

## Four centuries of struggle for freedom at Edinburgh Festival Fringe

by [Larry Bridwell](#)

If you care about theater and arts, you need to put the Edinburgh Festival Fringe on your travel plans. Every August, that Scottish city hosts the world's largest arts festival. The next, August 4 to 28, 2017, is its 70th anniversary.

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.

This past August, there was a fascinating collection of plays dealing with the history of freedom since the American and French Revolutions.



### **“A Common Man: The Bridge that Tom Built”**

Written and portrayed by Dominic Allen, directed by Joe Hufton.

Thomas Paine, an 18th century political activist, risked his life for freedom in Britain, the United States and France. His prominence stemmed from his oratory and writings, including the famous pamphlet “Common Sense,” which detailed the absurdity of monarchies and aristocratic positions acquired by birth. Directed by Joe Hufton, Allen vividly encapsulates the life of an important historical figure in an intimate staging where the

audience believes it is witnessing key episodes in the American and French Revolutions.

Paine's story starts in his birthplace, England, where he has an encounter with the American revolutionary Benjamin Franklin. After hearing Paine argue for political change in London, Franklin persuades him to go to Philadelphia. After the success of the American Revolution, Paine returns to England and speaks against King George III. These activities lead to an arrest warrant and his narrow escape to France. Allen then shows us Paine's political activism in Paris, where he is imprisoned during the French Revolution and scheduled for execution before his sudden release. Paine returns to the United States, and his radicalism leads to unwelcomed criticism of George Washington.



Thomas Paine is most famous for his writings, including the classic phrase, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” Few realize how his words were inspired by a life-long struggle for freedom infused by the powerful revolutionary spirit that Allen brilliantly captured.



### **“Glasgow Girls”**

Book by David Greig, conceived for the stage and directed by Cora Bissett.

The international dimensions of the pursuit of freedom have frequently involved migration to Europe, often with people seeking political asylum. “Glasgow Girls,” based on a true story, features a group of high school girls who band together when one of them is threatened with deportation.

They launch a successful media campaign which reaches the Scottish Parliament and wins a victory for permanent residence for the family about to be deported. This political success won the Scottish Campaign of the Year Award in 2005.

The captivating play, featuring snazzy musical numbers energetically performed by teenagers, shows how immigrants who were born in Africa and the Middle East, assimilate in Scotland and become proud of their Glasgow community.

### **“Get It While You Can”**

Choreographed by David P. France. The Festival Fringe also features dance productions including the [Dance-Forms](#) International Choreographers’ Showcase. The dynamics of freedom was expressed in dances choreographed by David P. France, who had a dance studio in Harlem before moving to Europe. Jada Rose Cunningham beautifully and solemnly expresses the desire for freedom to “Love Theme from Spartacus” sung by the black soul singer, Terry Callier. The lyrics included:



“Can it be, do you hear  
A new freedom song is ringing  
No more dark, no more fear  
There’s a new day that is free”

For the second dance segment, Cunningham is joined by the choreographer as they perform an energetically free, exquisite jazz dance to “Hippies On A Corner” by Joe Sample. The pairing of the two dance segments artistically communicates how the struggle for freedom can lead to great creativity.

### “Angel”

Written by Henry Naylor; directed by Michael Cabot.



The most poignant of the 21st century struggles for freedom is the advancement of women’s rights in the midst of violent conflicts in the Middle East. “Angel” describes the childhood and military life of a female soldier in Syria and won a 2016 The Scotsman Fringe First Award.

The play is inspired by the struggle of the Kurdish people to maintain their historic communities against the expansionist Islamic caliphate, ISIS, and focuses on dramatic events in the Syrian town of

Kobane where female fighters mobilized to eventually repel the ISIS invaders.

“Angel” is based on the history of a fighter named Rehana, who as a sniper is reported to have killed one hundred ISIS fighters. Filipa Bragança, the sole actor, portrays conversations with several characters, brilliantly conveying their different accents. Her performance is intense as she moves from her life as the teenage daughter of a farmer, to an aspiring pacifist law student, and finally a reluctant soldier.

“Angel,” is the third in a series of plays by Naylor about violence in Islamic countries. The first, “The Collector,” focused on the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the ripple effects of events at American-run prisons, including the notorious Abu Graib. The second, “Echoes,” explored the early 20th-century history of the British in Afghanistan via the lives of two women. All of these plays had their significant first showings in Edinburgh, and their success led to award-winning productions in England and Australia. “Echoes” was performed at 59E59 Theaters in New York.



The ability of writers and actors to present plays at the Festival Fringe and get a wide range of reviews and feedback is a major contribution to world theater.

**If you go**

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. It is best to plan several months ahead to book accommodations.

[Edinburgh Festival Fringe](#)