

Stephanie Vlahos

American [IN]TENT

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*The American [in]Tent is a collective of artists interested in speaking to the American narrative who honour the diversity and positive inclusion while freely exploring everything that ails them. In the first of our Edinburgh Fringe coverage for the 2021 festival we spoke with founder **Stephanie Vlahos** about American [In]Tend and what we can expect.*

Hi Stephanie, thank you for talking to TNC, how have you been keeping during these strange Covid times?

Thank you for having me!

My story is kooky. I've been a stranger in a strange land going through a pandemic.

I grew up on the East Coast and have lived in Los Angeles for a number of years, and then, I moved to Edinburgh, U.K. not long before Covid hit. I clearly remember the last show I saw at the Edinburgh Festival Theatre which was Nixon in China, late February. Who knew? The strange part of it for me has been acclimating (or acclimatising per British English) when there's little opportunity to socialise or even interact in the most basic ways. I also miss seeing people's expressions, it is so much easier to break barriers when you see someone smile.

I have spent my time writing. I wrote a novel which I am adapting to podcast as a more dramatic offering. It's kept me out of trouble and thriving in my imagination, which has always been key to my survival.

Have you been inspired to take on any new creative opportunities?

Emphatically, yes. Having mentored young artists, directed, and sung for years, I have a wonderful family of artist friends, but it's been tough-going for artists – a lot of depression within frustration. When I asked one friend (a wonderful actor, originally from Edinburgh but more American, at this point) if he might read a poem for one of our projects, he said, Stephanie, I'm not sure I have the wherewithal to do one more Zoom or speak into my iPhone. The loneliness of it is in many ways daunting.



Creative voices have been slightly stifled, and, for many of us, we're accustomed to the social aspect of what we do.

Although I appreciate the Zoom productions of plays, etc, there's still something unreal and not palpable in those performances.

I got hooked on the reach of Spoken Word via podcast platforms as a place where our voices can reach into people's imaginations with an intimacy and impact not unlike theatre. We call it breaking the fourth wall. Orson Welles often spoke of radio performance in that manner. So, I took that concept as inspiration and applied it to creating a platform for artists to spin stories via podcast.

How does it feel to be able to bring American [In]tent to Edinburgh Fringe, how did this project come about?

American (in)Tent was cobbled together via two significant ideas: one, to represent our ailing American narrative positively and honestly through culturally diverse and engaging stories told by American artists in podcast; and, two, to offer a more substantial presence for Americans at the Fringe while valuing travel sustainability. We're a 24-month process from the art of the possible to the art of the probable.

"The experience is a mad rush when you're at the Fringe, and certainly anecdotal, but it's a tough go for Americans."

Will this be your first time presenting shows at Edinburgh Fringe?

I have formerly presented two shows at the Fringe in 2016 and 2018. Both received 5-stars, but, my heavens, it was a climb getting to the Festival. Those of us who have experienced the Fringe have our own reflections on the experience. I think it's a wonderful festival with opportunity if you understand how to avail yourself of it.

However, bottom line, most creative Americans haven't the wherewithal to get there, stay there, eat there, pay all the various costs for being at the Fringe, and then be told you're lucky if you have audiences of as many as two. In the meantime, you're jet-lagged and running around in your off-time trying to promote your gig. For Americans, it's a big reach.

I spent my first "out" at the Fringe (where I brought over 35 teens to perform the opera *Carmen* as a metaphor for the minefield of the American high school

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experience) obsessing over blue tack. It's a tape you get in the U.K. and the only tape permitted in slapping up posters or flyers around the city! The venue manager reiterated the importance like it was a mantra. The experience is a mad rush when you're at the Fringe, and certainly anecdotal, but it's a tough go for Americans. I thought it would be interesting to explore a more user-friendly way of getting motivated American creatives out here.

What makes American Spoken Word so unique?

Well, within the context of the American (in)Tent, these are American stories. They are stories about diversity, which, in my estimation is what makes America great, sadly, it seems a whole lot of Americans fail to recognise the bygone value of the melting pot. These are stories about reflecting on what we've gone through and trying to sort it out through humour, drama, and candour.

I believe all the voices in the "Tent" offer unique journeys into perspectives on America.

Our stories are told dramatically, and, what I am most excited about is, many of the stories address (dramatically) the process of creation. There are so many great stories on the road to the final work. We represent both prequel, talkback, exploration, dramatic work, all in one grab.

We live in a visual world, but the truth is, we need to embrace the value of words, listen, and stop throwing away meaning. Otherwise, we allow false statements and political rhetoric to wash over us.

Can you tell me about how American [In]tent came about & what we can expect from your roster of events this Edfringe?

They vary from a story about a Black American growing up in Mississippi in the 70's as a fatherless child, to a sound artist spinning a sonic story about her Filipino grandmother's voice, to a well-known operatic bass (he's amazing) who talks about his life and the flex of responding to all sides and genders of his personality, to a culinary anthropologist who has introduced Native American cuisine and is fully engaged in the *Native American Food Sovereignty* movement, to a therapist talking about the positive side of narcissism, to a well-known performance artist creatively winding a colourful myth via absurdity, science fiction, and history about the simultaneous breakdowns in America due to Covid and Trump, to a *Cowboy Balladier* singing sad songs about our contemporary American world, to a bunch of woman sharing songs from the American Civil Rights Movement and talking about being Black American women and managing the strain of prejudice and injustice



that persists in American society, to a jazz opera about baseball, to a hip hop take on an important and far-seeing **Robert Burns** poem, to a story about an accidental astronaut flying to Mars to get some much-needed perspective. We also have an incubator project as well an in-school project I call *Reach In, Don't Outreach*—this year's offering is a short play based on the *Lost Boys* from *Peter Pan*.

What has been the biggest challenge you've faced to bring American [In]tent to the virtual stage?

Actually, I've created a little podcast devoted to the process of making any kind of theatre (be it in the gallery, on the stage, on the page) virtual on our website *WeAreVocal*.

To the point, Spoken Word is the only form that manages to bring the intimacy of the voice up close and personal. Our scenes are set in the unique minds of our listeners, our *mise-en-scène*, their imaginations.

Key to this, is for the storyteller to speak to an audience of one.

For those of us who are accustomed to reaching across the footlights and using our bodies to express our feelings, that can be tough, but it can be managed out through the gesture of words. I believe that exploring works through the Spoken Word, not only challenges and engages the listener in a unique ways, but it also offers a window onto the artist's process that can assist the artist's process as a different kind of succinct creative dialogue.

The biggest challenge is convincing artists that telling stories is at the basis of what they do.

Have you always had a passion for storytelling?

Yes. I began as a singer, and sang because I loved the stories songs told. There are still some songs that I can't even get through because their story makes me cry. My father was a screenwriter for television and a poet, so the written word and spoken word was always part of my DNA. Where I live in Edinburgh, we've been able to sit out in our little front city-yard and chat to passers-by. I love it because I am amazed by their stories. Everyone has a story to tell. The craft is in how you tell it.

Do you have any advice or tips for someone interested in storytelling or spoken word?

I think I've nearly covered it, but I'll refer to a friend I'm hoping will join us in the "Tent" this year. He was a well-known club impresario in LA as well as a visual artist. When I asked him to speak to what he created and why he had a passion for it, its relevance to art-making and the American dialogue, he said, "it's interesting, but it's not interesting, I mean, it's not dramatic." And then, he paused for a moment in the midst of struggling with this concept and opportunity I had offered him, and then he said, "Actually, I understand what you want, you want me to tell a bedtime story."

I think he nailed it.

And finally, what do you want audiences will take away from American [In]tent?

Well, I hope they will be engaged by all the perspectives coming out of America from artists, not people railing on Twitter. I hope that audiences will appreciate the creative and carefully crafted stories, ones that honour our many of the people in our country but also aren't afraid of taking a hard look at what we are and from where we've come. I hope our audiences will be moved, and, moreover, I hope they will want to hear more, and, eventually be so inclined to see us when we perform in Edinburgh live at the Edinburgh Festival in 2022.