

# Buffer Fringe Festival (BFF) 2020: An Artist-Based Conflict Transformation Festival on the Fringes

By Lee Perlman, PhD & Meropi Moiseos



*Figure 1. The Buffer Fringe Festival takes place in the UN controlled Buffer Zone of Nicosia, Cyprus, serving as the festival's main open-air venue, with the exception of BFF 2020 when measures to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic, affected the festival's program.*

# Contents

Acknowledgements	2
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
• Structure of the Study and Research Approach	5
• Outsider-Insider to the Conflict Research Choice and Structural Tension	6
<b>Background</b>	<b>8</b>
A. Home for Cooperation (H4C)	8
B. The Buffer Fringe Festival (BFF) from its Inception	8
C. Evolution of BFF through Time and Space	10
D. Setting the Scene: The Cyprus Conflict	11
E. What’s in a Conflict’s Name?	12
F. BFF 2020’s Program	12
G. Innovations: Symposia, Artists Blogs and “Thinking Partners”	14
<b>Major Findings</b>	<b>16</b>
• BFF 2020’s Seven Definitive Features	16
• A New Type of Internationalization... of a Conflict “on the fringes”	20
• Struggling with Fear of Normalization	21
• BFF 2020 as a Questionably ‘Contentious’ Festival	23
• BFF 2020’s Problematizing Paradox	25
<b>BFF Strategic Questions and Final Reflections</b>	<b>26</b>
• BFF Strategic Questions	26
• Final Reflections	26
• Personal Reflections	27
• Looking back and looking forward – Lee Perlman	27
• Confronting our histories - Meropi Moiseos	28
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix A	Comprehensive List of BFF 2020 Artistic and Other Events
Appendix B	Interviewers Protocol
Appendix C	List of Interviewees
Appendix D	Other Conversants and Informants

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## Introduction

The 7<sup>th</sup> annual [Buffer Fringe Festival \(BFF\)](#) took place in Nicosia, Cyprus at the end of November and early December 2020. BFF 2020 was produced by The Home for Cooperation (H4C), located in the U.N. controlled Buffer Zone, which has divided the island since 1974, separating the Greek Cypriot Community in the south from the Turkish Cypriot Community in the north. Historically, and as well in 2020, BFF was conceived and led by a collaboration of artists and activists from the south and north of Cyprus. BFF 2020 was led by a five-member Leadership Team, with Dr. Ellada Evangelou serving as the festival's Artistic Director for the second consecutive year.

We, Meropi Moiseos (Nicosia) and Lee Perlman (Tel Aviv) conducted an intentionally conceived “insider/outsider to the conflict” research study. One of our shared points of departure was that divided societies not only divide people and communities, but they often provide barriers to transformative action (Yitzhaki, Gallagher, Aloni & Gross, 2022). We sought to understand the socio-political and socio-cultural significance of BFF 2020 within the island of Cyprus.

We hope the study contributes to the community of inquiry of the growing global field of Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation (ACCT) (Avetisyan et al., 2018, Avetisyan et al., 2019) and all artists, cultural workers and entrepreneurs, policy makers, researchers, funders and engaged citizens, who seek to learn and reflect more about how the arts can engender social change and social justice.

Building on the notion of ‘artist-based performance’ devised in the groundbreaking typology of peacebuilding and conflict transformation performances in **Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict, Volume 1** (Cohen, Varea & Walker, 2011), we characterize BFF 2020 as an artist-based form of conflict transformation and coin it ‘**an artist-based conflict transformation festival.**’

‘Artist-based performances’, “emerge from the impulses and creativity of artists and ensembles. The artists involved in such performances are attuned to and engaged with the needs and issues of their communities and societies.” Specifically, they:

“refer to productions in which professionally trained artists perform in fictional or real space and time.... with their primary focus based on the intersection between self-expressive needs and the experience that the audience will have with the artistic work or product. The “meaning” of a performance is understood to reside in the transaction between the viewer and the work, so that, to some degree, audience members construct their own meanings based on the experiences and sensibilities that they bring, both individually and collectively, to the event (Ibid, 2011, 7-8).”

Consciously adopting an ‘artist-based’ approach, not through a singular performance, rather as a festival, BFF 2020 attempted to both **confront** and **transform** the protracted, and what some stakeholders coin, the ‘frozen’ Cyprus conflict. The study identifies, how BFF, as an ‘artist-based’ festival went about this conflict transformation mission, by attempting to culturally dismantle the walls and barriers between north and south, literally and figuratively, during the first year of the global pandemic. BFF 2020, through its ‘artist-based’ approach, confronted unaddressed historical grievances and traumas at the core of the Cypriot conflict, while also seeking to transform the prevalent sense of ‘no end in sight’ to the conflict and the stubbornly resisted efforts to reach a negotiated solution. The study includes an extensive conceptualization and characterization of BFF 2020 and its salient features as an ‘artist-based conflict transformation festival.’

## BFF as a ‘Festival on the Fringes’

As per the full title of the study, we also characterize BFF 2020 as a ‘festival on the fringes,’ artistically, by design, as well as politically. We draw parallels between BFF 2020 and the Cypriot peace camp, both currently situated on the fringes of Cypriot society. As noted in the ‘BFF Strategic Questions’ below, the study lays out a number of questions, which touch upon the potential and limitations of BFF as a ‘festival on the fringes.’

## BFF 2020 as a Questionably ‘Contentious’ Festival

We also coin BFF 2020 a questionably ‘contentious’ festival. The word ‘questionably’ points to the paradoxical nature of BFF 2020’s identity and strategies. Informed by social movements scholar Charles Tilly’s notions of *contentious performances* (Tilly, 2008) and *repertoires of contention*, (Tilly, 2008, Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) and borne out in our research, BFF was conceived and is still perceived to be fundamentally, existentially, a form of collective action and a public expression of dissent. It is also broadly perceived to be aligned philosophically with an alternative political vision for Cypriot society, the reunification of the island. It is a politically and artistically ‘oppositional’ event. Yet, BFF is also an institutionalized, professionally run arts festival, a ‘flagship’ project of the Home for Cooperation, a recurring, annual fixture every fall in the Cypriot cultural calendar. Its repetition has led to its institutionalization, possibly making it harder to be disruptive, and thus harder to disrupt many Cypriots’ status quo approach. BFF 2020 didn’t seek to express its contentious essence into publicly contentious acts or to “demand change” as Tilly suggests, in the sense of evoking protest in Cypriot society or its political arenas.

## BFF 2020’s Seven Definitive Features

The study characterizes and details BFF 2020’s seven definitive features as an “artist-based conflict transformation festival on the fringes” and “a questionably contentious festival”:

- I. **Defiance - of the political and cultural status quo**, a living part of the festival’s ethos and its *raison d’etre*.
- II. **Mission Driven** - singularly focused on confronting and transforming the Cyprus conflict.
- III. **Resilience** - amidst the pandemic and the political crises, the BFF 2020 leadership team ultimately produced a very complex set of programs, with an approach of “the show (festival) must go on”, on its own terms, artistically and politically.
- IV. **Celebratory** - BFF 2020, as a festival, celebrated its mission, defiance and resilience with its artists and audiences through diverse performance media and in multiple settings.
- V. **Self-selected and growing community** - BFF 2020 built upon and significantly expanded a growing community of artists, academics, engaged Cypriot citizens and colleagues amongst organizational partners and allies, locally and internationally.
- VI. **Critique and Self Critique** - alongside its critique of Cypriot society, the festival Leadership Team conducted ongoing self-critique and critical reflection regarding what they perceived to be the limitations of BFF 2020’s impact in Cypriot society.
- VII. **Underlying ethical core** - built upon the leadership team’s commitments to the artists, the festival, its mission and the values of equity, justice and inclusivity.

The latter feature is informed by our reading and applying of a key notion articulated in the important [“Invite/Affirm/Evoke/Unleash” study](#) (Cohen & IMPACT team, 2021), on how artistic and cultural processes transform complex challenges.

## A New Type of Internationalization of a Conflict (“on the fringes”)

BFF 2020 went through a dramatic process, accelerated by the pandemic, of what we coin the “internationalization of a conflict on the fringes.” BFF 2020 flipped traditional notions of internationalization e.g. mobilization of political, economic, or military support extending rivalry and conflict to the rest of the world to one mobilizing and spreading hope and cooperation.

## Struggling with Fear of Normalization... from both sides

A challenge BFF 2020 faced and was constantly navigating was the fear of normalization from two distinct sides – those in Cypriot society who don’t want to **normalize relations** and those in the pro-reunification political camp who fear that by **normalizing the cooperation** between the Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots, BFF, in fact, perpetuates the status quo of the separation of both sides. These complementary fears of normalization informed BFF 2020’s strategies and operational modes in various ways and indirectly contributed to the above-mentioned internationalization process.

## BFF Strategic Questions

Our study underscores and delineates sets of **inter-related strategic questions, essentially, strategic dilemmas, with which BFF and its leadership team and community struggle**, often explicitly, and sometimes, implicitly. The questions touch upon the potential and limitations of BFF as an ACCT initiative in its sociological, political, cultural and global contexts. In the study, we highlight different and often clashing approaches to these questions, as expressed by the interviewees.

## Structure of the Study & Research Approach

The study is divided into three major sections:

### [Background](#), [Major Findings](#), and BFF [Strategic Questions & Final Reflections](#)

Several embedded links to relevant sources are included in the study.

In addition to viewing either on line or in person the BFF 2020 artistic and other events, we adopted an ethnographic approach and in 2021 conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews by zoom with: Participating Cypriot and International Artists; BFF 2020’s Producing and Artistic Leadership Team; and Stakeholders: Local and International Programmatic Partners, as well as other local artist-activists and thought leaders. (*See Appendix B for the Interview Protocol and Appendix C for the List of Interviewees*). In March 2022, at the Home for Cooperation, we shared and discussed our major findings with members of BFF 2020’s Producing and Artistic Leadership Team and other Home for Cooperation staff members.

We chose this ethnographic approach understanding that for socio-cultural and socio-political research of a festival, it would potentially offer rich data to glean the significance of the festival, based on those closely involved with it. This approach is informed by similar research efforts of singular artistic institutions, artistic events or groups, with the added complexity of the scope of a multi-event and multi-dimensional festival.

As described below, the ideological and artistic sensibilities of the Buffer Fringe Festival have evolved significantly since the inaugural festival in 2014. We knew that most of the interviewees had at least one experience of previous Buffer Fringe festivals and that many interviewees, especially the BFF leadership team, had several different Buffer Fringe experiences. Therefore, we also sought to understand if and how these previous experiences influenced their perspectives on BFF 2020.

We also surveyed Buffer Fringe 2020's communication materials on its various platforms. This included a 20 minute long ["after-movie"](#) produced by the Home for Cooperation, sharing both highlights of the festival and reflections of the artists and part of the leadership team, including on the selected festival theme of displacement and their experiences of displacement. The film and other marketing and communication materials before and during the festival also provide important data. We thank the Home for Cooperation and BFF 2020 for enabling us to share this film, as part of this study.

Our research was also informed by concepts developed in the realms of sociology, political science and social movement studies.

The research was conducted as an independent effort and not commissioned by the Home for Cooperation or any other interested party. It was made clear to all the interviewees that the research was not conceived as an evaluative assessment of any aspect of BFF 2020.

### [Outsider-Insider to the Conflict Research Choice and Structural Tension](#)

The study was conceived from the outset as "Insider-Outsider" to the conflict research to complement the inherent strengths of each and hopefully mitigate the respective disadvantages.

The decision to conduct the study was informed by a sincere curiosity shared by both researchers: Meropi, a Nicosia-based, seasoned 'insider' reporter on the Cypriot arts scene, communications professional and social activist who had previously covered the Buffer Fringe Festival in the local press, and with an extensive familiarity of the Cyprus conflict and the Cypriot "peace camp"; and Lee, a Tel Aviv based associate of Brandeis University's Ethics Center program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, an 'outsider' researcher on arts, culture and conflict transformation and cultural policy, in Israel/Palestine, active for over two decades in the ACCT field globally, and who had attended BFF 2019.

From the extensive literature on the topic, we knew that there were several distinct advantages and disadvantages that both the insider and outsider bring to the table.

The insider has greater potential for in-depth knowledge of the terrain, while potentially having considerable blind spots due to the proximity to the subject. The insider can usually be easily located within the society and his/her analysis read accordingly but may be totally identified with one side and unable to make a paradigm shift to studying the conflict, as a whole. The insider's cultural competence is likely to be high, while cultural aspects of society that pertain to the conflict may be taken for granted and 'invisible' to the insider due to over familiarity.

The outsider to the conflict, on the other hand, potentially can adopt fresh perspectives on the society but is potentially over-reliant on secondary sources which may be from one predominant perspective and acquired knowledge rather than experiential learning. His/her lack of detailed knowledge can lead to ignorance, in general, and even specific risks. (Smyth, 2001)

In addition, in light of our professional and personal backgrounds, we often struggled with the structural tension between, on the one hand, the analytical distance & critical analytic tools we adopted and on the other hand, our specific passions, whether they be for socially engaged art and belief in its potential to transform conflict or the desire to be part of an effort to reunify the island, by bringing the two communities together and working towards this goal.

Beyond the structural tension, full disclosure. Before Lee initiated the research study in the summer of 2020, he was asked and agreed to serve as a member of the Selection Committee of the festival in Spring 2020 and also took part in one of the pre-festival on-line symposia, reflecting on his experiences in BFF 2019.

Before joining the research team, Meropi was asked, in a freelance capacity, to serve as media consultant for Buffer Fringe 2020, which she took on for a two-month stint.

These respective experiences enriched the research effort.

## Background

### A. Home for Cooperation (H4C)

[H4C](#), the initiator of BFF and its producer from the festival's inception in 2014, was created by the [Association for Historical Dialogue and Research \(AHDR\)](#), established as a bi-communal group concerned with how history has been taught by the two sides and currently self-defined as a multi-communal group. Since its opening in the Buffer Zone in 2011, H4C has functioned as the primary meeting space in the island for individuals, civil society groups, official and functionaries, including both locals and those from abroad. It has also functioned as a site hosting various conferences with academics from the two sides and from abroad, as well as numerous cultural endeavors, (Papadakis, 2018), including the Buffer Fringe Festival.



Figure 2. The Home for Cooperation which initiated the Buffer Fringe Festival is situated between the checkpoints used to cross from one part of the island to the other, in an area controlled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP).

### B. The Buffer Fringe Festival (BFF) from its Inception

In 2014, The Buffer Fringe Festival was established and launched by the Home for Cooperation. Marina Neofytou, then Director of H4C, initiated and ran the festival in collaboration with an evaluation committee.

The festival took place in the Buffer Zone of Nicosia, Cyprus *“with the idea of providing a platform to question sensitive topics”* as noted in a brochure published by the H4C on BFF, adding that the aim is to enable people

to engage “*regardless of the dominant historical narratives, ideologies or identities which are very politicized and often divisive for the peoples of Cyprus*” In the local press, it was presented as an open-air theatre stage in Nicosia's dead zone. The 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the festival hosted performances by Cypriot artists, both Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots.

In 2015, the festival was shaped into a walking tour in the Buffer Zone but also took place around the old part of Nicosia on both sides of the divide. Again, artists from Cyprus participated in the festival.

2016 was the first year the Buffer Fringe Festival hosted performances by international artists and expanded in venues of historical or social significance across the divide. The festival called on both the artists and the audience to “*overcome the geographical and artistic boundaries and discover the 'fringes' and marginalities of a city life that has been 'buffered' in its inhabitants' minds visibly and invisibly. The Home for Cooperation creates the space where new cultural identities are sought and artistic fluidity is celebrated*”, as was declared in the official [press release](#) for the festival's 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.

In 2017, the festival invited applications through an international open call for the first time. Performance artist/producer Charalambia Theophanous served as the artistic director while Greek Cypriot dancer/choreographer Evi Demetriou, Turkish Cypriot artist/actor Izel Seylani and Turkish Cypriot dancer/choreographer Nezihe Erken served on the selection committee. The festival took place in various spaces, both indoors and outdoors, across the divide.

In 2018, the artistic direction baton was passed on to Achim Wieland, a German theatre director and producer, based in Cyprus. That year's festival enjoyed a distinct increase of international interest, reflected in the 300 applications submitted from all over the world. Wieland, who sadly passed away in 2022, established new partnerships to host performances in a number of cities outside of Nicosia (*detailed below in Section 'C'*), and introduced an overarching theme, a feature which would continue until 2020 and to the current day. The 2018 festival was organized under the theme: “*Breaking Point*”.

Dr. Ellada Evangelou was appointed artistic director of BFF 2019. Dr. Evangelou sought to return the festival to its roots and called upon the artists to “*Define the Buffer Zone*”, in line with that year's theme: “*Defining the/a Buffer Zone, the in-between space*”. Beyond the active involvement of artists, the festival opened itself up to scholars and architects and many local institutions. The foundations of international partnerships, including with the IMPACT global initiative, were established.

BFF 2020, which we examine in this study, continued under Dr. Evangelou's artistic direction, as well as Ms. Maria Varnakkidou and Ms. Nihal Socangi's creative direction. This 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the festival, produced amidst the global pandemic, was implemented as a hybrid event with both live and live-streamed shows in both parts of Nicosia, as well as in New York and Limassol. The festival's selected theme was “*Displacement*”.



Figure 3. Installation during the BFF 2019 at the Buffer Zone. Artistic Director Dr. Ellada Evangelou called upon the artists to "Define the/a Buffer Zone, the in-between space". ©Buffer Fringe Festival

### C. Evolution of BFF through Time and Space

The Buffer Fringe Festival has evolved, both in its artistic values and in its relation to space - in the Buffer Zone, in Nicosia and throughout the island. In its inaugural year in 2014, in choosing to conduct the festival in the Buffer Zone, BFF aimed to challenge the Buffer Zone's idea of a dead zone, a space standing idle, an unoccupied space between two communities in conflict, not to be touched or activated.

In its second year in 2015, the festival used the space around the Buffer Zone and invited the audience to walk through it, thus transcending – and even overlooking what the organizers perceived as the limitations of a geographically and politically divided city.

By expanding beyond the Buffer Zone, the 2016 festival challenged the notion of these limitations, by inviting the audience to follow the festival's activities in venues of historical or social significance across the divide.

In 2017, the choice of venue was not defined by its geographical positioning but by its cultural significance. Outdoor performances were held for the first time in historical landmarks on both sides of the divide, thus demonstrating an explicit need to seek the common values of a common culture, beyond its division.

2018 was a "Breaking Point" for the festival. Appropriately, it was also its selected theme, forging more international participation and the internationalization of its issues - breaking points were not only experienced in the Buffer Zone but in many places/spaces and situations around the world. During this 5<sup>th</sup>

edition, the festival included new partnerships which resulted in performances in Kyrenia, situated in the northern part of the island, and in Limassol and Paphos, situated in the southern part of the island.

In 2019, the festival returned to where it had originated: the Buffer Zone. Furthermore, its new artistic director, Dr. Ellada Evangelou, challenged the artists to “define the/a Buffer Zone”. The invitation created the literal and metaphorical space for participants from Cyprus and the world to speak about and express (their) buffer zones.

#### D. Setting the Scene: The Cyprus Conflict

Cyprus was under British rule for 82 years until it gained independence in 1960. However, the long-standing conflict between the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot communities intensified following independence.

After a series of political upheavals, which started during the Greek Cypriots’ anti-colonial struggle for *enosis* (union) with Greece and peaked in December 1963 (the ‘bloody Christmas’), a Green Line between the two communities was drawn by the United Nations in 1964, aiming to prevent a recurrence of intercommunal violence. Fast forward a decade later, regiments of the Republic of Cyprus’ National Guard, supported by the Greek Force in Cyprus (ELDYK) and led by the Athens military junta, launched a coup against President Makarios on July 15, 1974, to assassinate President Makarios to complete the goal of union with Greece. The coup failed, Makarios fled to New York and on July 19 accused Greece of invading Cyprus. The day after, on July 20th, citing the Treaty of Guarantee, Turkey ‘invaded’ or ‘launched a peace operation’ in Cyprus (*we relate to the different uses and meanings of these and other terms below*). The Turkish invasion led to the military occupation of one third of the island. The Green Line expanded, separating the south part of the island – where Greek Cypriots were forced to relocate (Republic of Cyprus), from the north part – where Turkish Cypriots were forced to relocate. The north part was later self-declared as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Turkey.

After a nearly 30-year estrangement, the Turkish Cypriot administration decided on easing travel restrictions in 2003, allowing Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, respectively, to cross at a limited number of checkpoints by showing their ID or passports. This prerequisite sparked yet another debate at the time, as many Cypriots would refuse to show their ID/passport to cross the checkpoints to visit their own homeland. As of 2022, there are seven checkpoints, which can be crossed either on foot or by car. In 2019, a record number of 3,694,958 crossings from one side to the other were recorded.

When the pandemic broke out in early 2020, it was the first time that Cyprus had closed the checkpoints on the island since 2003. The decision was taken by the Republic of Cyprus on February 29, 2020, even though no Covid-19 cases were recorded in Cyprus at the time and the airports were still open. The four closed checkpoints included the one in the capital, Nicosia, crossed by hundreds on a daily basis. The decision triggered dismay among peace activists who were calling for cooperation between the two communities to tackle the pandemic, rather than measures which further enhanced the island’s division.

During our research, we experimented with the idea of the festival being part of the peace process, a process which is currently “frozen”, much like the conflict is often characterized (*see section ‘E’ below*). Since 2017, after the collapse of negotiations to solve the Cyprus conflict and reunify the island, no real steps have been taken to restart negotiations. On the contrary, there's a complete disconnection from the idea of reunifying the island under a bizonal, bicomunal federation with political equality, as per the agreed UN framework.

### E. What's in a conflict's name?

The Cyprus conflict is characterized, internally, in many ways, e.g., “the Cyprus issue” or *Zitima* (in Greek), “the Cyprus problem” (*Provlima* in Greek), or *Kibris Sorunu* in Turkish, which means both problem and issue.

The terms used by the various political camps in the two communities to describe the events which led to this conflict, include ‘invasion’ - used by almost all Greek Cypriots - or ‘operation’ - used by some Turkish Cypriots. The Buffer Zone itself is also commonly called ‘The Dead Zone’ or ‘No Man’s Land.’

Other terms commonly used to characterize the conflict in diplomatic, academic and local civil society circles are dispute, frozen conflict, soft conflict, non-violent conflict, post-violent conflict and post-conflict (Psaltis, 2016; Hadjigeorgiou, 2022; Bebler & Ker-Lindsay, 2015; Brody, 2015). Scholars and analysts in international relations, political science and sociology tend to understand the Cyprus conflict more widely as an ethnic or intercommunal conflict, which are the most widely agreed upon terms since they do not rely on further conditions or particulars to their definitions. (Sertaç, Küçükşener & Porat, 2020; Paschalis, Kitromilides & Coulombis, 1975; Vural & Peristianis, 2008). Yet, the Cyprus conflict is predominantly defined over the last decade and a half by scholars as an intractable or protracted conflict (Hadjipavlou, 2007; Psaltis, Beydola, Filippou & Vrachimis, 2014; Bekerman, Zemblyas & McGlynn, 2009; and specifically, an intractable or protracted ‘social’ conflict, protracted ‘ethnic conflict’ or even a ‘comfortable’ protracted conflict. One scholar even describes the Cyprus conflict as a “textbook case of Intractable Conflict” in the way that it is “unresolved for a long duration, of zero-sum nature, seemingly irreconcilable, influenced by external actors, and characterized by continuous communal division and deep inter-communal distrust.” (Adamides, 2020). The notions of intractable or protracted social conflict (Azar, E., 1985 & 1990;) have also been used to highlight the intensity of the ethnic or cultural aspects of the conflict and to describe how they “intensify competition around cultural issues” (Constantinou, & Hatay, 2010).

This multitude of terms prompted us to include the interviewees’ characterization of the conflict as one of the questions in our interview protocol.

While not the focus of this study, we recognized that these terms have symbolic and practical significance. They express the Cyprus conflict’s ‘actors’, ‘stakeholders’ (including diplomats’), scholars’ and analysts’ various sensibilities and interests. They also underscore the different notions of the conflict the festival attempted to confront and transform.

### F. BFF 2020 Program

As opposed to most professional theatre and other performing arts festivals produced throughout the world during the first 10 months of the pandemic (March – December 2020), that were either cancelled or produced solely or primarily thru broadcasting pre-taped recordings of the planned performances, BFF 2020 was one of the first and only ones to respond by choosing to produce a “hybrid model.” This included mostly “live” events: performances and installations in Cyprus, with in person audiences present where possible amidst the health restrictions and limitations. The events were broadcast online via the BFF Facebook Page, BFF website and on virtual platforms of groups partnering with BFF 2020 in a given event. These hybrid “live” and “live broadcast”, that is, live streaming events took place in venues in Nicosia, north and south of the Buffer Zone, other locales in Cyprus and in New York, along with one unplanned taped performance. Some of the festival’s other planned “live” events were either cancelled or postponed till the BFF 2021.

[BFF 2020's program](#) consisted of nine performances, two installation works, two virtual discussions and one online international academic conference. Of the nine performances (five performance art pieces, one theatre performance, two contemporary dance performances and one artistic dialogue performance), four were presented live before an audience in Cyprus and the rest were livestreamed while being performed in Cyprus, and in two cases, in New York. The two installations were presented physically on digital media. One, on-screen, was at the live performance venue in Teatro Polis, while the other was in the form of posters on walls in the center of Nicosia with QR Codes which connected to the work.

BFF 2020 hosted 28 local and international artists: 11 Greek Cypriots living in Cyprus or abroad, 2 Turkish Cypriots and 15 international artists, among whom were both artists of Cypriot origin living abroad and international artists living in Cyprus.

In order to help further “set the scene” of the BFF 2020 artistic program and put some faces to the names and visual images to the events, here is a link to the [after-movie](#), which we recommend you see in full. Alternatively, you may choose to view the brief excerpts of three specific BFF 2020 productions, juxtaposed with conversations with the respective performing artists. These three productions are emblematic of the BFF 2020 program, thematically, in their artistic media, also reflecting the diversity of how BFF 2020 events were produced in the wake of the pandemic.

*Excerpt I – History Lesson, by Argyro Nicolaou 4:22 - 5:32*

The performance-lecture is conducted as a lesson, given by Dr. Nicolaou, which explores the intergenerational effects of internal displacement in Cyprus and the histories they produce. As per the program note: ***the performance harbors a desire to return to a vision of Cyprus as a whole: before the island was displaced from itself.*** Nicolaou, a Cypriot scholar and filmmaker, based in New York at the time, draws from artistic sources that are rarely looked at and studied e.g., films shot in Cyprus before 1974, like 'Exodus' (1960, starring Paul Newman), 'Sin' (1971, starring Rachel Welch) and 'Ghost in the Noonday Sun' (1974, starring Peter Sellers) to (re)create and teach the island's history in a whole new manner, far from the dominant, and often nationalistic narrative. Here is the [link to the full production of “History Lesson”](#), that was performed and broadcasted live from New York City, and due to the pandemic, not performed live in Nicosia, as originally intended.

*Excerpt II – awaiting your response 10:16 – 11:47*

Kat Kats is an Australian artist of Cypriot origin. She lives in Australia with her husband, artist Bryce Ives with whom she collaborated for this installation called "awaiting your response". Kat Kats and Bryce Ives were supposed to travel to Cyprus for the festival but did not make it due to the pandemic. They collaborated with Kyriaki Theodorou and their work, “awaiting your response”, resulted in posters hung all over Nicosia within the walls with a QR code that anyone could scan and listen to the story of Kat's grandparents who emigrated to Australia in the 60s. Many of these posters still decorate the town's walls.

*Excerpt III – Kazanti 13:00 – 14:35*

“Kazanti” was a theatrical performance by Yasemin Collective. The three Cypriot actresses wrote the play about kazanti, a game of chance which is common in both the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot community. The play uses much irony and humor to describe the surrealism that characterizes the reality of Cyprus today.



Figure 4. "Kazanti" on stage at Teatro Polis during the BFF 2020, by Yasemin Collective. "Kazanti" was one of the few performances staged live before an audience.

### G. Innovations: Symposia, Artists Blogs and "Thinking Partners"

Other BFF 2020 components included a series of 'live' online English language symposia in partnership with local and international groups, leading up to and during the festival. Two virtual discussions, "Displacement as a Global Experience" and "Artistic Praxis & a Contested Festival in the Middle of a Pandemic", were produced in partnership with the [IMPACT](#) global initiative, conducted in the weeks leading up to the artistic program. The international conference "Making Theatre at a Time of Global Crisis" that took place during the official festival dates, was conducted in partnership with the Open University of Cyprus, a local academic institution. You can view Day 2 of the conference under the theme "Crisis, Globalism and the Arts" with a panel discussion on BFF 2020 at 3:28:53, by following [this link](#).

The festival also launched a [festival blog](#) on the BFF website. The 2020 inaugural blog provided a platform where the participating artists and their thinking partners shared and documented elements of their creative processes, including many visual elements.

BFF 2020 piloted, also in collaboration with IMPACT, its "Thinking Partners Program", to enrich participating artists' practice and their connection to the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation (ACCT) field, globally. The program matched artists, scholars, and activists with different areas of expertise from diverse locations

around the world with the artists and artist teams who were creating new work for BFF 2020. Thinking partners served in an advisory role to a single artist or artist group, providing knowledge and support that responded to the creative ideas the artists were developing. Here is a [link to reflections on this initiative written by IMPACT's Germaine Ingram](#).

## Major Findings

The conceptualization and characterization of BFF 2020 and its salient features constitute the study's major findings. Our analysis of the voices and critical reflections of the interviewees in our semi-structured interviews, which are integrated below, has informed our coining BFF 2020 an 'artist-based conflict transformation festival,' a 'festival on the fringes' and a 'questionably contentious festival.' The interviewees drew on their experiences and shared their perceptions and reflections about the Cyprus conflict, their festival experiences and about BFF's explicit raison d'être to harness the power of creativity and the arts as a conflict transformation tool.

Note: ***The interviewees comments are all bolded and italicized.*** Due to issues of privacy, we have chosen to identify most of the interviewees in a generic form e.g. participating artist, leadership team member, rather than by name.

### **BFF 2020's Seven Definitive Features:**

**Defiance, Mission Driven, Resilience, Celebratory, Self-selected and growing community, Critique & Self Critique and Underlying ethical core.**

#### I. Defiance

The first feature of BFF 2020 is its defiance of the political and cultural status quo. As a built-in and living part of the festival's ethos and of its raison d'être, this feature expressed itself in various ways.

One of many tangible examples is the selection of the festival theme of displacement, way before the outbreak of the pandemic. The festival's social and artistic point of departure embraced the deeper and painful existential challenges Cypriots, north and south, continue to experience, as part of and in the wake of its conflict. The theme, as part of the festival's ongoing agenda, also served to challenge and defy dominant narratives in Cypriot society.

As the artistic director noted about the selection of the theme:

***In Cypriot society, we don't really discuss, we don't really have critical discussions.... you're either for or against something, you don't talk about it.... And we need to build new narratives together among the artists that explore Cyprus as one single identity.***

One of the Creative Co-Directors noted that the festival explored competing and often clashing narratives and identity, which are themselves internally in tension:

***They discovered how we as Cypriots are very confused with our identity and the political situation and if we belong here or there, and where and what... you could see the political aspect of displacement and how these affected the new generation.***

Many of the participating artist interviewees also noted the leadership team's defiance of the limitations imposed on the freedom of movement between north and south, as part of the measures taken by the Republic of Cyprus to tackle the spread of Covid-19. This act unleashed the Cypriot peace camp's fury, who protested that it was a unilateral and scientifically unjustified decision. Some viewed the team's persistence to go through with the live performances in the north, first and foremost as an explicit protest against the closed checkpoints.

In the case of BFF 2020, the defiance is not expressed through a given event or performance, but in the **mode**

**of operation as a festival**, as an institution, where the leadership team defied, at great cost of time and resources, what they saw as the primarily political motivations of the limits of movement between south and north.

Underscoring this, the artistic director reinforced the need for defiance of the cultural and political status quo overall, which was reinforced by the freedom of movement limitations:

*In terms of the individual right to be able to go and see art, without succumbing to the tension and the violence that is inflicted on a human body when it comes to actually crossing a checkpoint. I think that people should be given an option, and we as cultural agents should try to, if we are able to, if it's possible to, give people that right, to grant people that right... we're not giving it to them, they have it... they just need the platform to actually cash in... they should be able to go and see art.*

Displacement, therefore, wasn't only an edgy festival theme. Amidst the pandemic, the leadership team defiantly sought to overcome and leverage the displacement.

## II. Mission Driven: Fused artistic and social missions

BFF 2020's defiance directly connects to its second feature, as a **mission driven** festival. BFF 2020's artistic and social missions were not only fused but strengthened and built on each other. Some of the artists noted that BFF 2020 would have been cancelled if the artistic team didn't believe that they should "stand by the artists", many of whom were left with no jobs and thus no income, and no support from the government during the pandemic. The creative team also articulated their deep belief in enabling as much live audience participation during BFF 2020, as possible.

We understand the Buffer Fringe Festival's mission as **confronting and attempting to transform the Cyprus conflict**. The leadership team went about this by culturally dismantling the walls and barriers between north and south by making gaps through which the other can be seen and heard on the island and beyond. They had a mission and their insistence on the "hybrid" model enabled the live audience participation in both north and south, albeit limited, as well as a dramatic expansion of its international audiences.

One interviewee noted about the performances with live audience participation, that *in 2019, it was important, but now it seemed critical, existential*.

## III. Resilience

BFF's socially and artistically infused charged mission along with the Leadership Team's determination speak to another feature: **resilience, amidst the pandemic and the political crises**. Against very difficult odds, the team coped, together, with ever shifting logistical challenges, to ultimately produce a very complex set of programs. Their mentality wasn't just a "the show must go on" for its own sake, but the "contentious festival" must go on, on its own terms.

One of the creative directors expresses the three first features of defiance, mission-driven and resilience and what she understood to be a unique characteristic of BFF, as a festival:

*At the end of the day, the Buffer Fringe is a festival... festivals are happening around the world, but this specific festival...it's not a festival just for the sake of it... [we don't] even care about making a festival just to make a festival, you know... It's a bigger picture that matters, it's the political aspect that the Buffer Fringe carries with it.*

#### IV. Celebratory

BFF 2020 was a festival... and a celebratory event – celebrating the creative responses to the pandemic – in form and content, the creative interpretations of the selected theme of displacement and ultimately celebrating its defiance, mission and resilience. Substantively, Cyprus’ societal existential angst and its “conflict”, were offered as a source of inspiration, not just to local artists, but to international artists, as well. BFF 2020’s intention though was not to limit the scope of creativity or limit the works selected only to those directly addressing Cypriot social and political realities or sensibilities.

The artistic director noted that the selection of the theme *basically, came out of a need for us to start to think of the human experience of moving from one space to the other.*

This feature speaks to some of the unique aspects of arts and conflict transformation overall.

A participating non-Cypriot artist, who resides in Cyprus illustrates this point:

***The festival provides a space for people who are [otherwise] in political discussion which turn them away from each other; the arts enable discussion of sensitive topics, without necessarily feelings of sensitivity.... it's a very, very complex situation and so sometimes the benefit of the arts is that it simplifies or enables the discussion in a simpler, empathetic way.***

The artistic leadership team, despite the differences in their backgrounds, were all committed to the celebratory dimension of the festival, working together to enable the artists to express themselves and celebrate their work, despite all the external obstacles.

#### V. Self-selected and Growing Community

BFF 2020 built upon and significantly expanded a growing community of artists, activists, academics, engaged Cypriot citizens and colleagues among organizational partners and allies, locally and internationally. In our questions related to this issue, almost all the interviewees involved with the festival expressed their personal sense of belonging to “the Buffer Fringe community,” and described it in various ways. Much of the conversations on this focused on to what extent this is a self-selective community and how much of the Buffer Fringe community overlaps with what many called the Home for Cooperation’s community – and the significance of that. For some, notions of community became even more sharpened in their reflections on the Buffer Fringe’s audiences – some saw the community and audiences as one and the same, but most viewed BFF’s community and their audiences as fundamentally different, with the community as a subset of the larger group of audience members, including those who partake in Home for Cooperation events and ongoing programs.

Many of the Cypriot interviewees grappled whether the collaboration amongst a growing, but mostly like-minded local community of artists and activists, served primarily as an echo-chamber, reinforcing and embedding already established views and assumptions.

One Cypriot artist pointed to the dualistic nature of the BFF 2020 community, as an echo-chamber.

***Are they able to speak or to preach to anyone else you know than the choir that's already converted? I don't know how to say it. Yeah, so preach to the converted, or preach to the non-converted and be effective, that is a big question for any communal initiative or multicultural initiative in Cyprus.***

In light of the expanded international partnerships and hybrid format, the artistic director embraced a broader

notion of the BFF community.

***“I think my understanding of community has expanded to include the online and the global.”***

## VI. Critique AND Self-Critique

Alongside its critique of Cypriot society, the festival Leadership Team conducted ongoing self-critique and critical reflection regarding what they perceived to be the limitations of BFF 2020's impact in Cypriot society. On the one hand the artistic team all took pride in the festival's achievements overall and they and the artists cherished the 'fringe' and independent nature of the festival in its artistic sense, in its singular commitment to provide a high-level, open, inclusive platform for participating artists. The artistic director and other members of the leadership team though were very open in sharing with us, often tough self-critique, expressing their perceptions of the festival and its mission continuing to be, like the Cypriot peace camp, on the fringes of Cypriot society.

Alongside sharing her pride in the achievements of the festival, the artistic director was very open in sharing with us a harsh self-critique:

***I don't think the festival is that impactful and I don't think that anybody really cares for us on the island. We're very marginalized... I wish it would generate more conversation.***

This very bold reflection underscores the question of whether the Buffer Fringe Festival is destined to be on the fringes, and if not, from a strategic perspective, where can or should it be trying to situate itself within Cypriot society?

Here are two participating artists' reflections which shed light on these questions.

A non-Cypriot artist resident of the island commented on her understanding of the festival's raison d'être:

***For the Buffer Fringe to be operating here is so obviously political, but I don't believe they have a political agenda as in politics and politicians and occupation, and that is politics with a big “P”. But the politics with a small “p”, the politics of people of society, of identity, is what I believe their objective is, if not suggest one type of a separate identity to allow the space for it to be discussed so that it stops being the identity that divides Turkish from Greek Cypriots.***

A Cypriot artist emphasized the crucial social and artistic roles the festival fulfills:

***First of all, the name Buffer Fringe Festival, in the buffer zone, a dead zone, is where you can give life when you can have performances. It's a place that does not belong to anyone, and this is what we need, I think, in Cyprus to collaborate more, we need to have more artists from the south and the north and I have friends from the north and south. I've always wanted to have this ability to create things with them and the Buffer Fringe Festival offers this opportunity.***

The email note sent in November 2020, two days before the opening of the festival by the artistic director to all the artists and partners, capsulizes these first six definitive features:

***With great pleasure we are inviting you to this year's Buffer Fringe Performing Arts Festival. Despite the hard times we are going through, our team and artists have managed to deliver another year full of creativity, critical thinking and of course collaboration across the globe.***

## VII. Underlying Ethical Core

This seventh and last feature is informed by a recent study on arts, culture and conflict transformation:

[Invite/Affirm/Evoke/Unleash: How artistic and cultural processes transform complex challenges](#) (Cohen &

IMPACT team, 2021). It offers the notion of *ethical arts and cultural processes that can be crafted to evoke honesty and nourish capacities to negotiate ambiguity and paradox... and unleash creativity and agency* (Ibid, 7).

We identified, through the interviews, and as expressed in some of the features above e.g. defiance and mission driven, what we understand to be an underlying ethical core of BFF 2020 – built upon the leadership team’s commitment to the artists, the festival, its mission, and the values of equity, justice and inclusivity. Similarly, to the role of directors of Jewish-Palestinian joint theatre productions, studied in the Israel/Palestine context (Perlman, 2017), the leadership team served as a kind of ‘moral force’. Their consciousness determined, to a great extent, the consciousness of the productions and embodied the core mission of the festival, to confront and transform the Cyprus conflict.

### A New Type of Internationalization... of a Conflict “on the fringes”

BFF 2020 went through a dramatic process, accelerated by the pandemic, of what we coin “internationalization.” This is not to be confused with the use of the word in socialist and communist circles.

Typically, in conflict studies, one speaks of either ‘outside-in’ internationalization or ‘inside-out’, internationalization – by both state and non-state actors. In the first, ‘actors’, external to a conflict, try to promote and preserve their various interests in a conflict. In the second, the ‘actors’ inside a conflict extend their rivalry to the rest of the world and seek to mobilize public opinion, political, economic, or military support by bringing a conflict in one location elsewhere (Bapat, 2007; Reut Institute, 2005).

An example of ‘inside-out’ internationalization is the B.D.S. (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement of the Palestinians (Joffe, 2017; Abu Ziad & Schenker, 2015; Abu Ziad & Schenker, 2007). The internationalization of the Civil War in Syria is an example of both ‘outside-in’ and ‘inside-out’. Internationalization processes are both top-down and bottom-up and often both happen in parallel. For example, during the current war between Ukraine and Russia, there are many examples of both types of internationalization at play.

BFF 2020 flipped these traditional notions of internationalization e.g. mobilization of support extending rivalry and conflict to the rest of the world, to one of mobilizing and spreading hope and cooperation. BFF 2020 adopted this different type of strategy of internationalization, understanding and often frustrated that the Cypriot problem is a “conflict on the fringes.” This was expressed in the festival’s operational and artistic decisions, including the dominant inclusion of performances and events in English, expanded partnerships with global partners, most notably, the IMPACT global initiative which co-conceived and partnered in the ‘Thinking Partners’ program and co-produced with BFF 2020’s Leadership Team the two pre-festival symposia, and the decision to have a significant online presence, accelerated by the pandemic.

In BFF 2020’s strategy of internationalization, the festival brings both sides’ shared hopes for the situation to an international audience and invites diverse global partners and audiences to join them and expand this cooperation and this hope. The leadership team, accelerated and dramatized by the pandemic, created a sense of urgency with new international programs, partners, and viewers.

From the perspective of the leadership team members, the internationalization stemmed from both a planful and organic approach.

Manager of the Home for Cooperation during BFF 2020 noted:

***And this was one of my goals as director of the Home since the Fringe (i.e., BFF) grew so much, to have***

*its own team and its own entity, let's say somehow, to be able to grow more and go international. And that's why we invested with the new team and a specific role with a three-year plan with the artistic director in order to be more sustainable and build on the previous year's work.*

As experienced by BFF 2020's artistic director, the circumstances of the pandemic and pragmatic audience development needs, rendered BFF 2020's internationalization organic, which took on a life of its own.

*I think that the original intention was very logistical, very practical and it was about audience development. Very practically speaking, it was about who the audience was going to be. Since the participating artists' blog started to kind of take-off, and it really took off very fast and it had a really great dynamic, and the connection with the Thinking Partners helped. Some of the international thinking partners were very active. It's then that we understood that, you know, that this had potential.... I think that the international aspect of it and these kinds of parallel processes came on because we understood that there was stuff there. Also having IMPACT on board doing the parallel events, like the symposia, were very dynamic and again we understood that there is something here, so yeah, I guess that was it. So, it evolved into a new international community, whereby this kind of inside-out and outside-in kind of thing both worked. I think at some point we were following what was happening rather than making it happen.... Yes, I think that the outside-in was very organic but the one thing that makes sense in relation to working with IMPACT and Gallatin (the partner NYU organization), and all these people was the fact that we came in with a need, with an awareness of what we needed and that the fact, that, especially for IMPACT, the shared conflict transformation agenda, is something that freed us from creating models that did not represent who we are.*

Two of BFF 2020's Leadership Team members reflections underscore the outside-in dimension of the internalization processes:

*I think that in the end the theme of displacement became kind of... the festival as whole was displaced without us wanting it to be... at some point we were just watching what was happening.*

*We were really open, and we would have a meeting, and something would be voiced and the next week we would find ourselves working to make it happen. It was this very open kind of free process that it didn't go 'oh, we will do this, and we will do that.' It was a very organic process I would say.*

## Struggling with Fear of Normalization... from both sides: Normalizing Relations & Normalizing the Cooperation

A challenge BFF 2020 faced and was constantly navigating was the fear of normalization from two distinct sides – those in Cypriot society who don't want to **normalize relations** and those in the pro-bizonal, bicomunal federation political camp, who fear that by **normalizing the cooperation** between North and South, BFF, in fact perpetuates the status quo of the separation of both sides. These complementary fears of normalization informed BFF 2020's strategies and operational modes in various ways and indirectly contributed to the above-mentioned internationalization process.

The first are those in Cypriot society who do not want to meet the other side or necessarily be associated with groups or in this case a festival that facilitates this encounter. The second group, who fear the impact of the normalizing the cooperation, was very discernable amongst our interviewees.

One of the participating artists explained how even amongst the artist community there is a tension regarding the normalization of relations. She shares how her friend who could not accept what one side refers to as "the

Turkish occupation”, chose not to attend the festival:

***I think Buffer has its audience as other theatres or festivals have their audience. For example, I had a friend who wanted to come in, [but] when she found out that it was organized by Home for Cooperation, she didn't want to come... she wanted to see our performance as artists, but because of the organization [BFF, and its ideology] she didn't come because she doesn't accept to go to the north part to see the theatre... Yes, our grandfathers or our relatives were fighting, but if we keep thinking of what happened and being stuck on that we will never go forward, we will never be able to see a future together.***

Another face of fear of normalization was also expressed by the artistic director, amongst others, regarding the limitations of the historical BFF bicomunal approach and how placing bicomunal artistic collaborations, and specifically in the buffer zone, as a continued thrust, unintentionally encouraged “normalization” of the separation:

***We as a festival at some point, have reached a point where, we should try to stop bringing people together. I think this kind of old style of peacebuilding and bringing people together from both sides and you know, ‘you guys want the same thing so why don't you do a common project?’ I think we should stop completely. As a peacebuilder through the arts, that is my first lesson. So, no forced engagements, marriages, baptisms, (laughs) bar mitzvahs, or any of that. I think we have graduated into the post-post-conflict, at least on the island.***



Figure 5. To visit the Buffer Fringe Festival, the H4C and cross to the other side, one has to pass through the Ledra Palace checkpoint where now worn-out images of two Greek Cypriots murdered in 1996 by Turkish nationalists are posted.

## BFF 2020 as a Questionably 'Contentious' Festival

Social movements scholar Charles Tilly coined the term *contentious performance*, in describing certain types of public protests, that address contested issues, and involve public expressions of dissent against prevailing systems and demand change. Tilly describes the contentious performance as a public act of *contentious politics* which he defines as the interactions in which people make claims that bear on the interests of others, by use of public performance, and utilize forms of *collective action*, or coordination and alliances with others on behalf of shared interests and advancing their claims. Oftentimes, contentious politics assume a bottom-up perspective. Tilly also coined the notion of a *repertoire of contention* to discuss the intersection of theatre and protest and the collaboration between communities of performing artists, theatre makers and activists.

We coin BFF 2020 a questionably 'contentious' festival.

The word 'questionably' points to the paradoxical nature of BFF 2020's identity and strategies. As borne out in our research, BFF was conceived and is still perceived to be fundamentally, existentially, a form of collective action and a public expression of dissent, and what Tilly and co-researcher, Sidney Tarrow might coin 'a public act of *contentious politics*' (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). It is also broadly perceived to be aligned philosophically with an alternative political vision for Cypriot society, the reunification of the island. It is a politically and artistically 'oppositional' event. One of BFF 2020's features that strengthens this perspective is what we characterized above as the festival's "defiance," that was expressed boldly in the wake of the pandemic.

Yet, BFF is also an institutionalized, professionally run arts festival, a 'flagship' project of the Home for Cooperation, a recurring, annual fixture every fall in the Cypriot cultural calendar. Its repetition has led to its institutionalization, possibly making it harder to be disruptive, and thus harder to disrupt many Cypriots' status quo approach. BFF 2020 didn't seek to express its contentious essence into publicly contentious acts or to "demand change" as Tilly suggests, in the sense of evoking protest in Cypriot society or its political arenas. So, while it possesses many of the characteristics that Tilly describes, it didn't seek to spark controversy that could lead to, for example, public debate of how Cypriots see reunification happening.

Some of the festival's local participating artists express their internal, visceral experiences in how they experienced BFF 2020, wrestling with opening oneself up to the contentious history of the conflict just by virtue of choosing to take part.

***Don't forget what you have to drive past to go to the festival... You see the pictures of people who were killed by terrorists in 1974 and after... I had these discussions with friends and when we passed from there, they said, 'I have a pain in my stomach. I cannot go forward,' they cannot, they don't want to see these images anymore, so when you pass this road you know what happened... And [then] you have the big images in front of you on this road, and then you create a festival in the same road we and you want peace. But you have to show ID in order to pass. So it's very complicated... how to manage this festival, and where to place it.***

One of the Cypriot artists points to, but also challenges the inherent time limitations of BFF:

***...that's a big problem kind of, if this is a festival that makes you free once in a lifetime in the buffer zone, because I also have a problem with that... it needs to be open every day, that Buffer Zone. It's a buffer zone, so if we can make art for a month, but we are not making it for a year. It could be bigger and longer, if there was good funding and if they're thinking that this is great, and if you can have permission to have a festival in a buffer zone... so if you're already thinking about this it's also reflected in your art and at least buffer friends or this festival opens that kind of ground.***

Another artist reflected:

***You have all the range of ideas coming in together to put something as one at the end of the day, with one vision. There is an importance in physically coming together; physically transcending borders, in holding a festival in a buffer zone.***

***To see a unification, you need to imagine a life without borders, without armies, without police, without showing your ID. And that's very difficult because we are used to it for so long.***

In referring to the artist quoted above à-propos the fear or normalizing relations, whose friend chose not to attend a festival event in the north, out of protest of what she called the Turkish occupation, another leadership team member reflected:

***The fact that this person had kind of this uncomfortable situation of wanting to see the performance of their friend, but they had to think about 'who organizes' or that because of this they should change their mind and not watch the performance...I think even this is sparking a question for the person because they have to make a choice. They have to make a choice to go see the performance in the north part of the divide. They have to make a choice to cross. So, in this sense, I would also define it as a contentious festival. Maybe not sparking controversy or protest but it is starting a questioning process on an individual level, maybe not on a societal level. Maybe that why it's a questionably contentious festival. But yeah, at least it's challenging them.***

A member of the leadership team considered the distinctions between a contentious and controversial festival:

***I have always found the difference between contentious and controversy very significant because something can generate controversy and that's controversial, but to be contentious, by no means do you have to generate controversy. And I think, in the context of Cyprus, the festival is creating an alternative subjectivity to all of the dominant ideologies.***

Yet, as a socially engaged festival, BFF, in the spirit of other socially engaged forms and traditions in the theatre – whether it be explicit political theatre, or specifically documentary theatre, took on a role of critiquing myths of a country/society that tends to silence, marginalize or distort the voices of those not in positions of power and whose stories or opinions are either ignored or suppressed by the media or government which stereotypes or even erases them.

Part and parcel with this notion of contentiousness, BFF 2020 singularly embodies the 'evoke' feature described in the aforementioned [“Invite/Affirm/Evoke/Unleash”](#) 2021 report. BFF 2020 ***evokes feelings and honest exploration where repeated traumas and ongoing oppressions have resulted in numbness and silencing; and nourishes capacities to embrace the paradox and ambiguity that characterize complexity*** (Cohen & IMPACT team, 2021, 7).

An additional explanation of the festival's questionably contentious nature offered by one of the BFF 2020 leadership team members relates to the festival's identity in relation to its producing body, the Home for Cooperation:

***Buffer Fringe also has the issue of being linked to a civil society organization. So, it's a festival, but at the same it's like a peacebuilding program of an organization so there are always some different types of messages of the two entities, if you can say, maybe not officially, but in practice. Which is maybe why it cannot realize its potential of being contentious as a festival. So, this is a kind of a debate we are having internally as well.***

## BFF 2020's Problematizing Paradox

These differing notions around the contentious nature of BFF 2022 can also be understood by what we understand to be BFF 2020's 'problematizing paradox'. BFF is the flagship project of the Home for Cooperation, which is at the forefront in Cyprus of the explicit promotion of a bicomunal, now more commonly called multi-communal agenda, and is associated in Cypriot civil society and the diplomatic community with the pro-unification, pro-bizonal, bicomunal federation camp. In contrast, BFF 2020, with its questioning approach to traditional bicomunal and co-existence practices and its very self-aware selection of displacement as the festival's theme, reflected a different set of sensibilities in its relation to how to confront and attempt to transform the Cyprus conflict. Rather than pointing towards or offering a solution, BFF 2020 used the festival platform to confront the conflict by gaining a deeper perspective of the conflict, selecting and including performances that try to understand the historical roots, some of the significant events that influence it and its various implications within Cypriot society. While problematization is a term used typically in other milieus - in critical thinking and pedagogical dialogue in educational circles, or in critical analysis and demystification of behavior and phenomena in social research, one might characterize BFF 2020's approach as **problematizing the conflict**, in the arts, culture and conflict transformation context. BFF 2020's problematizing is similar to how many human and civil rights group activists, globally, (as opposed to most peace organizations who are solution-focused), relate to their missions of preserving human dignity by struggling for and raising awareness to injustices and thus, problematizing the conflicts in which they operate, rather than offering and promoting political solutions.

## BFF Strategic Questions and Final Reflections

Our study underscores and delineates sets of **inter-related strategic questions, essentially, strategic dilemmas, with which BFF and its leadership team and community struggle**, often explicitly, and sometimes, implicitly. The questions touch upon the potential and limitations of BFF as an ACCT initiative in its sociological, political, cultural and now, global contexts. In the study, we've highlighted different and often clashing approaches to these questions, as expressed by the interviewees.

We invite the reader to explore whether some, or all of these question and dilemmas, when contextualized and adapted, have relevance to their work in your spheres, at various stages of conceptualization, development and implementation.

- I. **On the Fringes I** Is BFF itself destined to be on the fringes? If BFF is in fact politically on the fringes of Cypriot society, and it explicitly embraces that position, can or should it adopt a more contentious set of strategies? If you locate yourself on the fringe, can you hope to transform the mainstream of society?
- II. **Contentious? I** Does BFF necessarily have to be contentious in Tilly's senses, to engage constructively with the Cyprus conflict?
- III. **Contentious? II – Same Time Next Year** - What are the different ways in which BFF's institutionalized nature as the flagship project of the Home for Cooperation contribute and limit it to achieving its mission? How contentious can a recurring, year in/year out festival and a fixture in the Cypriot cultural calendar be? What is the most effective balance between being a positive, disruptive force and institutionalization?
- IV. **On the Fringes? II** Does BFF best serve Cypriot society and transforming its conflict, while on the fringes? If it is not destined to be on the fringes, where can or should it be trying to situate itself within Cypriot society? Are there either paradigms or specific strategies that can lead to different outcomes?
- V. **Seven Definitive Features** Are BFF 2020's seven Definitive Features (*Defiance, Mission Driven, Resilience, Celebratory, Self-Selected and Growing Community, Critique & Self Critique, Underlying Ethical Core*) sufficient to enable BFF to fulfil its mission?
- VI. **Normalization** – Are addressing the fear of *normalizing relations* (among prospective BFF audience members from a large subset of Cypriots) and the critique of *normalizing cooperation* (among a kernel of key Cypriot peace and social change activists) in essence, challenges that need to be addressed and resolved in parallel or in dialogue with each other? Can these challenges be reconciled at all?
- VII. **Internationalization I** What are the strategic and practical implications and potential of the internationalization process for BFF, including specifically within Cypriot society, to fulfil its mission of confronting and transforming the protracted, "frozen" Cyprus conflict?
- VIII. **Internationalization II** Does BFF's internationalization process essentially move it outside of the fringes?

### Final Reflections

One of our motivations in conducting this study was to enrich and inform our global colleagues' practices and contribute to the broader understanding of creative responses to different types of conflicts. We also hope the study contributes to the understanding of arts festivals' potential and limitations to engender social change, and the perhaps unique characteristics they possess in this regard, as opposed to that of a singular performance or event.

Invariably, any examination of a work of art, let alone a festival, with an explicit social mission or agenda, may be scrutinized as to whether its social agenda is compromising its artistic quality. This deliberation continues to resonate among certain artistic and academic circles. Within the ACCT field, the discourse is informed by the recognition of the potential contributions of arts and culture in preventing violence and transforming conflict. It is also informed by an explicit set of values and foci, for example, on the ethical imperatives and aspirations necessary in arts-based and culture initiatives and the actions needed to support these commitments. BFF 2020 pro-actively engaged in this and related discourses, including the role of arts and decolonization.

The BFF 2020 artistic director and co-creative directors were wholly committed to the ‘artist-based’ approach they consciously adopted, nurtured, and struggled to help bring to life, amidst the trying conditions described in the study. Notwithstanding, the artistic team was also keen that the socially charged performances and art works they curated, inspired by the socially and politically charged theme of displacement, not dent the festival’s artistic integrity. BFF 2020’s artistic team proudly embraced these challenges and is emblematic of what we have coined an ‘artist-based conflict transformation festival.’

## Personal Reflections

Looking back and looking forward – Lee Perlman

Israel/Palestine, “my protracted conflict”, is geographically a hop, skip and jump from Cyprus. These conflicts, while very different, are also inextricably linked. While I am an ‘outsider’ to Cyprus and its troubles, I have been drawn to them ever since my visit to the island in 2015, on behalf of the [Peacebuilding and the Arts Program](#) of Brandeis University and our [Acting Together on the World Stage](#) project.

At an international conference in Nicosia, which took place in the Buffer Zone at the landmark Ledra Palace and the Home for Cooperation, it was inspiring to meet local peace activists, many of whom were intimately involved in support roles of the various iterations of Cypriot peace negotiations. I learned about bicomunal projects like the Cypriot Academic Network and a sophisticated design ‘imagining’ project led by architects from North and South to rebuild Famagusta in hope of eventual reunification. I then first learned about two seminal occurrences in the progressive Cypriot cultural and arts scene: The Cyprus Theatre Organization (THOK) controversial decision in 2015 to perform Euripides’ tragedy “Hippolytus” at the ancient Greek open amphitheatre of Salamina, situated in the occupied area in the north part of Cyprus, for an audience of Cypriots from the North and South, as part of an effort to reignite the Cyprus reunification effort; and the cancellation, years earlier, of the contested itinerant European Biennial of Contemporary Arts, which had been scheduled to be held in Nicosia in September 2006. (Toumazis, 2012).

In Limassol, where I also came to screen the documentary film **Acting Together on the World Stage**, I met an impressive group of socially engaged artists from Cyprus, Italy and Poland at the gathering of a trans-national arts, culture and conflict transformation project, **Songs of My Neighbours** (Agathokleous & Koufteros, 2015). I was also afforded the opportunity to join an eye-opening walking tour by architect Sevina Floridou, of the abandoned Turkish neighbourhood of Limassol, which brought to life the politics of its contested space.

I subsequently visited the island a number of times, deepening my interest in the Cypriot conflict, visiting colleagues in the North and South, taking part in conferences and then at the Buffer Fringe Festival 2019, when the spark for the collaborative study you’ve just read was ignited.

As a researcher, I hope that the study has shed some light on the unique powers and characteristics which arts and culture possess to transform intergroup, protracted conflicts. As a peace activist and neighbor, I have come to deeply care about the Cypriots whom I’ve met, empathic to their worries and their warranted frustrations

about their political deadlock and its implications for their society. So, while this study is written for a global audience, I truly wish that it will also offer socially engaged artists and peace activists in Cyprus helpful insights into their challenges and possibilities, now, and in the future.

Tel Aviv, January 2023

Confronting our histories - Meropi Moiseos

I have been following the Buffer Fringe Festival since Day 1, back in 2014, and until its most recent edition, in 2022. In my capacity at the time as a journalist writing on arts, I was given the chance to follow the festival up-close. Then it became personal, as well. Ultimately, I followed the festival as a journalist, a viewer and as an individual who wishes to witness the island's reunification.

All these connections led to this study, in a process which brought up a lot of questions, raised expectations and helped me realise: as the “insider” to this “insider-outsider” research process, that I needed to be able to talk about events and facts, to explain their multiple meanings and be open to their interpretations. Exposed to the outsider's gaze upon the Cyprus issue, a strictly political matter felt personal at the same, time. Throughout this process and while researching and commenting on BFF 2020's defiance and resilience, the question kept popping in my mind: where did we go wrong with finding a solution?

Living in Cyprus, one gets used to the dominant, often nationalistic, narrative of “us and them”, us, being the Greek Cypriot “victims”, them, being the Turkish Cypriot bad guys, to say the least. Up to this day, we are only learning one side of history, the other side being inaccessible.

I first came across a different narrative of Cyprus' recent history while watching a work of art. It was a documentary titled “Our Wall” by Greek Cypriot cinematographer Panicos Chrysanthou, in collaboration with Turkish Cypriot Niyazi Kızılyürek, an academic, currently a member of the European Parliament. I gradually came to realise that Generations X (those born after 1974), Z and all that follow, grew up having their own, one-sided histories, whether they were Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, Maronites, Armenians or Latinos. And that we are all defined by the unwitnessed memories of war, their traumas and their consequences. Hopefully, this study will be able to highlight the significance of confronting our histories, wherever we may come from, regardless of our internal/personal/communal conflicts. Furthermore, we hope that its critical approach will further the understanding of how arts can contribute to conflict transformation processes and at the same time strengthen the belief in the power of arts to constructively help transform conflicts. It is a bold belief. It also feels like a last resort.

Nicosia, January 2023

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