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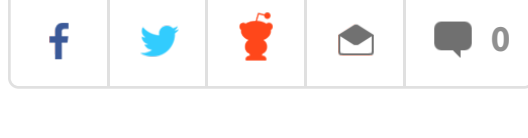
## Arts

### ARTS FEATURES

## With lockdown, Vancouver Fringe Fest was formed from afar

New executive director Rohit Chokhani has created a pandemic-ready event from the other side of the planet

by Janet Smith on September 9th, 2020 at 9:00 PM



While working from his parents' home in Mumbai, Rohit Chokhani found ways to realize some of his long-term plans for the Fringe Festival, even in the face of COVID-19.

RAYMOND KAM

It speaks to these bizarre times that the Vancouver Fringe Festival's new executive director should have found himself running the annual theatre event from 12,243 kilometres away.

The unique situation called for a personal pivot as dramatic as the one being made at the Fringe itself, as the fest moves to a staggered series of performances—indoors, outdoors, and live-streamed—throughout the fall.

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Vancouver Fringe Festival tip sheet

Back in February, Vancouver theatre artist, producer, and cultural leader Rohit Chokhani decided to visit his elderly parents in Mumbai before he dove into his new position. India went into full lockdown in March, and until recently he'd been stuck there. In the last few weeks he's watched his populous home nation's COVID-19 numbers skyrocket.

"One sixth of the world lives here and numbers are high, but I've felt like I've been safe in my parents' home," he told the *Straight* philosophically over What's App when he was still quarantined in India. "But it's been difficult for the folks out there on the street.

"Once I started in the job, I had this huge sense of disconnect between being here and majority of my team being in Canada," he admitted. "I am born and raised in India, but I've been gone for two decades, so my entire social life and professional life was in Canada."

Still, like the rest of the world, Chokhani learned to adapt—starting with his sleep patterns. Mumbai sits 12-and-a-half hours ahead of Vancouver.

"In India, my work day starts at 9 p.m. and I go to 3 or 4 a.m.," he said. "I sleep from 4 to 8 and then take more calls. I sleep again for four hours in the afternoon."

### Flexibility was essential

The Fringe team had some months to prepare for the new pandemic reality, so it started with its artists, sending out surveys to find out how they wanted to proceed—acknowledging that any troupes travelling long distances internationally or nationally were off the table.

"It was clear we were not going to find a one-size-fits-all solution," said Chokhani, whose diverse credits include heading up the Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts, codirecting an Indian-set *All's Well That Ends Well* at Bard on the Beach, and directing Pick of the Fringe award-winner *Bombay Black*.

"There were artists who were not wanting or comfortable with live performance. What we also heard was there were significant concerns about productions that were [created to be] live and how significantly they'd have to be translating that over to the digital realm."

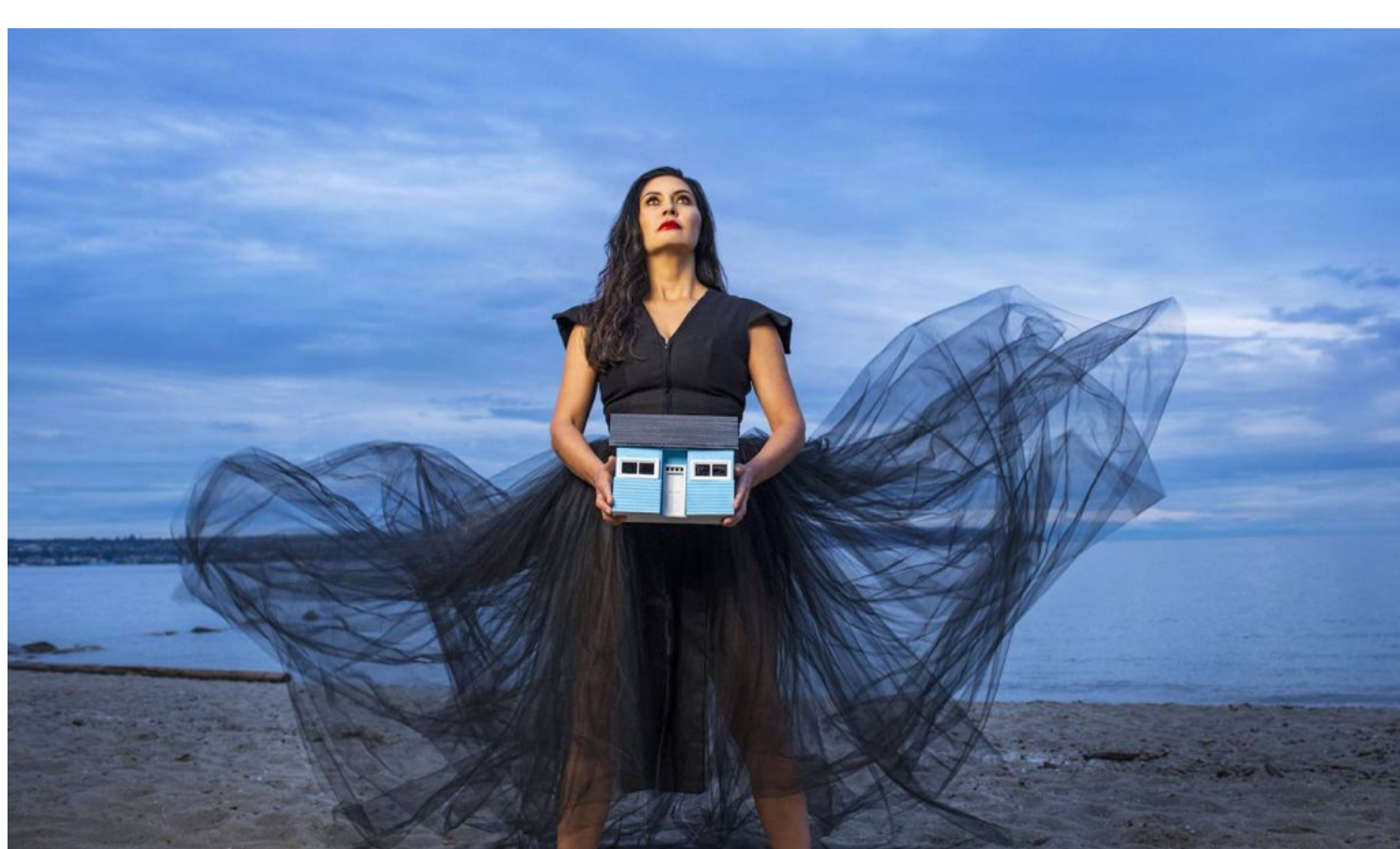
The manifold solution is a far cry from last year's celebration, which hosted more than 700 performances around town by more

than 90 artists over 11 days.

This year, the Fringe allows artists to withdraw applications and get a refund, and reduces fees for those who want to take part in a few concentrated series over the autumn. Events are going to happen live in several limited-audience indoor and outdoor venues, and digital content will be largely offered for workshops and gatherings.

The first block of programming takes place from Thursday (September 10) to September 20 on Granville Island at Performance Works, the Picnic Pavilion, and the Yellow Crane Pad. Further intimate programming will be announced for blocks running October 1 to 10, October 29 to November 8, and November 26 through December 6.

"We managed to do certain things I would have done even pre-COVID—long-term visionary ideas," Chokhani said.



Quelema Sparrow, seen above in this year's *Skymorn: A Land Reclamation Odyssey*, will be part of a curated series of staged readings at this year's Fringe fest.

EMILY COOPER

### An inclusive Fringe

One of those pillars—equity, diversity, and inclusion—has been a mandate the Fringe has been working aggressively toward since about 2017. Though it also encompasses structural changes at the organization, it plays out immediately in 2020 Fringe programming such as Advance Theatre: New Works by Diverse Women.

The staged readings curated by Métis, Cree, and Haudenosaunee artist Tai Amy Grauman feature pieces by Quelema Sparrow, Yvonne Wallace, and Lisa C. Ravensbergen.

"I've been an artist at the Fringe and I was already a part of the conversation as a community representative and consultant, so these lenses give me a certain understanding of the festival," said Chokhani of the diversity push. "We want to include these folks and invite them in, but also we want to do it right. The last thing we want is folks who are marginalized to come here and not have a good experience."

He's also committed to turning the Fringe into even more of an incubator for new work than it already is: "If a show is successful at the Fringe, what happens to get it into another city, what does the second show look like?"

For the present moment, however, the intricacies of health and safety measures may pose the biggest logistical leaps. The shows' limited capacity will meet the guidelines in the B.C. Restart Plan for patrons, volunteers, and artists.

"It's been quite a ride," Chokhani reflected. "Of course, I'm saddened by the impact and deaths. But I feel like there's an opportunity for change in all this. And the amount of love and support from volunteers and donors and community is really heartwarming."

The **Vancouver Fringe Festival** runs at various Granville Island venues and online from Thursday (September 10) to September 20, October 1 to 10, October 29 to November 8, and November 26 through December 6.

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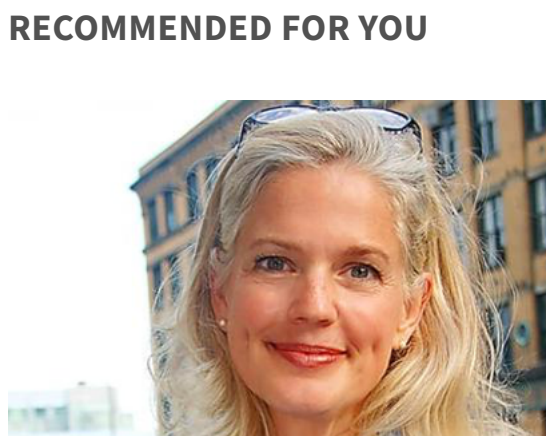
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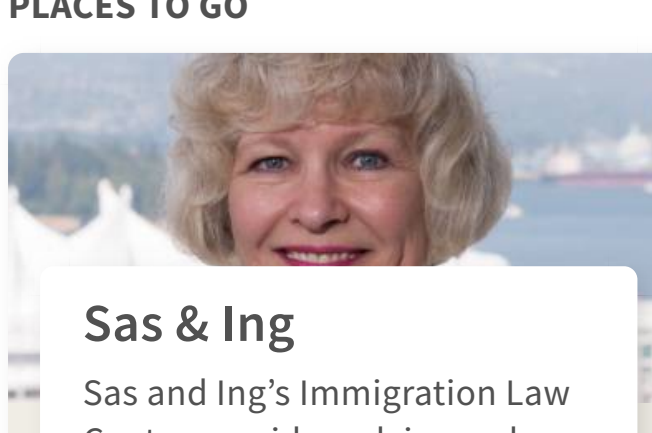
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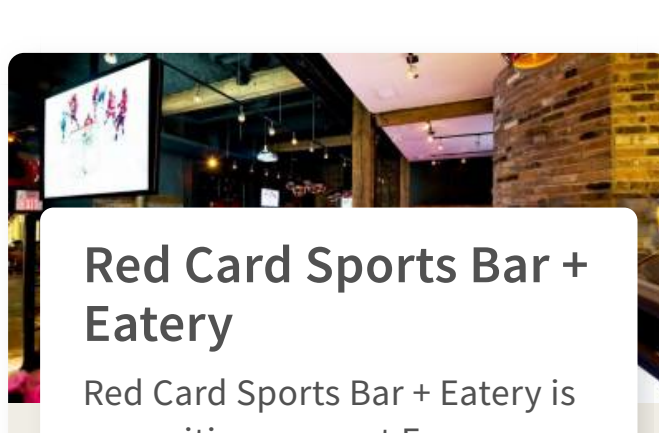
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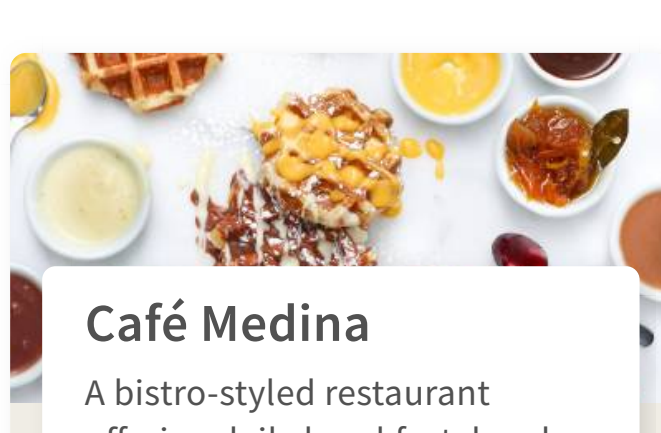
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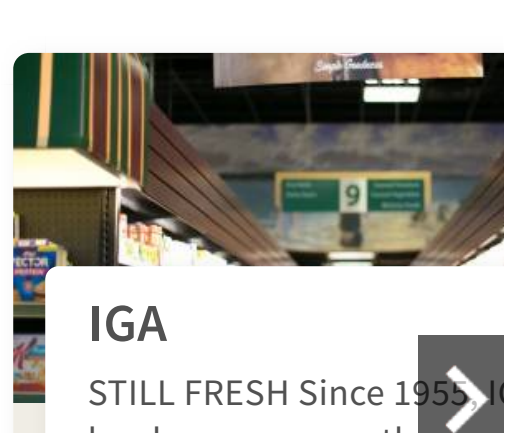
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Local Arts / Entertainment

# 2020 Fringe Festival finds ways to play with past formulas

From his family home in Mumbai, Fringe Festival director Rohit Chokhani envisioned a different kind of festival.

Stuart Derdeyn

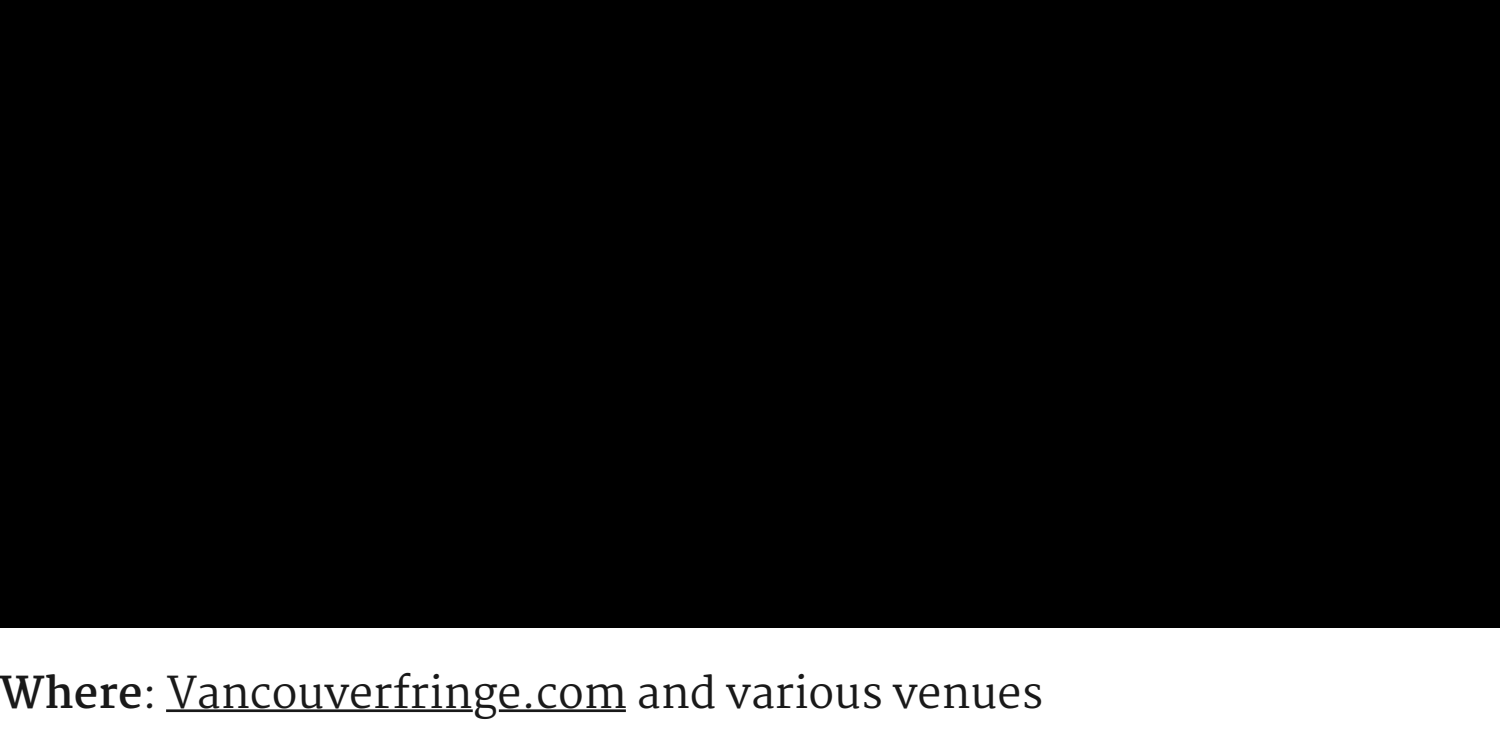
Sep 07, 2020 • Last Updated 5 minutes ago • 5 minute read



Rohit Chokhani is the new executive director of the Vancouver Fringe Festival. PHOTO BY RAYMOND KAM /jpg

## Vancouver Fringe Festival 2020

When: Sept. 10 — 20 | Oct. 1 — 10 | Oct. 29 — Nov. 8 | Nov. 26 — Dec. 6, various times



Where: [Vancouverfringe.com](https://vancouverfringe.com) and various venues

Tickets and info: [tickets.vancouverfringe.com](https://tickets.vancouverfringe.com) (masks required for venues; single-use masks available for purchase on site)

When the Fringe kicks-off this week it won't be the same event theatre goers have come to know and love so well. COVID-19 saw to that as it has with all other arts and cultural events. Surprise.

Rohit Chokhani was appointed executive director of the Fringe Festival when the pandemic hit. He was in Mumbai visiting family. On a Skype call from India, the founder of Diwali in B.C. and Fringe Fest veteran discussed "shifting the Fringe," to reflect the priority given to maintaining community safety while still presenting a showcase for unique, delightful and entertaining theatre.

For Chokhani, re-envisioning and organizing the event from another continent for the past few months fit the weird new reality of producing arts and cultural events across a digital landscape.

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"I wanted to visit my family before things picked up later in the year and I actually finalized the particulars of the contract after I'd already arrived here," said Chokhani. "Now, finally, I have a return ticket at the end of August, which gives me just enough time to complete quarantine and still be able to open the festival. I've been on other sides of the equation — wearing hats from production manager, to producing and directing — which has meant I've felt a part of this community for a long time."

Chokhani was production manager on the 2011 production of Siddhartha: A Journey Home at the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Garden. In 2015, he and South Asian Arts co-produced Mr. Singh and Me (Public Market Pick of the Fringe Award), and in 2017 directed Anosh Irani's Bombay Black, which also won the market award. His initial Fringe entry into the local community was quickly developed into his powerhouse roles with Diwali in B.C., South Asian Theatre (SAT) and as the co-creator of the Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts.

"It feels exciting to have been part of the Fringe community, looking at it through all those different lenses, and to now be in a leadership position," he said. "From day one, we wanted all possibilities on the table and we were in regular contact with all of the other festivals discussing everything. One option we had — as we fall late in the Fringe season — was to break up the event into a number of smaller segments after contacting all of the artists who were booked to appear at the time."

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Seeking that level of engagement with the 100 or so artists who were booked took time, as did soliciting surveys from all other stakeholders involved in the Fringe Festival. But in the end, it produced this year's staggered model of a series of four shorter "segments" to the Fringe. Each of these includes a mix of live theatre, workshops, readings and other performing arts so no one misses out on the usual Fringe smorgasbord if they can't do all the segments.

"The standard format for the Fringe is hundreds of shows happening at multiple venues in a short time period, and that just wasn't possible," he said. "By making it into smaller segments in a far more limited geographic area, we are in a far better position to provide the right levels of safety and service to staff, artists and patrons, and give a better entertainment experience. Also, by having it broken down like that, we are in a position to make changes quickly and efficiently as things develop or change."

For all that, Chokhani says that the shows are still coming from artists who were booked in "pre-COVID," so there isn't likely to be any kind of massive change in content unless artists are in frenzied rewrite mode at the moment. Where the changes will occur at performances such as Art Heist (Sept. 11 — 20, Yellow Crane Pad) or the Judith Fair: An Outdoor Variety Night (Sept. 12 -13, Picnic Pavilion) is more a case of nip and tuck shifts to the scripts.

"The reality we are in means some artists have had to adapt to the situation with a shift to a smaller capacity presentation or a rethink of how to break the fourth wall down without actually going out into the audience and touching someone," he said. "But the whole idea of our non-juried/non-curated event is that we don't dictate content or anything else, usually. I see this year as an opportunity for modifications, change and re-envisioning how we do all of what we do."

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One thing that the Vancouver Fringe Festival is dedicated to doing is providing greater opportunities to artists from communities that have not had the same levels of access to the event in its lifetime. No pandemic is going to put hold to the promises made to continue promoting programming to develop EDI (equality, diversity, inclusion) within Canadian theatre.

For this year, Ruby Slippers Theatre, Playwrights Theatre Centre, Playwrights Guild of Canada and Savage Society join up with the Fringe to present Advance Theatre: New Works by Diverse Women, 2020.

Curated by rising star tai Amy Grauman (Métis, Cree, Haudenosaunee), the dramatic reading showcase features five works by Indigenous playwrights all being presented at Performance Works, 1:30 p.m. — Yvonne Wallace's Utszan (September 14); Nyla Carpentier's The In-Between Place (Sept. 15), Quelema Sparrow's Women of Papiyek (Sept 16), Brenda Prince's Turtle's Island (Sept. 17) and Lisa C. Ravensbergen's The Seventh Fire (Sept. 18.) — with each helmed by a female director.

Actor/playwright Tai Amy Grauman. PHOTO BY VANCOUVER FRINGE FEST /jpg

"My play Her Name Was Mary, premiered at the Fringe in 2017, so it's certainly a familiar scenario, no one ever completely leaves the Fringe," said Tai Amy Grauman. "The cool thing about the advance series, which I've been in as an actor before, is that you get to workshop your work, have a reading, hear what the audience has to say and keep refining. I really adore all of these people as artists, with both Quelema Sparrow and Lisa Ravensbergen being mentors, and thought having Indigenous stories from all over Turtle Island in the series would be cool."

Grauman actually used a part of Women of Papiyek as a monologue for her audition to UBC's theatre department and jokes about the play just waiting for her to appear in.

But all of the artists she has selected are well-known and established in their respective communities. She just wants to see them getting much wider exposure and knows that the Fringe Festival is a great jumping off point.

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# The Vancouver Fringe Festival goes virtual and more equitable

Nadia Elsherif // Culture, Festivals // Volume 21, Issue 16 - September 22–October 6, 2020

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**Rohit Chokhani, executive director of the Vancouver Fringe Festival, led the shift to all-virtual organizing while he was quarantined in India.**

He talks about the unexpected benefits of planning the theatre festival remotely, ongoing changes in response to the pandemic and how the festival is supporting its Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) artists and audiences.

## The perks of going digital

Though moving to an all-digital approach had its technical challenges, Chokhani and his team found unexpected moments of joy and bonding while planning this year's festival.

"When you're in the office, you have friendly chats by the water cooler or during lunch breaks, and we wanted to make sure that we were still able to maintain that. As part of our team bonding sessions, we got to see each other's homes and family gardens and so we got to know each other more intimately in a different way," he says.

In addition to staggering the dates, the festival is also introducing new digital components in order to make the event as safe for its artists and audiences as possible.

"The jury's still out in terms of what the turnout will be this year, and whether we're ready to engage with each other as humans, with social distancing and wearing masks, is a big question. But I do think that by staggering the festival, we might be able to attract certain other people who are usually unable to attend in September," hopes Chokhani.

## Working towards 'theatre for everyone'

Since 1983, the Vancouver Fringe Festival has aimed to produce 'theatre for everyone' as an incubator for independent artists to develop and share their work. After completing an online application and paying the participation fee (based on the length of the show), the lottery system randomly draws applicants to share their work on the main stage. Other options include 'Bring Your Own Venue' artists which are approved on a first-come, first-served basis and must also pay a participation fee to the Fringe.

Chokhani believes that while the Fringe's vision of inclusion for all is still in sight, it is important to stay vigilant in updating the ways through which this vision can be achieved.

"Back in 2017, Vancouver Fringe acknowledged that although we tried to be anti-establishment and create an environment of 'theatre for everyone,' the systemic challenges of the industry, including how the lottery system works, do create some systemic barriers," he says.

Currently, the festival offers discounted participation fees for those who choose them, as well as an option for artists to participate exclusively through digital live-streamed performances.

Though Vancouver Fringe has committed to some internal changes, including recently hiring an equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) consultant, Chokhani is still looking forward to the forthcoming changes within the theatre community at large.

"As a person of colour myself, being appointed as executive director does mean that some change is happening," he says. "When I came to Vancouver a decade ago and was doing my first show at the Fringe, I don't know whether I could've seen myself getting a position like this, although I believe that I did have the skills and the talent."

Chokhani explains that hiring BIPOC artists cannot be enough if there aren't systems in place to support them.

"As a leader, I don't believe in a check-box approach. Oftentimes, white institutions hire BIPOC and other equity-seeking artists expect them to continue to create the same kind of Eurocentric theatre that is in the mainstream," he adds.

For instance, Chokhani explains that the current understanding and methods of mainstream theatre, including sheet music and long-form musical monologues, are not universal to all cultures, and he hopes to bring more diversity to the festival in the future.

On bringing the Fringe Festival one step closer to this goal, Chokhani believes that the challenge will be ensuring that artists can create the shows they want to create while feeling empowered and supported to do so, both financially and artistically. One of his long-term goals is to bring non-English shows to the Fringe or shows that use English in tandem with the artists' mother tongues.

This year, the Vancouver Fringe Festival is taking place from Sept. 10–20, Oct. 1–10, Oct. 29–Nov. 8 and Nov. 26–Dec. 6 in the hopes that staggered dates will ensure the artists' and festival goers' safety and increase the festival's accessibility to audiences.

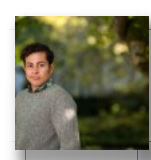
For more information and to purchase tickets, visit [www.vancouverfringe.com](http://www.vancouverfringe.com)

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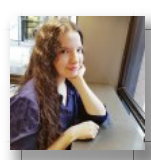
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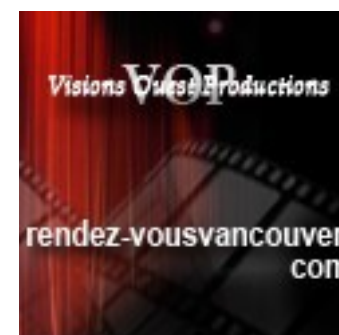
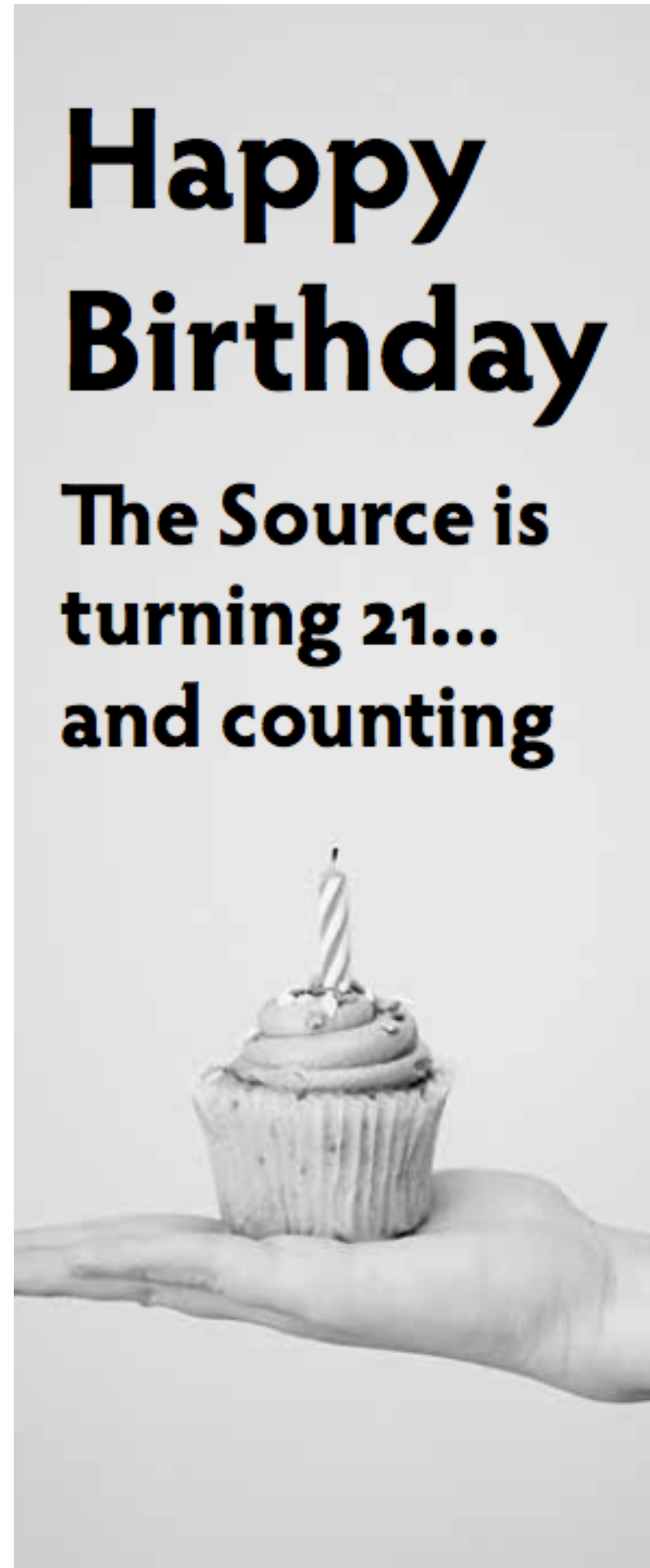
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