As an undergraduate he suffered heavily with depression and anxiety. After being threatened with expulsion by the University of Warwick (an action for which they would later apologize) John started a blog called *A Diary of a Depressed Student*. The blog, to date, has over 53,000 hits and became popular enough to feature in both a Guardian article and in an interview with BBC Radio Coventry and Warwickshire.

'I started the blog because I was having a miserable time at university and I was threatened with deregistration," Servante says. "I thought people needed to know how people like me were being treated, and I wanted to vent my frustrations in a way that might improve the social landscape for mentally ill students."

Servante was overwhelmed by the response from students around the world, who emailed him their stories of coping with depression at university. A year later, he decided to reveal his identity in the hope that it would give more students the courage to speak out.' (Michael Allen, *Guardian Online*)

Produced by Eimhin Walker and Directed by Laura Kurlansky, the team behind *Phantom Pain* all had some form of experience with mental illness. Thus, with a passionate and devoted behind-the-scenes team it was decided that the Edinburgh Fringe would be an appropriate venue to launch the play and the company. Whilst in Edinburgh we were able to invite industry professionals and peers to critique our work. In turn we were also able to experience other performances and open dialogues with new and established companies and social initiatives. The exposure of the Edinburgh Fringe was specifically chosen to launch the play as it was a sufficiently large platform for raising awareness as well as money for the mental health charity Mind.

As a young company, Edinburgh was a priceless learning experience to cast and crew alike. Though we had fully anticipated the utility of social media, we had completely underestimated the importance of the length of a show's run as well as the necessity of previews. Previews give one reviews and good reviews sell shows. Our reviews weren't available to us until nearly the end of our run, by which time we had struggled with ticket sales. Furthermore we realized the necessity for feedback - we had limited previews due to scheduling difficulties, but we learnt the hard way

and from talking to other companies that these are the most valuable and transformative periods in the development of a show.

“I don’t know what to do any more”, says Luke with his head in his hands. Neither do I. I’m too depressed. Probably in a good way; probably because I’ve been to play whose main purpose is to point out to a generally happy Edinburgh crowd that, for some people, life is tough. ★★★ (Georgina Wilson, *EdFringe Review*)

In many respects, the opening paragraph from this review condenses the general audience reaction.

The most important lesson we have learnt as a company after *Phantom Pain* is that it actually functioned more as a symptom of mental illness than a didactic piece for the public. To explain: writer John Servante liberally admits that James is based upon himself. However, James was not simply depressed – he was obnoxious, abusive towards his girlfriend and ostentatiously insane. That John’s writing (and Laura’s direction) produced such an extreme character is partly due to the self-loathing that John due to his depression and partly due to Laura’s desire to respectfully represent the struggles of the mentally ill. Subsequently, as a company we have learnt the necessity for greater objectivity: the fact that James became such an extreme character also diverted the plot from being about mental illness in to the territory of being about domestic abuse. At one point in the performance script James threatens Jenny, saying that he will commit suicide because she is not being an obedient lover. Whilst the subject of domestic abuse is undoubtedly a worthy subject for a play, to intermingle this with mental illness is an issue too far.

‘The profound and heartbreaking end rescues the slow start, but a few changes in script and more thorough characterisation in places could have make quite a difference overall. Although this may not be the most succinct production, by the end the characters’ struggles do feel real.’ ★★★ (Lottie Scaramanga, *Broadway Baby*)

The cast could have definitely used the script to greater effect, as it gives the opportunity for some heart-warming and funny student-esque interactions. Everyone involved in this performance has huge potential, and should be commended for the great job they are doing in bringing issues of mental health, particularly among students, to light. They are working alongside mental health charity Mind, and the show is an eye-opening experience for those who do not have any knowledge or experience of mental health issues or abuse, and an emotional one for those who do. Even if performance-wise it could have been stronger, *Phantom Pain* is worth going to see because of the cause it is supporting. (Emily Brearly-Bayliss, *EFR*)

Perhaps our best feedback came from theatre writer, producer and director Chris Thorpe, who encouraged us with the words “you’re dealing with some huge issues there... and making no judgments, which is... Yeah, whatever you do, keep going!”

To call Edinburgh an unqualified success would be disingenuous. But what we learnt is beyond invaluable to Unhinged Creations as both a social enterprise and an artistic one. It has strengthened our resolve and given us incredible insights about the way forward. Mental illness isn’t due to go away anytime soon, in fact it’s due to get worse. Unhinged Creations isn’t due to go away anytime soon either – we have made our first steps towards creating didactic, safe, entertaining spaces for both sufferers of mental illness and those fortunate enough to be mentally well.