Scotland quietly boasts some of the world’s most captivating landscapes with its shimmering lochs, vivid green dunes and winding roads that beguile travellers with tales of antiquity around every bend. But there is more to this land than its history and verdant scenery. In fact, for those who are passionate about the arts there is a special cluster of jewels in the Scottish crown that blaze brighter than any other – and the queenly capital knows only too well it’s magnetism.

The Edinburgh Fringe in particular has been a beacon for artists across the globe for almost 70 years and epitomises opportunities for those in all forms of artistic expression. In 2015 there were 50,459 performances of 3,314 shows in 313 venues. Staged across the city and its tributaries the deluge of people, performances and pressures in a tiny space are nothing short of mind boggling.

Sacha Copland, Artistic Director of Java Dance Company couldn’t agree more. The experience, she says, recalling their 2014 tour “was a medley of all things amazing and scary, revealing and high-risk, exciting and mad – and to top it all a lot of work!” But taking the tremendously successful physical dance comedy *Back of the Bus* on tour to Edinburgh was a strategic move. “I would definitely recommend taking a show first to Australia,” she adds, “The Adelaide Fringe is a real test and helps you to understand the market and whether Edinburgh is a good plan, it also isn’t as expensive so the risk is not as high.”

In fact testing the market before taking a show to Edinburgh is almost always guaranteed to offer better results. But that alone is not guaranteed to make it all smooth sailing.
Similarly, a collective effort was also put in by the team that brought us K’Rd Strip: A Place to Stand. “Showcasing Māori culture from a queer angle with non-traditional themes was an opportunity that allowed for the whole cast of K’Rd Strip to get in there and embrace the opportunity to share our story with everyone,” says Taane Mete who along with Taiaroa Royal took Okareka’s sell out show to the 2015 Fringe.

Shows get taken on tour but stories travel. More often than not shows are changed, truncated even and not always to their advantage – it was a challenge that the Okareka team were fully prepared to embrace.

“Our priority was to take the show abroad and test what it would look like out of a New Zealand context,” says Mete, “It’s the old thing of having to receive good reviews overseas to make New Zealanders appreciate who we are as a company. Audiences were amazed how we intertwined haka, song, dance, drag and Kiwi music into our story and reaching and connecting on the world stage is important for us as we continue to take our work internationally.”

Reflecting back on Edinburgh (and my own experience of utter and complete immersion as a stage critic and arts journalist during the 2014 Festival) it is increasingly evident that the city is a beast. One that yawns and stretches with potential yet equally, if not adamantly, it expects nothing less than an unwavering commitment and top notch quality.

Lemi Ponifasio’s whose work I AM was shown in the Edinburgh International Festival perhaps sums it up best for us as New Zealand artists: “We must make work for those who do not love what we make, because we have to stay true to our story, its’ part of our existence. It’s not about power [but] about us determining how to exist with each other without exercising violence. The world is beautiful, it is our culture that we need to reform.”

Ultimately, it’s not about simply taking our work to a festival to get a few rave reviews. The real reason we make work (no matter where it goes) is to create intimacy with our audiences and our communities, and in doing so, we can be part of a much bigger social and cultural transformation.

Let’s dance back to that.

Locally renowned choreographer Mary Jane O’Reilly’s neo-burlesque show In Flagrante is a well-known favourite in NZ. Over the years her work has gathered a faithful audience but when taking her show over to Edinburgh in 2013 the co-founder of Limbs Dance Company recalls that it wasn’t just content that counted when it came to competing for audiences.

“The group performing before us were a popular comedy act and they were always running late,” she laughs, “Our 10.30pm slot was good but it was always a rush to bump-in and bump out because the next act would be waiting.”

Logistical mayhem aside (often attributed to a lack of informed research, financial knowledge and an absence of savvy producers) there are other factors that continued to attract New Zealanders across the seas. For many years Edinburgh, considered far superior in scale and kudos to the Australian market, was often seen a rite of passage.

However, that sentiment is slowly, but almost certainly changing. Founder of Black Grace Neil Ieremia had never been to Edinburgh before 2014 and believes that individual artists and companies need to make this decision without pressure of what others have or have not done.

“I must admit I’ve resisted the urge for many years,” says Ieremia, “Lots of close friends and colleagues have wanted me to come but I hadn’t seen the point to be honest – but then again I like doing things in my own time.”

“Choosing to come to the Fringe was actually an opportunity for them [the company] to learn their craft, have some professional development, get a chance to hand out flyers and advertise their work, really hustle – but also get back to their roots of why we do what we do.”

1 Please note Dione’s conversation with Neil Ieremia took place in Edinburgh in 2014 and was first published in The Big Idea https://www.thebigidea.nz/stories/in-his-own-time