

The Fringe-y Days of August

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By Neil Genzlinger

It's time once again for that theatrical roulette known as the New York International Fringe Festival, which runs Friday through Aug. 30: spin the wheel and if you're lucky you'll hit a winner, though you may well come away feeling as if you've just spent \$15 to see someone's bad idea. That's what I felt after my initial Fringe exposure, and therein lies a story.

Back in 2001 I was sent to review a play at the Fringe, a two-hander called "Hustle" that left me underwhelmed. It was my first exposure to the festival, possibly because in previous Augusts I'd gone on vacation like most normal people instead of hanging around a broiling metropolis. I took in a few other Fringe shows that year as well, and I soon came to this conclusion: "Heck, I could write better plays than this."

And that's how, a year later, I found myself sitting in the Fringe "Welcome Meeting" along with scores of other people who had plays in the 2002 festival. I had submitted a mini-musical I'd written called "Not Herself Lately," and, to my naïve surprise, it had been accepted. Only later did I realize that, at least back then, you could submit the instruction manual for a washing machine and it would be accepted, as long as you had the required "participation fee" (this year, \$550).



M. R. Anderson "The Adventures of Alvin Sputnik: Deep Sea Explorer" is one of the shows at the 2009 New York International Fringe Festival.



One of the characters in "Graveyard Shift."

The welcome session, held in one of those stifling Lower East Side theaters where air-conditioning, if it exists at all, seems only to make the room hotter, was a combination informational meeting, mixer and pep talk. It was a humbling experience, one that held a lesson for all who might dare attempt a Fringe production: No matter how brilliant and original you think your little burst of creativity is, you'll almost certainly find that it's not half as dazzling as you thought and that it has already been done by someone else. My "Not Herself Lately" was a musical about a female serial killer. At the welcome

meeting, we went around the room, each participant giving a brief summary of his or her show. By the time my turn came, there had already been two other shows about female serial killers, including one musical. Sigh.

Since then I've absorbed a bit more of the Fringe culture (in 2004 I had another show in the festival, a stage version of "The Last Detail") and now know the keys to mounting a successful Fringe show:

Since no ticket buyer can possibly plow through the more than 200 offerings and make a reasoned, nuanced selection, the best way to get people into your show is to put the word "Naked" in your title, whether or not anyone is naked, or at least to strongly imply in your show description that nakedness is available. This year there will almost surely be good crowds for the likes of "Dream Lovers" ("Are they having dream sex in their fantasy or fantasy sex in their dreams?"), "Porn Rock: The Musical" ("This provocative, sexy, multimedia rock 'n' roll extravaganza invites you to join the party") and "Sex and the Holy Land" ("a stereotype-shattering sexploration of Israel"). Also, "Spermalot: The Musical" and "State of Undress" (www.theimpulseinitiative.com).



Joshua Z. Weinstein The cast of "Sex and the Holy Land."

No one wants to think too hard in 90-degree weather, so titles with pop-culture references that promise easy laughs are always good. Most likely to deliver mindless entertainment this year: "Pie-Face: The Adventures of Anita Bryant," "George and Laura Bush Perform Our Favorite Sitcom Episodes" (www.georgeandlaurabushperform.com) and "Clemenza and Tessio Are Dead."

Savvy playwrights know that people love animals. Domestic or wild; furry or leathery. Thus this year offers "Be the Dog" ("Celebrate a world of complex human relationships unearthed by one simply exuberant dog"), "Cock-a-Doodle-Doo!" ("The siren call of a mysterious cock lures an excitable, debt-ridden landowner on a quirky journey of discovery"), "Cephalopod: A Play Below Sea Level" ("Mary struggles to stay afloat amid her pot-smoking Jewish mother, squid scientist husband and the tides of loss") and "Elephant in the Room" (which actually seems to be about an obese woman, but elephant-lovers won't realize that till after they've bought tickets).

So by those standards, I should have titled my first play "Not Her Naked Self Lately: A Musical That Might Have Kittens In It," or perhaps "Not Herself Lately, and Not Kate Gosselin Either."

My pal Carla and I have for a few years now been tossing ideas back and forth for a Fringe show that would star and be about her dog. Though we have no plot or other details yet, we do have a working title: "Fritzzy the Naked Wonder Dog." I'm not sure if I have that spelling right; it might be "Fritzie." I'd ask Carla, but, like most normal people in August, she's on vacation.

Anyway, for a more intelligent discussion of the 2009 Fringe offerings than anything you just read above, here and below is advice from my colleague Steven McElroy, from The Times's Arts & Leisure section last Sunday.:

The program guide listing participating shows in the 13th annual New York International Fringe Festival, which starts Friday, runs more than 60 pages. So to choose from about 200 productions you must look at some specifics: Are your friends involved? Is the director a hotshot? The company noteworthy? Any actors of special interest? The premise too odd to pass up? This last criterion can sometimes lead to buyer's remorse, but the tickets are cheap and choosing Fringe shows should always involve some impulsiveness.

In suggesting some of the many highlights, the friends issue prevents me from including a few shows. But among the other shows worth noting, there are "ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S BIG, GAY DANCE PARTY," a satire about a teacher put on trial for discussing the possibility that Honest Abe was a homosexual, directed by Chris Smith (hotshot), and "THE EVENT," written and directed by John Clancy (hotshot and a co-founder of the Fringe).

"666," a macabre comedy from Yllana Theater Company of Madrid, in its first United States appearance, seems interesting, if completely bizarre. It's a physical comedy about death-row inmates that has been seen at several international theater festivals.

There are always many talented actors, but it will be hard to pass up a chance to see Chad Lindsey, who made news in March after he jumped onto the subway tracks at Penn Station to rescue a man who had fallen. Mr. Lindsey is in "NOTES ON THE LAND OF EARTHQUAKE & FIRE," a Hollywood tale written and directed by Jason Schafer ("Trick").

Of the oddball options there are "MOM — A ROCK CONCERT MUSICAL," about a rock band of suburban mothers, and "BABY WANTS CANDY THE IMPROVISED MUSICAL WITH FULL BAND" (name says it all). And let's not forget "SHELF LIFE," a romantic comedy about a bottle of ketchup and a jar of jam. Set in a refrigerator. Yes, it sounds nuts. See you there. Friday through Aug. 30, (212) 279-4488, (866) 468-7619, fringenyc.org; \$15 (discounts and value packs available).