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THEATER: Iowa Fringe wrapup :: Jeffrey Bruner



July 23rd, 2006 :: 4:41 PM

Although it seemed unlikely just a month ago, the Iowa Fringe Festival managed to show some growth in its second year.

Last year's festival, held in the Court Avenue District, gave people a feel for what's possible in the fringe festival, which pulls together actors, comedians, filmmakers and other artists for performances in non-traditional locations. That success attracted some out-of-state acts in addition to talent from Des Moines-area performers.

It came in spite of hurdles — too little marketing to raise awareness and a struggle to get volunteers. Both need to increase if the festival is to grow in subsequent years and return to selling tickets at the venue, not one location. Some food for thought: Could the outdoor nature of the arts festival and the indoor venues of the fringe complement each other?

The move a few blocks to Gateway West, coupled with a decision to not put venues 20 blocks away in the East Village, was a smart idea that took advantage of two new buildings — the Central Library and the Pappajohn building. Both are a bit on the sterile side for fringe venues, but they're a good core on which to expand. Here's hoping the Masonic Temple can host some shows next year to replace the Fitch Gallery and the Rainbow Center, which were both too far away.

Shows took a baby step closer to the, ahem, fringe although Iowa still has a ways to go. While that doesn't mean more shows need to have full-frontal male nudity ("MA for Mature Audiences") or titles unprintable in newspapers like this one ("Poona"), the Iowa Fringe Festival does need more experimental fare like Minneapolis-based Theatre for the Thirsty's "The Cubicle," Los Angeles actor Steven Marrocco's "How to Fake Clinical Depression" or even that show ("Poona") that I can't print here.








Here are some of my favorites among the shows I saw this year:

- "The Cubicle" — Jeremiah Gamble and Corey Mills put together a clever, funny and even moving meditation on life in small squares and how that impacts the other parts of our lives. It starts out as a one-joke bit — the cubicles are on wheels and morph into showers, cars, an elevator, and a grocery cart before becoming pieces of office equipment where software designers Jim and Robert work. But then the show slyly becomes something different altogether, mixing subversive comedy bits (the sound design and voice work by Gamble and his wife Vanessa is hilarious) with some nice observations about how people communicate (or don't communicate) with

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- **“How to Fake Clinical Depression”** — Actor and bass player Steve Marrocco of Los Angeles tells of a remarkably funny trip through Big Pharma Hell as he fakes being depressed in order to become a test subject for anti-depressant drugs to make some much needed cash. Marrocco whirls through a slew of characters, including his entire family, his pompous doctor and a hot drug company assistant who makes it tough to convince his doctors that he’s lost his sex drive. Funny, a pinch profane and a true fringe experience.

- **“The Bible - The Complete Word of God (Abridged)”** and **“The Zoo Story”** — Tried and true fringe fare from very different spectrums, both executed beautifully. John Cisar, Larry Mahlstedt and Thatcher Williams delivered a subversively funny Cliff’s Notes version of the Bible, complete with a money-back guarantee. (The show I saw ended 11 seconds under the 55-minute guarantee.) Richard Maynard and Joe Smith made Edward Albee’s 1959 masterpiece feel fresh for first-timers and still compelling for longtime theater-goers.

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First of all, thanks to everyone associated with StageWest for another exciting weekend of theatre and performance pieces. I think we’re on to something good here.

There has been almost no mention on this blog of the Iowa Poetry Slam’s “Guilty by Association: A Beat Revue”. I’m sorry more people didn’t get over to the Pappajohn Center to hear the poetry of the Beats of 50 years ago. These poets were (and are) fringier than almost anything you’ll see or hear today. The Beats’ incarnates were present at Pappajohn with terrific recitations of the rhythm, words, and imagery of these fringe poets of an earlier America. Jim Coppoc’s performance of Allen Ginzberg’s seminal HOWL was something not to be missed. I hope the Slam is back next year for Fringe III.

- *Richard; Indianola*  
July 23rd, 2006 at 7:27 pm

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