

# Top Ten Lessons Learned From My Fringe Festival Tour (2024)

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Playwright and Performer of “Rethinking Good Intentions”

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHlia6xRzLM>

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## **“Remember why you’re doing this”:**

This sage advice was shared with me by a theatrical guru at the Guelph Fringe Festival. My play “Rethinking Good Intentions” opens with a taped recording of Mende health education songs being sung by some of the students I taught in Sierra Leone. I originally added this music to my play to create authentic context for the audience. These songs have now become my anchoring point before I go onstage. The music reminds me of my motivation to write, memorize, and perform the play. It brings to life the talented community health nursing students I worked with in Sierra Leone 45 years ago. Their voices propel my inner vibe.

## **Add dimension to your performance:**

If you’re going to perform virtually, consider using open broadcasting software (OBS). It adds dimension to your performance with the addition of pictures/scenes and music/sounds. Using OBS for my virtual performance helped me enhance plans for my on-stage, in-person performance.

## **Create opportunities to workshop your play:**

It’s not hard to find opportunities to perform. Consider setting up a small theatre space in your house where you can hold indoor concerts for a few people at a time. Offer to perform at your public library. Host a performance event that can be auctioned off to fund-raise for a cause. Invite friends and colleagues to come up with performance options. Success breeds success and builds your confidence as a performer.

## **Make the most of workshopping your play:**

Begin workshopping your play well in advance of fringe festivals. Try out your performance with a variety of audiences. Be sure to use a feedback form, which includes open-ended questions. Use this input to summarize “what audiences are saying” about the play and to make adjustments. Use workshops to get input on things like the use of props and costume changes.

Workshop different scenarios that you think might be challenging. For example, I was concerned about having the fortitude to do two performances in a single day. I purposefully workshopped this – I could do it.

**It takes a team:**

Start with a mentor who has fringe festival performance experience. My mentor (Flora Le) provided essential guidance on how to shift from page to stage (i.e. writing to performing), how and where to apply for fringe festivals, how to optimize my use of social media, and when and why she thought I was ready to perform. She was a genuine confidence-builder.

Tech support is essential, especially to get the sound right. Lighting is important too, but technical lighting options for some fringe festival venues are limited. Plan for bare-bones lighting and sound as well as something more sophisticated. You'll likely have a two-hour window for the initial tech load-up when any adjustments to your lighting and sound cues must be sorted. Prepare for tech load-up with a fully-cued script ready for your tech person.

Even a few hours with a dramaturg can generate ideas on how to better use the stage and your body (especially for a neophyte performance-artist like me). Doing this on a theatrical stage enhances the time spent.

**Trust the imagination of audiences:**

Spend time with young children to be reminded of how easily imaginations can be sparked. Time with my four-year-old grandson reinforced my trust in the imagination of audiences. Less may be more when you want to tap people's imagination. That goes for sets, props, and costume changes.

**Adopt a work-in-progress approach:**

Fringe festival audiences are encouraging and forgiving. I gave each performance my best but I considered my play to be a work-in-progress. This reinforced a mindset of learning from the reactions of each audience and reviewing what could offset my glitches and stumbles. A learn-as-you-go frame of reference reduced my self-inflicted pressure and helped me improve on each performance. I used the morning after each performance to find a place in nature where I could consider performance improvements. Journaling helped too, with bigger learnings emerging from that process, including those reflected in this top ten list.

**Spring all the senses:**

Spring all the senses of the audience through words, intonation, gestures, and movements. Audiences identified my walk through a swamp "muck is squishing through my toes", my description of women toiling in smoking shacks for fish "pungent smoke stung my eyes", and my story about sitting with granny midwives "our bums sank into the prickly straw mattress, thighs touching" as moments they experienced somatically.

**Market to get bums on seats:**

Marketing is essential to get bums on seats at Fringe Festivals. This requires a presence on social media and a lead-up plan. Images and photos are important for social media posts. Take lots of photos and ask those photographed for permission to post on-line. Provide a behind-the-scenes look at staging and performance. Social media matters but so do your direct messages to friends and colleagues. The only way to skirt around and break through the social media algorithms is with direct messaging.

**Draw inspiration from other artists:**

Raise your writing and performing bar through the inspirational artistry of others. Just as I read the works of talented writers to try and enhance and hone my writing skills, I watch the artistry of theatrical pros to help me refine my script and boost my performance. I fit in visits to see live theatre at the Stratford Festival and the Thousand Islands Playhouse before and after my Fringe Festival tour in Ontario. I found those performances energizing.

There are many on the fringe circuit with years of experience as artists. Opportunities to speak and learn from these artists was a highlight of my participation in fringe festivals. Have your questions at the ready. Be prepared to share what you have learned along the way.