



Home : Entertainment

## Site Map

 search site 

Search tips

 QwikNav 

What's this?

**FROM THE  
PAST 7 DAYS**
**monday**

sunday

saturday

friday

thursday

wednesday

tuesday

**1999-2005  
ARCHIVES**

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 keyword 
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 News

 Sports

 Opinion

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Arts

## Attendance and good theater make Fringe Festival a success

 By JEFFREY BRUNER  
 REGISTER THEATER CRITIC  
 July 25, 2005

The Iowa Fringe Festival was like sampling wines — sip and move on, but forget about taking any time to sit and contemplate.

Even as a whirlwind experience, chalk up the first festival as a big success for bringing a massive number of theatergoers to a brutally hot downtown Des Moines to fill 1,800 seats over four days. Ron Ziegler and his army of enthusiastic volunteers have the seed of something that's going to keep growing in the years to come.

Anyone who can get 30 people to watch a 93-year-old play by George Bernard Shaw at 11 p.m. in the Stoner Theater is clearly doing something right. Any time you have people, young and old, talking about what they've seen, what they liked and didn't like, you see a remarkable vitality being pumped into the Court Avenue district that couldn't be sapped by 98 degrees on Saturday afternoon.

Picking favorites is difficult, but if I had to single out five theater productions, they would be these:

- "Art" - Steve Berry, Mark John Conley and Andy Elliott delivered a savagely funny production of the Tony Award-winning play about three friendships almost torn apart by a 20-square-foot piece of white canvas. Berry and Conley were great sparring partners, and Elliott, as a soon-to-be-married but already henpecked underachiever, served up a gut-splitting monologue on, of all things, wedding invitations.
- "Medicine Show" - This second foray by Michael Sokoloff's Aggravated Assault Ensemble into Des Moines was again a production not for all tastes but hands-down the truest "fringe" play in the festival. I may not have enjoyed Sokoloff's raunchy satire about cosmetic surgery, but it was well-executed, and I was still thinking about it the next day.
- "Overruled" - Even after nine hours of theater, this comedy by George Bernard Shaw, presented by Central Iowa Repertory Theatre, still captured my heart with its great wit and solid performances by Joseph Leonardi, Sara Ostbloom, John Robinson and Laura Weise.
- "No Exit" - Call me a geek, but I'm a sucker for Jean-Paul Sartre. David Oddy, Sue Gerver and Suzie Spicer dished out an intense serving as a threesome who discover they are in hell for the rest of eternity. The fact that the room was at least 80 degrees added a certain . . . authenticity to the play's setting.
- "Dirty Laundry" - Sure, the first three comic shorts are fairly average, but Theater . . . for a Change's romp through David Ives' "Soap Opera" is a riot. Thatcher Williams, Amy Burgmaier and Kay Mueller were hysterical in this surreal tale of a man's unclean love for a major appliance.

Even after picking five, other standouts still need to be recognized - especially two school groups heading from here to the granddaddy of all fringes, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland.

Iowa State University Theatre, easily the hardest-working troupe at the Iowa festival, ripped through an abridged version of "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)" in just 55 minutes. That's all 37 plays and who knows how many sword fights and air guitar riffs. Ankeny High School's production of "All I Really Need to

ZOOM



Kay Mueller of "Theater for a Change" pops out of a washing machine during the show "Dirty Laundry" at the Fringe Festival in Des Moines.

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"Know I Learned in Kindergarten" was cute if perhaps a tad sugary - it is based on a Robert Fulghum book, after all.

It was expected that this year's festival would be primarily local and fairly vanilla - classics and relationship comedies ruled the day. Next year should bring a harder edge as Iowa draws fringe performances from Minneapolis, Chicago and Kansas City. I'm also hopeful that it'll bring three in-your-face productions from StageWest, the Des Moines Playhouse and Theater Cedar Rapids - perhaps the kind of play deemed too edgy for their mainstage seasons.

The Iowa fringe experience eventually needs to have more spice, flavors that don't suit everyone's palate. That said, this first vintage of fringe in Iowa was remarkably good and has me anticipating next year's crop.



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