

# Thinking Partners Program 2022

A Buffer Fringe partnership with ICAF, powered by IMPACT

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## Preface

In an extraordinary collaboration with IMPACT (Imagining Together Platform for Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation)/Brandeis University, the “Thinking Partners” program creates a system of artistic support and collective practice integral to the alignment of Buffer Fringe’s work with its mission. As a fringe festival that takes place within a unique political, social and historical context, the mode of operation is fueled by the connection to the communities that Buffer Fringe has fostered. This includes the nurturing of the performing arts festival community on both a local and international scale, cultivating a space for novice and experienced artists alike to share and experience experimental works, and to establish and implement an artistic space in which participants can explore art as a vehicle for peace building and conflict transformation. The “Thinking Partners” program, has over the 3 years of its implementation, helped to sustain these aims by generating effective dialogues, encouraging reflection and understanding, and supporting new approaches to the artistic process.

The “Thinking Partners” program was initiated through a first collaboration between IMPACT and Buffer Fringe back in 2020. The program resulted from a series of discussions between IMPACT (Toni Shapiro Phim, Germaine Ingram) and Buffer Fringe (Ellada Evangelou), in which the planning of its 2020 edition was discussed at length, relating especially to the restrictions emerging the first wave of the pandemic. Among others, the closing of the checkpoints early in 2020, created the need to facilitate contact between artists, communities and other stakeholders. Therefore, in both the 2020 and 2021 creative processes, the program

structure was rooted in one-on-one consultation between individual thinking partners and Buffer Fringe artists. The thinking partners, which could come from any field given the interdisciplinary nature of the festival, offered essential guidance, fresh perspectives, and critical thought to the artists' creative processes. This proved to be influential and impactful for participating artists, who found that this counsel and advice from their knowledgeable and seasoned Thinking Partners helped to challenge their thinking and broaden their artistic visions. Ultimately, the important Buffer Fringe principle of "thinking with" is verified in the sense that idea formulation of the highest caliber inevitably stems from the multiplicity of knowledge; we as creators – and human beings – need collaboration in order to produce compelling, impactful, and multi-dimensional work.

For the 2022 edition of the Festival, the approach to the "Thinking Partners" program evolved to meet Buffer Fringe's newly modified structure, with Coordinators Nihal Soganci and Ellada Evangelou, being joined by 5 curators. The thinking around this process, was facilitated by the International Community Arts Festival of Rotterdam (ICAF) representatives Jasmina Ibrahimovic, Anamaria Cruz, and Amy Gowen. The innovative restructuring of the Buffer Fringe Festival's curation initiated by the new methodological of performances surrounding the theme of *Pockets (beyond)* that collectively make up the festival. Due to this collaborative nature, the Thinking Partners practice was reimagined from individually paired meetings into a series of group discussions held between the ICAF collaborators, the BF creative team and the five curators/three curatorial team. These larger group discussions allowed for collective exploration of curatorial motifs of audience reception and engagement, conflict transformation, and identity/community relative to BF2022's overarching theme of *Pockets (beyond)* that proved to be fundamental to BF2022's curatorial and creative coordination processes. The discussions

served as a thinking space in which the curators' respective visions and significance of their spaces ultimately came together.

The curators include Lebanese director/performer/peacebuilder Raffi Feghali, who is curating the first day of the festival (Friday, October 7th). Feghali is an artist whose curation reflects poignantly on his perception of identity and belonging in the context of history and culture and how these sentiments translate into narrative. The second day of the festival (Saturday, October 8th) is curated by a multifaceted team of three; Australian Cypriot author/dramaturg Kat Kats, Australian performance director Bryce Ives, and Cypriot theatre director Maria Varnakkidou. The team's curation revolves around the creation of a queered space that expands the agency and ability of the individual, and in doing so, the community. Their curatorial vision actively goes against the status quo, for as Kats describes, "We're often told to 'think outside the box'. To think more creatively. Intuitively. What happens, however, when we take our creativity - our ability to dance or sing or act - and place it within the confines of a very specific box: a black box?" This exploration of identity and expression continues into the essence of the third day of the festival, curated by Cypriot art historian Derya Ulubatli. Her curation is heavily informed by the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl and his theory of "otherness" resulting from intersubjectivity rather than isolated subjects. Ulubatli's curatorial vision seeks to build a space where we can embrace all diversities, and where various subjects can live and produce together beyond all "identities."

In order to further develop and innovate these artistic and theoretical bases of the festival, new perspectives and fresh takes on concepts were critical, a fact that the participants of this collaboration continued to discover with each new meeting throughout the process. This document will outline the takeaways of this fruitful collaborative process as we aim to codify the

ideas that were expressed and cultivated in this series of three meetings taking place over the summer of 2022. The document itself demonstrates the significance of the “thinking with” approach at a curatorial level and aims to organize the artistic development process of the participants through lenses of the festival’s audience, physical spaces, and conflict transformation and transcendental properties. The document intends to prompt further reflection of this experimental process and is, in itself, a reflection of what has been conceived thus far. This document reiterates the notion that “no idea making is done alone”, for it is a collaborative composition that is not itself a final product, but rather a stepping stone in an ongoing process.

## **Festival Itinerary**

### **Day 1: October 7th, 2022 curated by Raffi Feghali**

- Ergo Theater (CY) – “Nobody”
- Ahmad Hijazi (DE) – “Ilk: A Queer Arab Dichotomy”
- Encuentro Theater and Dance Company (IT) – “Una Guerra Entre Nosotros”
- Inal Bilsel (CY) – “Nostalgia for the Future”

### **Day 2: October 8th, 2022 curated by Bryce Ives, Kat Kats, and Maria Varnakkidou**

- Vasiliki Anastasiou & The Amalgamation Choir (CY) – “[from west to east]”
- Die Wolke Art Group (GR) – “Poetics of Space”
- Compagnie Inflexions (FR) – “As we drove short short horizon lines”
- Ody Icons (CY) – “POLYDRAMA”

### **Day 3: October 9th, 2022 curated by Derya Ulubatli**

- Programme Music (NL): “Where Words Become Music”
- Fatosh Olgacher (CY): “KI|PR|OΣ”
- Melita Couta (CY): “STATE”
- Tera Group (CY): “Muzuru”

## MAIN TAKE-AWAYS FROM THE DIALOGUE:

### A. Audience

A main pillar of discussion throughout these meetings has been the audience.

- Who are they?
- What do we want them to gain from this experience?
- space in itself?
- How do we create space and time for them to collaborate and reflect?
- How do they experience and participate in the use of arts for peacebuilding?

These questions that arose throughout the group dialogue allowed for the consideration of many new aspects for the BF creative team and curators. This in turn allowed for curatorial explorations of framing the performances as one cohesive experience as opposed to three separate ones, thinking about who comprises the audience and what that experience will be, introducing/priming the audience with an “opening ritual” and inviting them to reflect/bookend the experience with a “closing ritual”.

With the unique position of the Buffer Fringe Festival as a performing arts event located across the island of Cyprus, we consider who, specifically, desires and possesses the means to be in physical attendance. Through experiential data and conversations on the matter, we posit that five primary groups comprise the community of the festival.

- the peacebuilders of the community around the Home for Cooperation. These peacebuilding activists may be distinct from other audience groups as they are drawn to the festival not from its artistic identity, but rather, its mission.
- a community of younger artists drawn to the festival by their existing artistic communities

- people who are curious about the other side of the island, primarily Greek Cypriots across from the north
- students and a broader intellectual crowd, galvanized by a drive toward education and academia
- theatergoers who themselves may not be artists but are interested in the experiential, fringe aspect of the festival

Acknowledging these communities, the festival curators strive also to invite those who may not yet identify with one of these groups, or would not otherwise have knowledge of the festival.

On the **first day of the festival**, Raffi Feghali, seeks to build a space where audiences are invited to explore their own conception of cultural identity in the context of an international festival. Feghali identifies his agency as a storyteller as a strong filter in his creative process, and sees his role as a curator as someone who can mobilize things. Drawing inspiration from his venue, Rüstem bookshop, as a uniquely dynamic and interactive space, Feghali considers the multitude of ways in which audiences will be invited to interact with one another, envisioning that, “as they move between rooms, people will bump shoulders, say hello, and casually interact with one another”.

The **second day of the festival** presents a live installation essentially operating through audience participation before the audience even enters the artistic space. As a vital role in the creation and evolution of each work, the audience joins in communion with the artists and one another, emphasizing the power of collective thought and action. The curatorial team, comprised of Kat Kats, Bryce Ives, and Maria Varnakkidou, plans to end the night with a party of sorts, encouraging a different type of interaction between participants. Through these practices, the curators ultimately present an attempt to strip away context so as to allow audience members and artists alike to be or become whoever and whatever they want.

On the **third and final day of the festival**, Derya Ulubatli seeks to curate an experience where different artists create new stories by collaborating with the audience and the ‘other’. Ulubatli posits that ‘otherness’ is about intersubjectivity rather than isolated subjects and plans to convey this idea to the audience through interactive artworks which accept the existence of an ‘other,’ and can only be completed with the contribution of 'someone else'. Ulubatli emphasizes the importance of collaborative creation where audiences work in conjunction with the artist, enabling them to feel part of the performances and installations. The day transports audience members into a new physical and ideological space; as explained by Ulubatli, it’s “a space where different subjects can meet, create, produce together, and, ultimately, experience intersubjectivity”.

Between each day, an emphasis on audience participation and reflection serve as a uniting tenant across the diverse group of works. Each curator strives to leave space for audiences to come together, ideate, and create. Through these collective practices, the curators explore unique approaches for allowing audience members to communicate and express freely, unfettered by outside circumstances.

## **B. Space as a Pocket**

Another pillar of the discussions in the planning of the festival is the use of space and employing the physicality of the venues as a means for creating wider impact. Each day of the festival takes place in a different space, not only in terms of its geographical location within Nicosia, but in its character and social context. Creating a dynamic relationship between artist, audience, and space is fundamental to the transformative goals of the festival.

The **first day of the festival** takes us to Rüstem Bookstore, an important cultural center in Northern Nicosia that has endured many cultural shifts since its founding in 1937. The space is curated by Raffi Feghali, whose aim is to explore the relationship between narrative, identity and space. The bookstore itself has grappled with its own turbulent identity, going from a meeting place for Cypriot intellectuals and British colonial elite to publishing Turkish Cypriot political books after Nicosia's divide. Feghali has a unique curatorial project before him, as this is a space that is already saying something, so the artistic interventions have to be in conversation with the space, rather than boisterous voices talking over it. This is to say that Rüstem has a cultural fingerprint, a community and a history that is just as much a part of this day as the performance pieces that will temporarily occupy the space. Feghali's task is in marrying his own perspective and journey exploring his identity with both the voices of a diverse group of international artists and this space, allowing the artists to inform "identity and belonging, feed on history, and constantly evolve."

What makes Rüstem a pocket is that it is a space that in itself is deeply contextual, steeped in history and rich cultural dynamics. This calls to mind the BF team's own description of pockets as "enriched spaces of resistance," as well as "traces and remnants of the past." Rüstem is colourful and loud, with rooms lined with shelves of books telling hundreds of diverse stories, accompanied by a cafe space that encourages mingling and a mess of shared perspectives. Feghali frames day one as "a story told among stories," as it is very much about the interaction of the work presented, the audience, and the context of the space. It is a navigation of identity and belonging in a cultural pocket. The international nature of the festival provides a platform for the mingling of cultural identities that can then be put into conversation with the conflicting identities in Northern Cyprus. The more Feghali is able to use narrative and



storytelling, the more he is able to breach the gap between two conflicting communities, in turn allowing us to question our own perspectives as well as understand others.

The **second day of the Festival** finds us at NiMAC's Teatro Polis in southern Nicosia, a complete 180 from the contextuality of Rüstem. Rather than busy and colourful, the space is a black box: a dark, quiet, more "traditional" space for performance. The curatorial team invites participants, artists, and audiences alike, to "think inside the [black] box" and challenge the confines of the space. The curators want the black box to be seen as a "pocket of possibility," a space to be or become whatever or whoever you want. The physicality of a black box is much like a spatial representation of a literal pocket: dark, contained, and tucked-in; something that wants to be occupied by whatever can fit, adaptable, changing, *a space made to contain*. Unlike the day in Rüstem, which embraces and confronts historical and social context, the box emphasizes the potential of "stripping away context," meaning the space itself actually separates the work from any contextual space, allowing it to become whatever the community within the box wants to make it.

**Day three** takes us to the UN buffer zone, a space which can be seen as a culmination of everything encapsulated within the previous two spaces. The buffer zone is both entrenched in historical and cultural contexts, like Rüstem, and embodies a no-man's land in between communities, evocative of the emptiness of the black box. The question of "who owns this space" is predominant; how do you interact with a space where no one lives or is building up their future? In response to this, curator Derya Ulubatli aims to turn the space into a pocket, letting it become a "common meeting place," where various subjects can collaborate, live and produce together beyond all identities and confront ideas of 'otherness.' It becomes a space for participants to experience intersubjectivity and confront what makes someone 'other,' endowing

them with an agency often denied in the context of conflict. The BF team also sees pockets as a space to confront concepts of inclusion and exclusion, and a method of giving agency to the marginal. This is exactly what Ulubatli aims to do, by bringing artists and audiences together in collaboration through a series of interactive artworks that depend upon the contribution of an ‘other’ in order to become something.

Ulubatli is curating a transformative piece. The very existence of the buffer zone denotes an additional spatial, and, in turn, social dimension. As a space devoid of identities, there are no embedded processes of othering or mechanisms of identity formation. In creating a “new nation state” that questions identity and community within the context of this space, the use of performance here facilitates a transformative spatial reconstruction. This performative piece serves as a way to acknowledge and exercise the past while constructing a new future for the buffer zone.

### **C. Conflict Transformation and Transcendence**

When considering the unique characteristics of the Buffer Fringe Festival, the transcendental properties of such a festival prove paramount in regards to conflict transformation. The festival actively exists in this macrocosm inundated by social, political and historical contexts that exacerbate the present conflict and heavily inform the division of the greater community. In spite of this, or perhaps, because of it, Buffer Fringe acts as a catalyst for the transformation of this conflict, providing the environment in which spaces transcending these contexts can exist. It is critical to acknowledge that the cultural, historical, and political contexts that exist are not to be discounted; they are real and they carry weight in the lives of people in the community. However, this transcendence allows for the exploration of peace-building and

reconciliation within a community in a conflict zone through the use of arts and culture.

During the discussions, we had talked about ways in which Conflict Transformation could be something not only actively addressed as a topic/theme within the festival, but to also find ways to enact it on a small scale, with conversations, different methods of interaction and participation, and the merging of different audiences as part of the festival. One of the suggestions towards this came from Jasmina, with the idea of working with artists and children as an audience group. This would be a shift for the Buffer Fringe, since the audience addressed so far has been young adults. The suggestions was discussed, as a means to find ways to enact small scale conflict transformation within the festival and to begin conversations/plan interventions or moments for participation that could inspire a more long lasting change in perspective.

Moreover, what was addressed was the potential for conflict transformation related to the locations in which the festival is held. Each of the three days, in their own way, create pockets of safety that extend beyond the limits of the wider context of the conflict. Within the larger political and social contexts we can exist, become, create and collaborate, not just in spite of them but because of them. Artistic interventions in areas marked by conflict like Nicosia are a means to cultivate cultural exchange, empathy, and dialogue as well as build bridges between communities that can lead to a challenging of prejudices. While each curator/curatorial team has a distinct creative and social vision, these dynamic collaborative discussions have shown that there is a common thread running through each of them: the transformative power of the arts. Curator Raffi Feghali, described the way with which Rustem, with its complex past, has become for him a space which provides a base for questioning identity, and that feeds into his own story, and that of the audiences. In a similar manner, curator Derya Ulubatli mentions that by placing

performance in the space of the buffer zone, you are reconstructing the space: you acknowledge the past while reconstructing the future of the space. This also involves creating a new with the UN, in order to navigate using the Buffer Zone as a curatorial site. The possibility for a future for a space such as that between two conflicting sides (and those involved in keeping the ‘peace’), is the beginning of thinking that there might be a future beyond the division.

## **IN SHORT:**

### AUDIENCE

- Strong emphasis placed on audience participation, interaction, and reflection across all festival days
- Striving to bring audiences together, creating a space for audience members to communicate and express freely and organically
- Approaching the festival as one cohesive experience as opposed to three separate ones, or even as separate artworks / artists
- Importance of priming the audience with an “opening ritual”
- Importance of wrapping up with the audience experience in a “closing ritual”
- Acknowledgement of who is and who is not included in the audience
- Inviting the audience in with context and appreciation for the work and space

### SPACE

- Emphasis on the relationship between artist, audience, and physical space
- Utilization of the space in curatorial narrative
- Viewing the performance spaces themselves as pockets

- Considering and implementing historical and cultural context of the spaces inhabited
- Embracing the characteristics of physical space as a means for bringing people together, audience and artist, and creating pockets of safety and openness

### CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSCENDENCE

- Curators seek to invoke the transformative power of art by creating spaces which transcend limiting contexts of conflict

### **Still to be Explored**

While there were many rich takeaways from these conversations, the beauty of a collaborative and site-specific festival is that every aspect, from the organizational team to the dynamics of the spaces to the audience demographics, will continue to change and develop over the coming months. Essential aspects of an arts festival that should still be discussed in further depth are the complementary structures, such as opening/closing ceremonies, parties and/or activities that tie each day of the festival together. These parallel events are essential to building community and creating the time and space for audiences to come together and collaboratively reflect on their experiences. In many ways, the festival becomes a pocket in itself. Much of the beauty and impact of these works and the spaces they inhabit comes from their juxtaposition, and the way they interweave to tell a bigger story of conflict, identity and existence in a pocket. As outlined by ICAF director Jasmina Ibrahimovic, facilitating informal gatherings for participants to inhabit these spaces for themselves and discuss what they've seen, could have a profound impact and could make space to reflect and connect in this way in the long term. This is something that should be further considered and prioritized moving forward, so the audience

may carry on the meaning and message of the works presented here.

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