

# Beyond the Fringe

The Edmonton festival has launched a thousand careers — and has arguably corrupted a generation of performers

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# I

ARRIVED AT MY FIRST Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival on the day Oilers owner Peter Pocklington exiled Number 99 to the Los Angeles Kings and dismantled the world's greatest hockey team: August 9, 1988. Street vendors were selling hastily made T-shirts, badges, and posters to commemorate the great disaster. When I saw the buskers working the crowds outside several of the Fringe's makeshift theatres, I convinced my stage manager to borrow a guitar and start strumming. Ten minutes later, we were serenading the crowd with our parody of "Bye Bye

Love,” scoring cheers as we sang the chorus: “Bye-bye Wayne. Bye-bye Stanley Cup.” When we hit the refrain, “Let’s lynch Peter Puck,” our guitar case swallowed hundreds of coins. If we had spent the afternoon busking, we might have earned more from the song than from the show I had written.

That was year seven of the Fringe, which had already earned a reputation as one of the world’s biggest and best theatre festivals. Performers from the US and the UK were arranging international tours so they could hit Edmonton in August. Albertans were lining up vacation days to attend shows and take part in a summer street festival that felt like Mardi Gras without the breasts and beads.

The early Fringes still inspire and intrigue a generation of young performers. Last summer, as I sat in the artists’ beer tent at the festival’s thirtieth anniversary, recalling my first Fringe, I felt like one of those ancient Dylan fans talking about seeing him before he went electric.

“You really saw Mump and Smoot’s first show?” asked one newbie.

Yep, back when the iconic Canadian clown duo performed with a sexy, scary, painted dominatrix named Wog.

No other festival in Canada has had the same influence and impact on artists, audiences, and the global performance scene — not even

the dead playwrights' festivals in Ontario. The Stratford Shakespeare Festival has presented just over 600 plays since 1953; the Edmonton Fringe has hosted over 600 shows since August 2008. While one Stratford production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is likely to have a bigger budget — and almost as big a cast — as all Fringe Festival shows in Edmonton combined, most of the latter's productions are original and Canadian. And many of them are life changing, if not necessarily for the audience then for the actors, playwrights, and directors getting their first taste of making theatre for money. Because no matter what they did in school, that first paying gig is graduation day.

Now at the adult age of thirty, the Edmonton Fringe has inspired, trained, and arguably corrupted a generation of playwrights, producers, directors, actors, and audiences. There are sixteen Fringes held in Canada and five in the US (New York, San Francisco, Orlando, Indianapolis, and Boulder, Colorado) that follow the Edmonton commandments, as codified on stone tablets by the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals. And there are at least ten other US Fringes that haven't joined, or are no longer part of CAFF, that pretty much conform to the Edmonton template, as well as overseas Fringes in Athens (the one in Greece, not Georgia) and Bangkok.

Liz Nicholls, the *Edmonton Journal's* long-time theatre critic, calls the festival “the most strange and seductive thing Edmonton has ever produced. Its most contagious export. Its best idea.” How

audiences feel about this Fringe contagion depends on their taste in theatre. Fringers know how to create and develop their own work and are aware — probably too aware — of their audience. No matter how much they want to focus on their art, working on the Fringe forces every artist to channel his or her inner Mirvish.

# L

IKE SO MANY GREAT Canadian cultural institutions, the Edmonton Fringe started with a government grant — except in this case it began with a grant being cut in half. In 1982, the city slashed the budget for summer arts programming, including Northern Light Theatre’s summer Shakespeare program, to the point where the only logical conclusion was “not to be.”

When \$50,000 got tossed back into the pool for funding summer arts programming, Brian Paisley, then artistic director of Chinook Theatre, had an idea. He had attended the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival in Scotland the year before and thought a similar festival might work in his hometown.

The world’s first Fringe had debuted in 1947, when a handful of performers who weren’t invited to the Edinburgh International Festival sought out their own venues and put on impromptu shows.

The Edinburgh Fringe is Aussie Rules theatre: Find your own venue, do your own PR — good luck. Elbowing, biting, and kicking are permitted. The only help provided by the festival administration is a program listing and a central ticket office.

Paisley didn't see how he could convince Edmonton performers to drop everything to put on a show if artists had to find a venue, provide seats, and pay for the privilege of letting him sell tickets. Never mind find an audience: who was going to spend the last few weeks of a brief summer watching low-budget experimental theatre?

He scribbled down a one-page manifesto describing an uncurated event that would welcome anyone with an idea and an entry fee. Using the grant money to create a handful of temporary venues in Old Strathcona, a neighbourhood best known for seedy bars and strip clubs, he hoped twenty acts would sign up; forty-five did. The Edmonton media soon began to spread the word.

Success led to lineups. By the Fringe's third year, bankers in suits were waiting five hours to see *Batman on a Dime*, by One Yellow Rabbit. "It was a good show," says OYR artistic co-director Michael Green. "But I'm not sure it was worth waiting five hours for." Lineups led to buskers, and buskers led to the street festival that now takes over several blocks for two weeks every August. Artists started arriving from across the country, and so did would-be Fringe founders requesting permission to copy the Edmonton

model. Vancouver joined the party in 1985, quickly followed by Victoria in 1986, Winnipeg in 1987, and Saskatoon and Toronto in 1989.

The Edmonton approach, followed by all these festivals, is oh-so-Canadian. Write a small cheque (\$650 plus GST for 2012), and the organizers supply the venue, basic lighting and sound, professional technicians, ticketing, ticket takers, ushers, janitors, and bare-bones promotion. In Edmonton, they even help arrange billets and free massages to make sure everyone is feeling okay, no matter what the critics have to say. At the thirtieth anniversary, festival artists could use their Fringe ID for free bus fare, and were even rewarded with complimentary waffles from a street vendor who wanted to thank them for all the business they had generated.

# W

WHEN I WAS FRINGING in the early '90s, the bitchfest in the artists' beer tent inevitably came back around to the same concern shared by producers at Stratford, Shaw, and Edinburgh, and around the world: there's no audience for serious theatre. Over the years, that worry has become progressively more valid for the Fringe. Artists hoping to pay the rent out of their summer offerings generally avoid drama: audiences don't like to gamble time or money on it,

and it doesn't usually lend itself to smaller casts, minimal tech, and shorter running times. When first-class theatre does emerge, it is usually produced on the smallest scale possible, like Clayton Jevne's acclaimed *One Man Hamlet*.

Fringe artists keep 100 percent of the box office (minus a \$2 surcharge on advance ticket sales), but venues, which are allocated by a top secret mix of lottery and voodoo, can be as small as seventy-eight seats. They seldom reach 200, and acts rarely score more than seven performances over a ten-day stay. At \$12 a ticket (the Edmonton maximum), a "hit of the Fringe" with a sold-out run at a 200-seat theatre might earn \$16,800.

If you're Mump and Smoot, with a cast of two, that's a good haul for ten days' work, even if you're paying a stage manager and covering the costs of promoting and touring a show. But if you're Trey Anthony's *'Da Kink in My Hair*, the 2001 breakout hit of the Toronto Fringe that went on to conquer the world with a cast of nine, \$17,000 doesn't stretch far, especially once you factor in costs for rehearsals and development, or for taking the time to write a script. These days, Fringes rarely lack for improv acts, and most Canadian theatre schools now teach students how to develop their own solo shows.

If artists want to make a living on the Fringe circuit — an actual living, not just enough to cover the costs of travelling across Canada — the first thing they jettison is a set that won't fit in their

backpacks. Then it's time to toss the dream of any tech that can't be handled by a laptop, and anything that might require a stage manager, never mind special effects that take more than ten minutes to strike, or makeup that can't be applied in five minutes in a bathroom shared by the audience.

The acts at early Fringes tended to be local, which kept costs down, so they could afford shows with larger casts. But as more Fringes popped up and the circuit grew, the shows shrank. Six-person comedy troupes made way for improv duos. At most Fringes today, three players would be considered a big-cast show.

There is something magical, heroic, and slightly mad about a single actor onstage. But a steady diet of solo acts seems about as appealing as one of those cleanses where you live off lemonade, and among four- and five-star shows that's pretty much the main selection on a typical Fringe menu. Edmonton Fringe icon Ken Brown is only half joking when he says, "If someone could figure out how to have a zero-cast live theatre show, the Fringe would be full of them."

A show the size of *'Da Kink* or *The Drowsy Chaperone* is almost always a labour of love by locals, or an unofficial and underfunded workshop for a nearby professional theatre. Brad Fraser wrote three Edmonton Fringe plays and the controversial smash hit *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* (a title so catchy no one would have imagined it in the pre-Fringe days before everyone discovered the title was the best sales tool). He



worries that the movement allows professional companies to abdicate development: “In terms of full-length plays rather than one-person shows, the Fringe can be limiting for writers and, in the worst scenarios, can actually ghettoize new work.”

There are at least a dozen performers who are rock stars at Fringes but don't even merit opening act status outside the summer circuit. This may not be entirely because Canada's mainstages are ignoring them. Once the festival is over, many artists turn off their inner Mirvishes and stop hustling their work — often to start working on new pieces for the following year. Those who do keep hustling, like Sandra Shamas, can be very successful: her 1987 Fringe show, *My Boyfriend's Back and There's Gonna Be Laundry*, went on to become the first Canadian production to play the Old Vic in London, and has packed mainstages around the world.

Playwright Ian Ferguson, the co-author of *How to Be a Canadian*, credits the Edmonton Fringe with sparking his writing career, but he nails the phenomenon when he says the festival ceased to be the journey and became the destination. As the Fringes have grown, the shows have become less, well, fringe. Many artists are more likely to remount past hits than to try something new.

As the participants become more conservative, Fringe festivals have built a bigger audience for themselves rather than for Canadian theatre. The same way foreign language films pack houses at film fests but often can't sell a few dozen tickets when

they open in local art houses a few weeks later, festival faves invited to hold over as “pick of the Fringe” frequently play to half-full houses. The audience seems to vanish with the beer tents and the buskers.

Even so, the phenomenon has introduced and created a space for hundreds of amazing new voices, and has given virgin audiences their first taste of live performance. John Turner (a.k.a. Smoot) calls it “the best thing to happen in theatre in Canada, ever.” It was also the best thing to happen to him and partner Michael “Mump” Kennard. The Fringe circuit kick-started a career that took their “clowns of horror” gig around the world. While they no longer Fringe, they’re still evangelical about their birthplace. “It encourages new artists and new audiences,” says Turner. “It’s totally accessible, and a billion people go that can’t or wouldn’t go to theatre.”

As I wandered through the packed midway after my final performance last summer, I knew he was right. Every year, at almost every festival, there’s at least one show or performer that launches into and perhaps even redefines the mainstream, if not nationally, at least locally. And somewhere in one of the forty indoor venues around the city, something unforgettable is happening, something people will brag about in the beer tent twenty years from now as they recall the magical show they saw at the 2011 Fringe.

