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Revenge of the outcasts

Boulder Fringe Festival carries on the rebel artist tradition

by Dylan Otto Kryder

It all began when performers not deemed “of caliber” for inclusion in the juried Edinburgh Theater Festival formed their own festival “on the fringes.” You know where this is going. The stuff not up to snuff was edgier, less pretentious — more fun — than the official selections, and eventually more people were going to the fringe than the actual festival. Now, fringe festivals are popping up everywhere.



If you’re a student of art history, this story probably sounds familiar: it was the art shows put on by the rejects from the Salon in France that launched the Impressionist movement.

In the spirit of openness, 25 percent of the selections for Boulder Fringe Festival were on a first-come, first-served basis, and the other 75 by lottery. Which means you could see the Next Big Thing or the self-published memoir of Grandma Milton.

It’s the inherent paradox of the “honest broker”: we rely on neutral gatekeepers to separate the wheat from the chaff. You hope the writer of this piece was published for his incredible insight, but it could be because we’re an easy mark for corporate stooges to inject their talking points. (Global warming’s good for you! Wetlands cause pollution!)

When David Ortolano first launched the fest in 2005, he met a lot of resistance for precisely that reason. “They kept asking, ‘Isn’t a lot of crap going to get in?’” he says.

Choosing from one of the many performances is a bit like handing in those anonymous questions in sex ed class: you may learn something, but you know some smart-ass couldn’t let the opportunity slip by. Like booking Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake to perform another halftime at the Super Bowl, you’ll probably just get a boring duet of “Nasty,” but you might see nipple ring.

“There’s something to me about community that requires communion,” Ortolano says. “The most interesting thing to me [about this format] is that it’s such a unique way of drawing out of

the community what's already here.”

The Fringe is kind of the play festival for the Internet Age, when everything is democratized. The only way someone's going to care what a housewife says is if they have something to say. Because the audience reviews the shows, the work literally has to speak for itself.

“This one magician totally got reamed,” Ortolano says. What was billed as a family-friendly hour, turned out to be 25 minutes of a magician obscenely abusing the audience. “Some people thought that was funny. I thought it was funny,” Ortolano admits. Audience reviews, however, were not as forgiving, and attendance plummeted.

It turns out, the free market of performance tended to self-regulate. “Lack of quality lacks organization and lacks follow through, and those people usually drop out,” Ortolano says, and more serious candidates were on the waitlist to take their slot. Not to mention, the fear of embarrassing yourself in front of large crowds is its own broker.

There are certain motifs that seem to rise from the wisdom of crowds. “There was a big red-nosed clown movement last year and the year before,” Ortolano says. So far, this looks like Butoh's year, a post-war, Japanese art form featuring scantily-clad to nude artists painted white, making extreme expressions.

If press releases are indication, the theme is sex. You can start the cycle of life with Sondra Blanchard's *The Box: The Virgins are Coming*, which is billed as an adult-only show for “lovers of elegant physical theatre, red nose clown, and a plain old great story.” That might prime you for Shana Cordon's *Brief History of Intercourse*, which, if you're not careful, could lead to some of the astute observations on pregnancy and birth present by Kjersti Ingela Webb's *Olive*, the red nose clown. *Olive*, by the way, is a reprisal of Webb's character who gave red-nose observations about death in *Once Upon a Time: the End* a few years ago, thus bringing us full circle to where it began, in a box. Or with a red nose clown, depending on your religion.

To help you decide which pieces might be worth your time, Ortolano has put together an “All You Can Artist Buffet” on opening night at the Boulder Theater with a smorgasbord of excerpts from the shows.

“That's the biggest thing we try to get across to people is, ‘take a risk,’” Ortolano says. When they do, they usually find a good show. If not? They come back to him and say, “You know, I didn't really like it, but I appreciate it.” You'd have to call that a success.

In the Box:

Boulder Fringe Festival will take place from Aug. 14-25 at various locations around Boulder, www.boulderfringe.com