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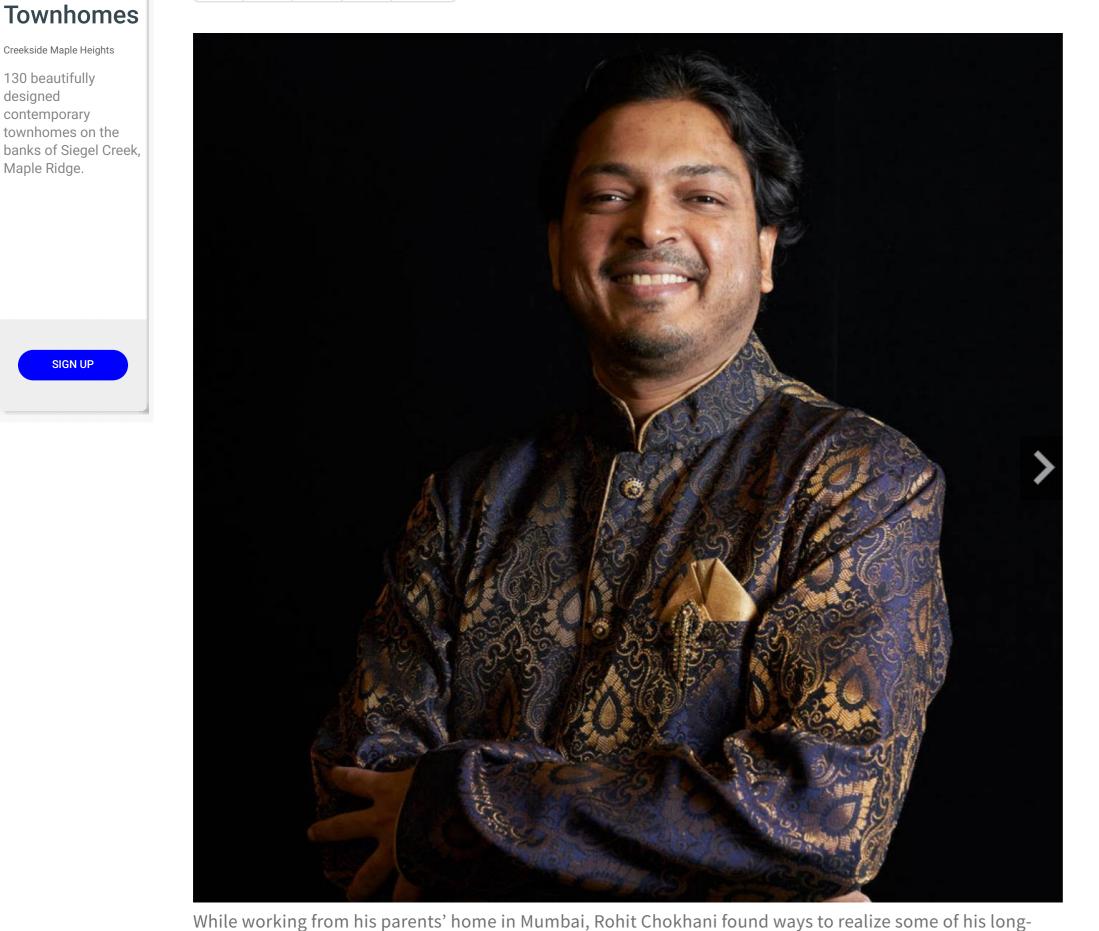
by Janet Smith on September 9th, 2020 at 9:00 PM



REAL ESTATE

NEWS

HEALTH



RAYMOND KAM It speaks to these bizarre times that the Vancouver Fringe Festival's new executive

kilometres away. The unique situation called for a personal pivot as dramatic as the one being made at the

director should have found himself running the annual theatre event from 12,243

Fringe itself, as the fest moves to a staggered series of performances—indoors, outdoors, and live-streamed—throughout the fall. **RELATED STORIES** Back in February, Vancouver theatre artist, producer, and

cultural leader Rohit Chokhani decided to visit his elderly

parents in Mumbai before he dived into his new position. India

went into full lockdown in March, and until recently he'd been

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

Bombay Black rides an ambitious mix of metaphor, magic, and deeply disturbing reality

stuck there. In the last few weeks he's watched his populous Rohit Chokhani takes the home nation's COVID-19 numbers skyrocket. helm of the Vancouver Fringe Festival "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* Rohit Chokhani and Diwali philosophically over What's App when he was still quarantined in

in Canada."

term plans for the Fringe Festival, even in the face of COVID-19.

project to establish South Asian theatre network Vancouver Fringe Festival

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than 90 artists over 11 days.

visionary ideas," Chokhani said.

Jessie Award winner Rohit

in B.C. amplify South

Chokhani announces

Asian voices

tip sheet 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." Move In

Flexibility was essential

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

Indian-set All's Well That Ends Well at Bard on the Beach, and

up the Monsoon Festival of Performing Arts, codirecting an

directing Pick of the Fringe award-winner Bombay Black.

pandemic reality, so it started with its artists, sending out surveys

The Fringe team had some months to prepare for the new

"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

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



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.

Quelemia Sparrow, seen above in this year's Skyborn: 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

feature pieces by Quelemia 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

The staged readings curated by Métis, Cree, and Haudenosaunee artist Tai Amy Grauman

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

"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."

online from Thursday (September 10) to September 20, October 1 to 10, October 29 to November 8, and November 26 through December 6. Click here to report a typo.

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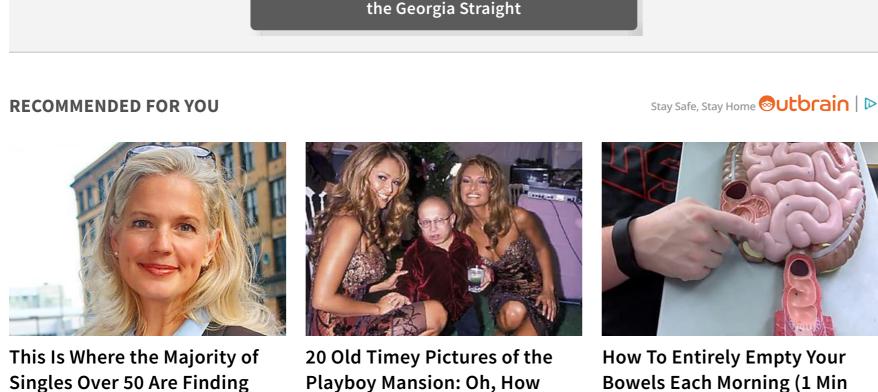
The Vancouver Fringe Festival runs at various Granville Island venues and

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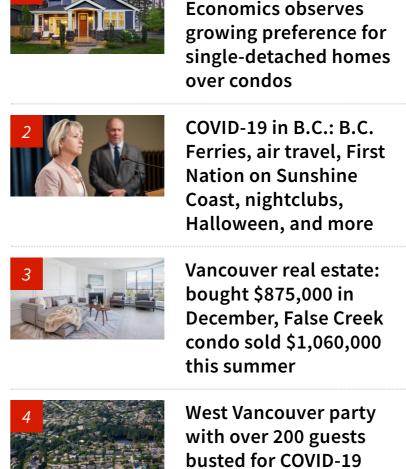
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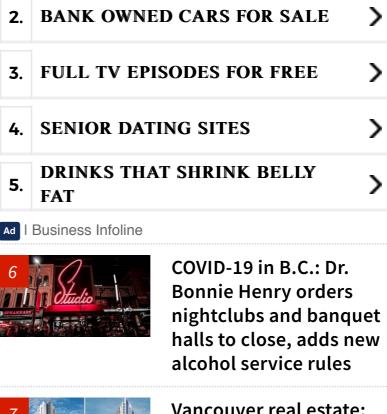


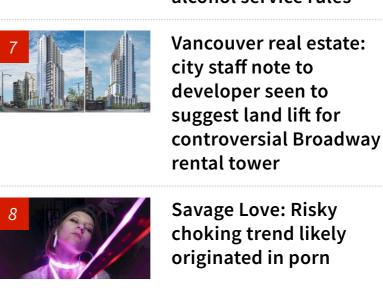
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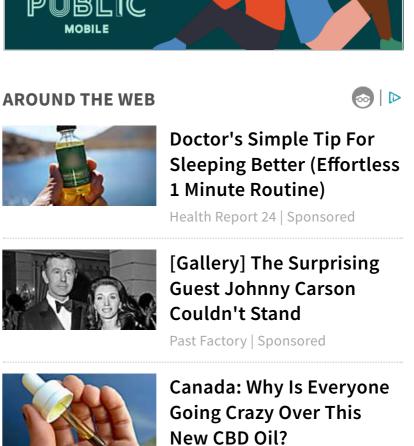
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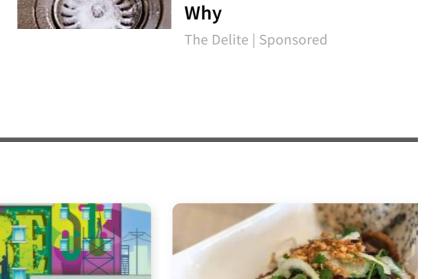
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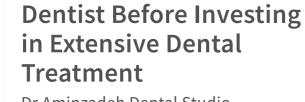


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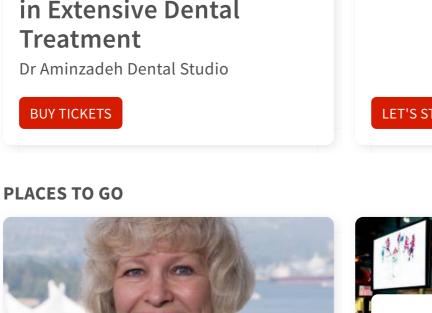
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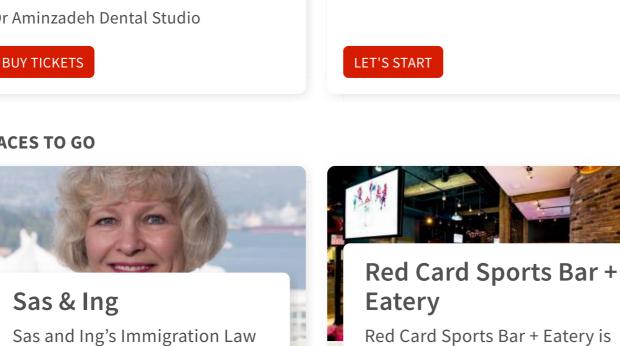
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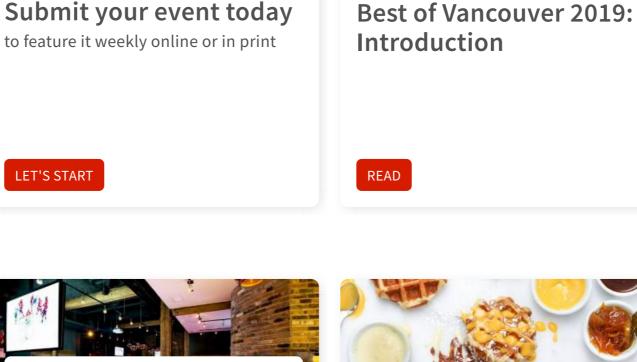
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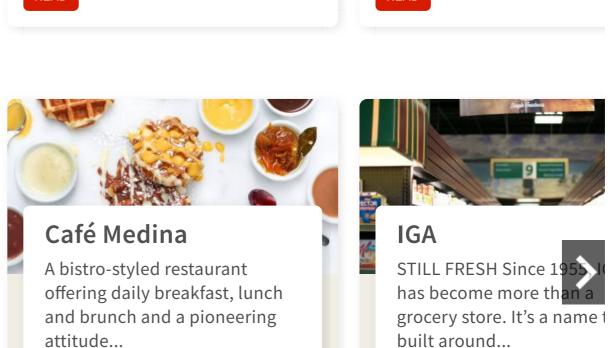


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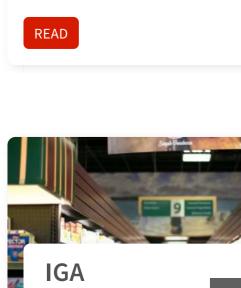
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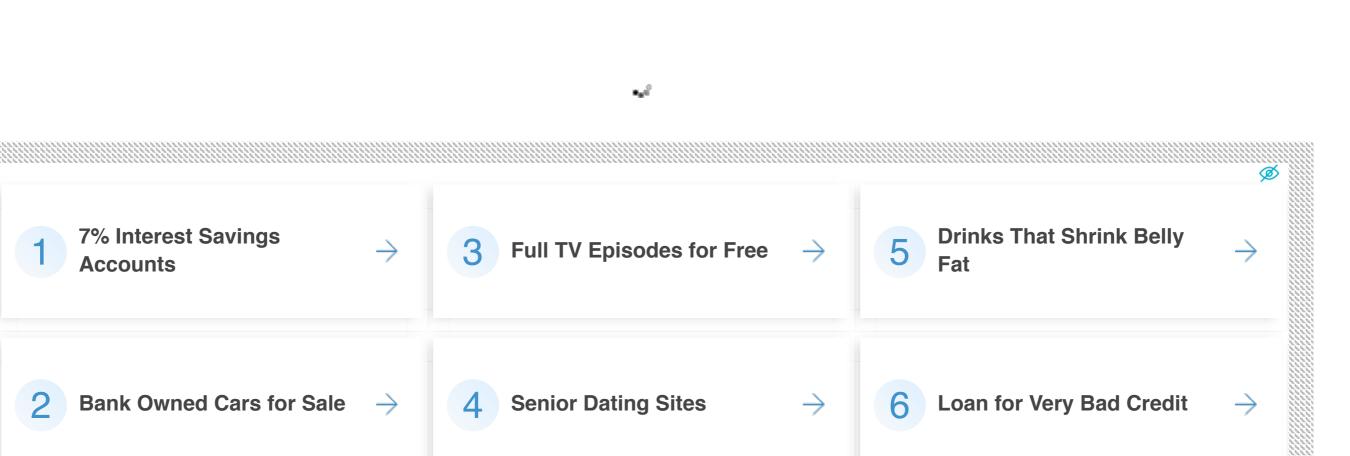
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2020 Fringe Festival finds ways to play with past formulas

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

The Province

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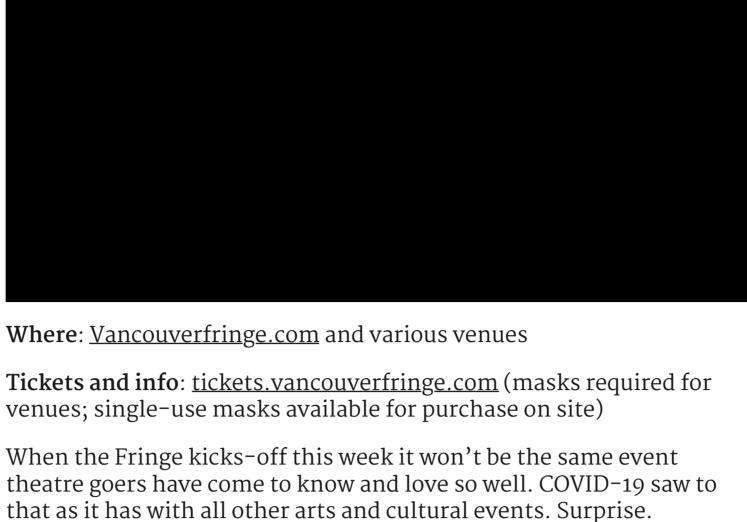
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6, various times



when the pandemic hit. He was in Mumbai visiting family. On a Skype

unique, delightful and entertaining theatre.

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

Rohit Chokhani was appointed executive director of the Fringe Festival

producing arts and cultural events across a digital landscape. STORY CONTINUES BELOW TD TD Insurance

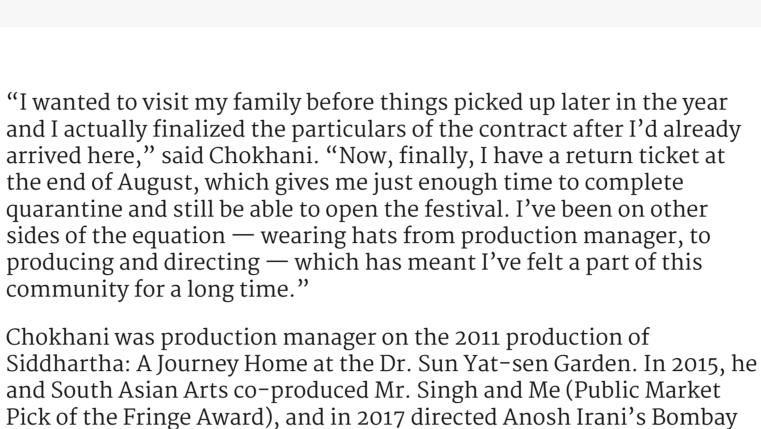
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For Chokhani, re-envisioning and organizing the event from another

continent for the past few months fit the weird new reality of

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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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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

of nip and tuck shifts to the scripts.

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

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

"The reality we are in means some artists have had to adapt to the

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." STORY CONTINUES BELOW [Pics] Conjoined Twins Share Appalling Family News After 27 Years

on Oprah, in Time Magazin... maternityweek.com One thing that the Vancouver Fringe Festival is dedicated to doing is

providing greater opportunities to artists from communities that have

promoting programming to develop EDI (equality, diversity, inclusion)

Playwrights Guild of Canada and Savage Society join up with the Fringe

Curated by rising star tai Amy Grauman (Métis, Cree, Haudenosaunee),

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

For this year, Ruby Slippers Theatre, Playwrights Theatre Centre,

to present Advance Theatre: New Works by Diverse Women, 2020.

the dramatic reading showcase features five works by Indigenous

16), Brenda Prince's Turtle's Island (Sept. 17) and Lisa C.

playwrights all being presented at Performance Works, 1:30 p.m. —

Yvonne Wallace's Ūtszan (September 14); Nyla Carpentier's The In-

Between Place (Sept. 15), Quelemia Sparrow's Women of Papiyek (Sept

Ravensbergen's The Seventh Fire (Sept. 18.) — with each helmed by a

within Canadian theatre.

female director.

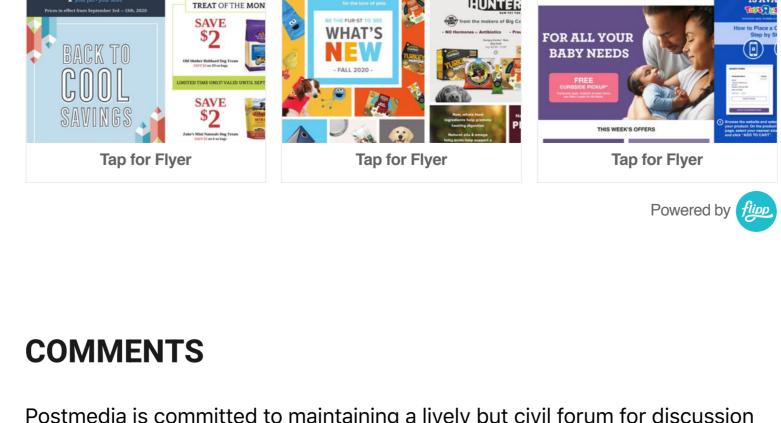
You may have heard of Abby and Brittany Hensel before, either

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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 Quelemia 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. sderdeyn@postmedia.com twitter.com/stuartderdeyn

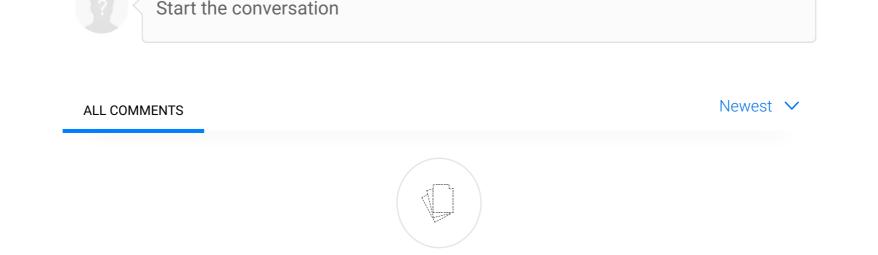


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British Columbia

New head of Vancouver Fringe Festival takes remote work to another level – 10,000 km away in India



1st 10-day phase of B.C.'s largest theatre festival kicked off Sept. 10

Ben Mussett · CBC News · Posted: Sep 12, 2020 10:00 AM PT | Last Updated: 3 hours ago



Rohit Chokhani became the Vancouver Fringe Theatre Society's executive director this past spring. He helped curate this year's festival from India, where he's been working nights. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

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How do you plan an arts festival in Vancouver when you're stuck in Mumbai, more than 10,000 kilometres away?

According to Rohit Chokhani, the new executive director of the Vancouver Fringe Theatre Society, you ignore the local time zone and commit to working nights for four months straight.

"It's been a wild ride," said Chokhani. "I definitely never imagined that in my lifetime I would have to do it during a pandemic while being locked down in a different country."

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Chokhani secured the position to oversee the city's annual theatre festival before he travelled to India to visit family in February. At the time, Vancouver's 37th Fringe had already been planned with hundreds of shows scheduled across the city over 10 nights.

- Festivals, arts events experiment this fall, bringing big experiences to tiny audiences
- Montreal Fringe Festival goes virtual, staging comedy, dance, storytelling from afar

Then the pandemic upended life everywhere — and made live theatre, with it's close, physical intimacy, seem practically impossible. Major productions on Broadway and in London's theatre district ground to a halt. Many Fringe festivals across Canada have been cancelled altogether.

square one. From his family's home in Mumbai, the curator worked from 10 p.m. to the early morning,

So Chokhani and his team — some of whom he's yet to meet in person — had to start from

finding time to sleep during the day. "Everything was on the table," he told Stephen Quinn, host of CBC's The Early Edition on

Thursday.

Chokhani returned to Vancouver about two weeks ago and just recently finished quarantine.

- Winnipeg Fringe to present 4-day live-streamed Virtually Yours festival during pandemic
- Saskatoon, Regina fringe festivals cancelled for 2020

"[But] our starting point was that health and safety was the priority."

Normally, the festivities would only last for 10 days in September. This time, organizers hope to curate in-person and digital shows and workshops for four 10-day stretches between September and December.

local artists. Performances will take place before no more than 50 patrons, the maximum amount of people that can currently gather at one time in B.C. The first phase of Fringe Fest, B.C.'s largest theatre festival, kicked off Thursday and runs until

This year's theme is "A Shift in Perspective." Unlike years past, the 2020 festival will only feature

Sept. 20. Those interested can learn more at the festival's website.

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Vancouver Fringe Festival takes off despite COVID odds



an outdoor, site-specific, physically distanced, carefully orchestrated participatory work co-created by Fringe stalwart T.J. Dawe and Ming Hudson. I watched in a mask and with a hunger I could not have anticipated at the Fringe festival a year ago. In spite of the pandemic, the Vancouver Fringe has mounted a small-scale festival, with plans to do the same in October, November and December – the COVID-19

Vancouver Fringe Festival opened with a live show to in-person audiences. It was

gods willing. "Nothing can completely replace the live experience and human to human experience when there's a body performing in front of you,"

Chokhani, who is brand new to the job, had to do most of that planning from India. He travelled to his hometown of Mumbai to visit family in February and was unable to leave once the pandemic hit. He almost didn't make it back in time for the festival, but he managed to find a flight, finally, in late August. He ended his quarantine on Wednesday, the day before the Fringe held its opening event – online. "I'm extremely grateful for my staff who had to work across the planet and across the time zones,"

Vancouver Fringe executive director Rohit

In addition to planning a live theatre festival

during COVID-19 - challenging enough -

Chokhani said in an interview.

Chokhani said during the digital kickoff. When it came to deciding whether to go ahead with live performances, the Vancouver Fringe asked for opinions from stakeholders – donors, audience

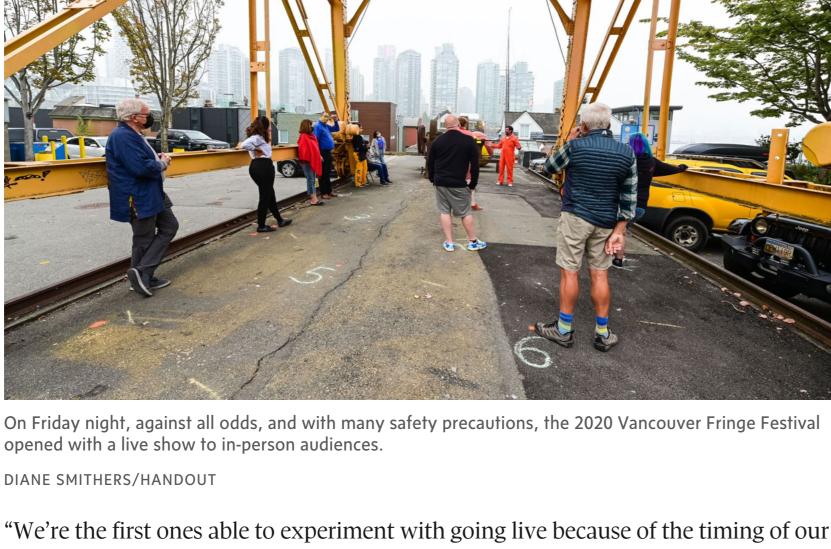


members, volunteers, artists. At the same time, for months during the pandemic,

RAYMOND KAM

sharing information and ideas and cheering each other on. Being at the end of the Canadian Fringe circuit was a plus, giving Vancouver some breathing space to figure out what to do.

artistic leaders throughout the wider Fringe festival network held weekly calls,



festival," Chokhani said. "And we see that moving forward as a victory for all Fringes."

The kickoff event included congratulatory appearances from organizers of Fringe

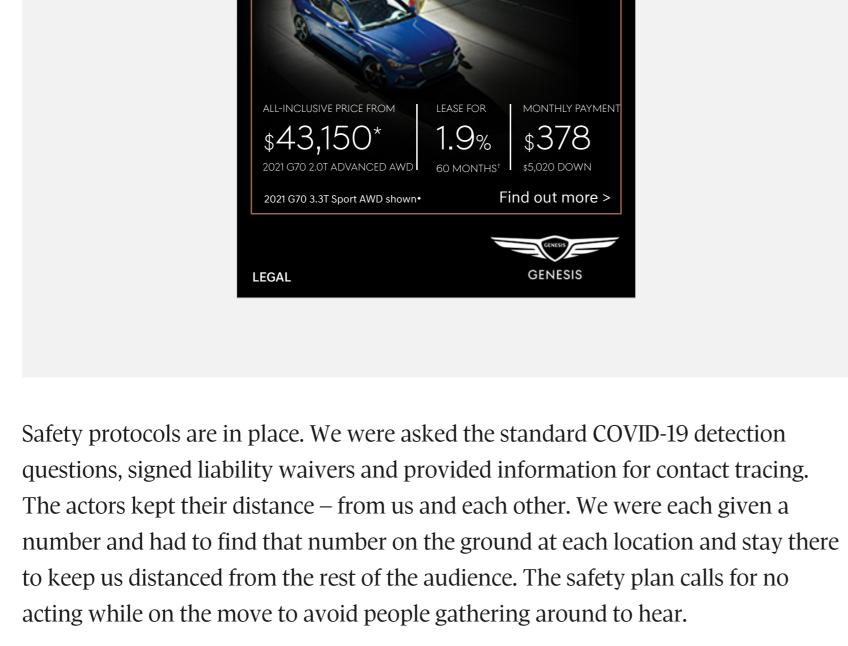
festivals in Victoria, Edmonton and Toronto.

"It's so exciting to have an actual Fringe festival happening in real life," Toronto's executive director Lucy Eveleigh said.

Performances in Vancouver began Friday night with Art Heist. Directed by Dawe, it

is being performed for audiences of 10 or fewer people, who move from one

outdoor location to another. Start times are staggered by 20 minutes, so several groups can be accommodated in an evening or afternoon. It was a lot of walking and standing, but at least we were outside. And watching a show! Live! In person! (And chairs are available for people who need them.) STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT



Behind the scenes, props, costumes and sets are kept in separate bins, one for each cast member. The bins' exteriors are disinfected every time they change hands between the actor and the production manager. The show is based on the real life theft of art from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston; 13 works of art valued at half a billion dollars were stolen in March, 1990. The show offers up real-life prime suspects and encourages the

audience to ask questions in order to help crack the case, which remains unsolved.

What a pleasure it was to think about something other than the pandemic we're all

living through, for 100 minutes or so – even if it was to consider a major crime. And

even if the smoky air from the wildfires burning south of the border was a reminder

of another current catastrophe.

Performance Works.

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Theatre fans have been robbed of so much; this was a joy. This month, Fringe is also offering a series of dramatic readings of works written by Indigenous women; an outdoor variety show; and a one-man show, Hard 2 Kill, by Richard Lett, who has survived alcohol addiction, cancer – and now COVID 19. The

variety show is outdoors, but the others are indoors, at Granville Island's

Programming for the remaining mini-festivals later this year will be announced at a later date. The staggered schedule is designed to be fluid and responsive in case anything changes – such as an outbreak, a change to British Columbia's 50-person limit rule, or what have you.

"We thought chunking it down in a way where we do limited performances each

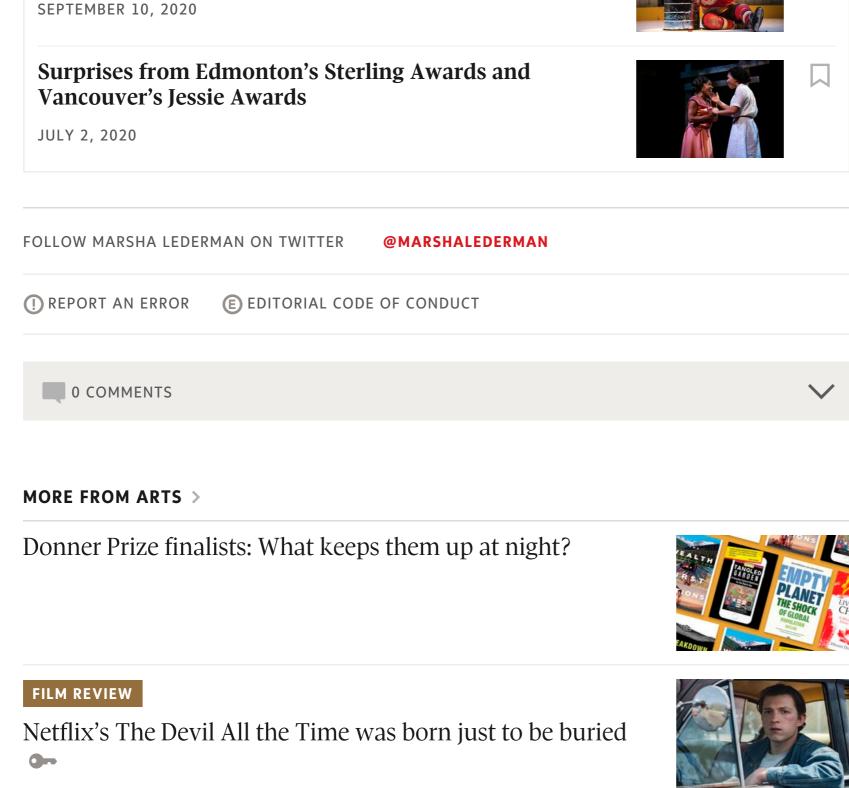
"We are praying that none of that happens, but it does give us options."

month over the next four months would give us the ability to shift," Chokhani said.

The Vancouver Fringe's September programming runs through Sept. 20. Keep up to date with the weekly Nestruck on Theatre newsletter. Sign up today.

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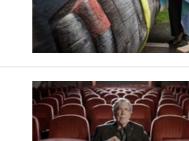
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The Vancouver Fringe Festival goes virtual and more equitable

2020

Rohit Chokhani, executive director of the Vancouver Fringe Festival, led the shift to allvirtual 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 firstcome, 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.

exclusively through digital live-streamed performances.

Currently, the festival offers discounted participation fees for those who choose them, as well as an option for artists to participate

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."

Chokahani 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

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Rohit Chokhani believes that the Fringe's vision of inclusion for all is still a work in the making. | Photo courtesy of Rohit Chokhani