

Edinburgh Fringe: Psychological impact of modern technology on working class communities

by [Larry Bridwell](#)

The anxieties of 21st century working-class lives has become a major theme of theater. I saw two emotionally powerful plays at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the world's largest arts festival. You can see such productions next August 4 to 28, 2017, when Edinburgh hosts the Fringe's 70th anniversary.



“Diary of a Madman” Traverse Theatre

Written by Al Smith and directed by Christopher Haydon.

“Diary of a Madman” has an innocent beginning when Matthew White (Guy Clark), a graduate engineering student at the University of Edinburgh, appears at the painting workshop of Pop Sheeran (Liam Brennan) to pursue a summer apprenticeship. Matthew is studying paint technology which could be used in the annual painting of the historic Forth Rail Bridge which has been the economic and psychological anchor of the Sheeran household.

After working together for a few days, Sheeran invites Matthew, a polite graduate of the prestigious Harrow school and son of a highly successful software programmer, to live at his house. Interactions between his daughter Sophie (Louise McMenemy) and her close friend, Mel (Lois Chimimba) humorously detail their shift from their parents' traditional values to contemporary and feminist lifestyles. The daughter, with an active social life among her high school peers, sees the contrast of her working-class lifestyle with that of the elite heritage of Matthew.

These unsettling 21st century changes cause Pop Sheeran to retreat into a whirlwind of Scottish Nationalist reveries. One character, explaining global corporate power, tells him, “Nobody takes a country by force, Pop. They come in and they reshape what you think you know.” Pop replies, “Single men don't stand up to corporations; that only falls to knights and thanes.”

During his psychological unraveling, Pop puts on a custom-designed military costume and recites Scottish nationalist poems, at times incoherently. His wife, Mavra Sheeran (Deborah Arnott) eventually nourishes the family back to some stability, and the daughter goes to college to pursue a modern life. The production values, the acting and the creativity of the script are mesmerizing as they present compellingly the psychological stresses of the 21st century. It justly won the 2016 Stage Edinburgh Award.



The social cleavage between college graduates and citizens with limited education surfaced dramatically in the British political consciousness in 2016 when working class communities who had historically voted for left-wing parties, suddenly and overwhelmingly voted for Brexit and against modern globalization as represented by the European Union. The establishment and intelligentsia were psychologically stunned.

In the United States, the disruption of working class lives by technology and globalization was echoed in the political success of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in attracting working class voters. Channeling the anti-establishment reverie of Pop, Trump projected the image of an American warrior protecting his soldiers against the evils of globalization, when he dramatically said that he would force a profitable Carrier air conditioner factory to stay open in Ohio instead of moving to Mexico, while the elitist Hillary Clinton, meeting with her rich contributors, described half of Trump's supporters as a "basket of deplorables".



"Trainspotting"

Written by Harry Gibson and adapted from the novel by Irvine Welsh and the film by Danny Boyle; directed by Adam Spreadbury-Maher and Greg Esplin.

The sociological ripple effects of economic changes on working class lives have often led to mental stress and drug epidemics. This was vividly portrayed in what has become an annual tradition at the Fringe, the yearly performance of the recent classic, "Trainspotting." This year's rendition was staged in a small, dark basement with the audience completely surrounding the stage. The performance was gritty, the actors were energetic and the full tragedy and overwhelming degradation of drug addiction was unnervingly conveyed.

Witnessing this play can easily produce a fervent desire never to get involved with narcotics.

The annual performance of "Trainspotting" at the Fringe enables young actors to get valuable acting experience. Viewing the play has become a Fringe rite of passage for those in the theatrical community to directly experience one of its most emotionally powerful plays.

In the United States, recent studies show an alarming deterioration in the physical health of working class communities since 2000, due to alcohol related illnesses and the deaths of alienated young people from drugs.



The Fringe festival had many plays addressing the 21st century sociological dynamics of economic and technological changes. American theater should emulate the Edinburgh Fringe and create venues providing creative workshops for playwrights, actors and other participants in the theater community to explore these social forces.

If you go

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe occurs for three weeks every August. With 30,000 performances of over 3,000 productions of drama, musical, and dance events, this is a magical experience for visitors in a compact city filled with history and events in easy walking distance. A wide range of tasty, reasonably priced food is available, frequently right next to the theaters.

Also, Edinburgh has an excellent bus system. The only drawback is the high cost of lodging during the Fringe month. There are bed & breakfasts and apartments to share as well as hotels. It is best to book accommodations several months ahead.

[Edinburgh Festival Fringe](#)