



# On The Fringe

NANAIMO FRINGE FESTIVAL



by David Morrison

When applied to the world of entertainment, the word ‘fringe’ can be misleading. It implies something existing at the outer limits of its domain, thereby perhaps offering minimal appeal or accessibility. In actuality, the opposite is often true. Certainly, by its very nature some fringe theatre can be edgier than that usually expected of ‘the mainstream,’ but regardless of the entertainment I believe the ethics behind fringe productions make it more appealing and accessible. Fringe is all about democracy, independence and commitment to artistic development. There is no censorship on content and productions are selected by lottery or on a first-come first-served basis. At least 50 percent of fringe festival productions stem from the local community, and ticket prices are always pegged low. So, all in all, what’s not to like?

The first fringe festival in Canada was staged in Edmonton in 1982, but it was not until 1996 that one appeared in Nanaimo. It was staged again the following year, then disappearing until returning in 2011. I spoke recently with the Nanaimo Fringe Festival’s (NFF) Artistic Producer, Jer Banks, and Operations Manager, Chelsea Damen, about what occurred back then, and their part in the NFF’s resurrection.

“Typically these festivals are started by a single person and their charisma,” Banks says, “and when that person leaves, that’s the critical moment as to whether the festival will continue. After the 1997 festival that’s what happened, as the person behind it moved onto other projects.”

Banks completed his Theatre Program at V.I.U. in 2010, then spent that summer working across the Canadian fringe circuit, talking to producers and co-ordinators, working front-of-house or as a

technician, gaining valuable experience of the fringe scene. As he explains, it was simply a casual comment that ultimately led him to co-founding the NFF:

“Offhandedly, someone said to me, ‘By the end of this summer you will have seen more fringe festivals across Canada than any single producer has, and worked every job there is to work in a fringe festival – except producing one. At that point I said, ‘Challenge accepted!’”

Damen and Banks met at V.I.U. when the former was studying philosophy. Like Banks, Damen is a passionate advocate of fringe theatre and independent artists in general.

“When Jer went on his cross-Canada trip I didn’t think he’d come back to Nanaimo,” she recalls. “But he did, and told me, ‘I’ve got this crazy idea to start a fringe festival!’ I thought this was awesome! There’s so much room to grow here, and so much potential that I was excited about this possibility, even if it didn’t work out. So I decided to endear myself to Jer and make myself indispensable!”

To Banks, Damen seemed a natural partner-in-crime to forge ahead with the idea of a fringe festival in Nanaimo, especially as they had already been “talking theatre” since the spring of 2010. And so it was that after fourteen years, these true believers, with the moral and financial support of friends and local businesses, brought fringe back to the Harbour City.

“It was amazing!” Banks gushes. “I went in with a plan, and it plan succeeded 100 percent. It was to not go into debt at any point in time and to see what would happen. I did some research, basing our expectations on the expectations of other fringe festivals, and then

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adjusted that according to demographics. The festival was a huge success and a good barometer of what people are interested in. We got a number of letters after the fringe, basically saying ‘we loved it, it was awesome, and we want more!’”

“I was running from venue to venue last year, seeing lots of the same faces,” Damen continues. “I didn’t know many of them, but they were all smiling and having a great time. They would grab me and tell me they were so glad this was all going on, and that means more than anything to us.”

Building on the successful platform of NFF 2011, the festival is back in 2012 with a fascinating and enticing program of productions to be staged between August 16 and 26. Exploding the myth of inaccessibility of fringe theatre, there appears to be something to suit most tastes this year.

As someone who recently lost a beloved furry companion of some fifteen years, I am looking forward to Fear Factor: Canine Edition, from New York’s John Grady. Concerning the huge impact of pets on our lives, Banks describes the production as “a very beautiful, touching and, at times, sad tale.”

From Chemainus, ‘Nick the Entertainer’ presents A Wooden Shoe in Canada, a show that examines in song and stories the challenges of a Dutch immigrant settling in this country. From Nanaimo’s Honestly Entertainment (a.k.a. local musical maverick, Chris Thompson) comes Cardboard Robot, the synopsis detailed thus: “Discussions between a basement scientist and the robot he’s building; things get complicated as the robot gets smarter. Also, it’s funny.”

There is ‘comedy sci-fi’ by way of the award-winning Chaos and the Cosmos from Nanaimo’s Dramarama; a decidedly adults only production, Placid Ends at Mothballed Beginnings, from The Failed Magician’s League (Georgetown, ON), plus three other great shows. Based solely on its categorization as a “dramatic-musical-stand-up-comedy-improv-burlesque-show... with free seafood recipes,” I am powerless

to resist Man Catches Fish, presented by Seattle’s Across the Pond.

Some of the theatrical ideas presented here may appear quirky on paper but, however roundabout, they deal with universal themes. Love and relationships, religion and human interaction with technology will all be examined in various inventive ways. So, I’d urge the skeptics out there to shed any preconceptions about the nature of fringe theatre and check out this original material and exciting talent from near and far

“I don’t want this festival to end up the way the other one did,” Banks says. “Although sponsorship from local businesses is obviously crucial, word of mouth is the biggest support we can get, and if something is going to succeed it will be because people want it to succeed.” Concerning said sponsorship, Banks says: “You buy a painting because it speaks to you; you buy a music album because you love listening to it, not because you’re going to resell it later. So while we’re small, we’re looking for people with an emotional attachment to what we’re doing.”

As Banks intimates, NFF 2012 is an important one: “In smaller communities these things either gain a lot of momentum very quickly, or they don’t, and the second year is always the hardest year. I came into this with a five-year plan. The first year was a tester, the second is to establish things, and the hope is that within the next three years we can make this into a full-time theatre company.”

This second year for the new NFF is aimed, then, at ensuring the festival is back for a third year and thereafter, so let’s do our bit to make that happen! Let’s turn out in force in support of independent Canadian theatre, especially now we are lucky enough to have such a festival back in our region. I promise you will love it, think it’s awesome, and want more. ~

*Further information about the Nanaimo Fringe Festival 2012, including the full line-up of productions, where to purchase tickets, other fringe productions and how else you can support the fringe can be found by visiting <http://fringetastic.com>*

