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Fringe companies have a short life expectancy, but some survive. **Daniel Rosenthal** met two of them.

The odds on small theatre companies foundering within a year or two of their first tour have always been high. If the theatre company has a “fringe”, experimental ethos, stability may prove even more elusive. So it’s quite an achievement for two such, Forkbeard Fantasy and People Show, to have survived for more than a quarter of a century.

On the road since 1974, Forkbeard are the leaner of the two outfits, with just three core members: its founders, brothers Tim and Chris Britton, who write, design and perform, and designer Penny Saunders who joined in 1980. Their new show, *Frankenstein*, is an idiosyncratic spin on a classic tale and involves elements that will be familiar to anyone who saw previous Forkbeard ventures such as 1996’s *The Fall of the House of Usherettes* (Edgar Allen Poe meets Macbeth) or *Architects of Fantasy*, a 1999 exhibition of their stagecraft at London’s Theatre Museum. The story is told through surreal comedy, grotesque puppetry and ingenious mechanical props and Forkbeard’s trademark filmed sequences, with live performers stepping in and out of screened action.

The Britton’s interest in film began in Oxford in the 1960’s. “Our father was a keen amateur film-maker,” says Tim Britton. “The other big influences were the Goons and the Bonzo Dog Band. When I was 20 and Chris was 23 we started out in experimental performance art.”

Subsidy was almost impossible to come by, even after the Arts Council had belatedly established a performance-art panel in the mid-1970s. “We might have fallen apart in the late 1970’s,” says Britton. “It was depressing to know that people wanted our stuff, yet not to be able to get any money to produce it.”

Better times arrived in the early 1980s, when the British Council funded tours to Latin America, and in recent years their audience in Britain has broadened sufficiently for them no longer to depend on overseas bookings. “People often write that we have a cult following here, and there are some who’ve followed us for years,” says Britton.

Arts Council revenue grants have kept Forkbeard stable since 1986, helping them to maintain a workshop in Devon, and their other survival aid has been versatility. Between new productions, Saunders and the Brittons mount installations, teach and take on freelance commissions as illustrators and designers. “The root of our longevity is that we drive the organisation,” says Britton. “We love finding as many ways as possible of putting our creativity out there.”

Forkbeard have admired the equally unconventional People Show since the early 1970’s. It had begun life in 1966, when Jeff Nuttall, Mark Long, John Darling and Sid Palmer performed a one-off piece, *People Show*, in the basement of a Charing Cross Road bookshop. Much to their surprise, the group stayed together, devising numbered show after numbered show, each one usually unlike the last. Music, song, dance, circus, prose, poetry and film have all been stirred into the pot by an ever-increasing “family” of collaborators from a wide range of disciplines.

Their tours have taken in venues as large as the Caracas Opera House, as small as London’s Bush Theatre, but it was only in 1996 that they established a properly equipped base. A £640,000 lottery grant enabled them to buy and convert their home, a church hall Bethnal Green, into the People Show Studios.

Founder members such as Mark Long, and veterans such as the jazz pianist Chahine Yavroyan, who joined 22 years ago, have been continuously involved, encouraging newcomers such as Jessica Worrall, a set and costume designer who started out “pushing sound and lighting buttons” for People Show in 1990 and has progressed to more prominent, guiding roles (the group has no “directors”) on the surreal 1999 Presley project *The Elvis Show* and the current touring production, *Second*. Worrall describes this as “an hour-long, multimedia performance installation, about the relationship between a man and a woman in their late forties”.

People’s Show’s endurance is all the more remarkable, she argues, “because we have never had a definitive house style. You might see one *People Show* and love it, then really dislike the next. There’s no enforced standard of performance.”

That freedom leads artists such as Worrall to return to People Show between other projects. Although she will obtain less exposure with *Second* than with her recent designs for Northern Broadsides’ *King John* and *Oedipus*, she proudly declares: “People Show is the most important work I do – and a lot of people in the group feel the same way.”