



LA Theatre Review

Presents



The HollywoodFRINGE Daily Rag

Welcome To the Fringe Issue

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Comprehensive Fringe Coverage

by K. Primeau~

With more than 30 venues, 175 productions, and only 11 days to see it all in, guests at the upcoming Hollywood Fringe Festival have their work cut out for them. As LA's seminal guide on everything pertaining to small theatre, LA Theatre Review will be easing the workload and delivering the dish on Fringe must-sees in our daily capsule review sheets.

Theatre-goers can look for LATR's report next to the Fringe Guides at every venue, or at our online home under the Fringe tab during the festival. LATR will be updating daily so that audiences can make the most of California's largest unjuried festival, running June 17-27th.

Hollywood's Lunatic Fringe

by Jonathan Harris~

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Fringe theatre can be tricky to define. Many hold that to qualify as a true fringe production, a show must be cutting-edge, avant-garde or, at the very least, far riskier aesthetically than the mundane, status quo productions found at the majority of regional theatres across the country. Other artists believe, just as firmly, that fringe is better defined economically. Theatre companies working with a budget of less than, say, \$100,000 a year. Being the founder of the first fringe festival in the United States (Seattle) and one of the unholy founding triad that birthed the devil child known as the New York International Fringe Festival, I have always held with the latter definition. It just seems cleaner to me, more inclusive and less theatrically elitist.

A fringe festival can be described as an international grouping of underfunded, independent theatre artists who come together in a host city under an organized banner with the shared purpose of mounting affordable, low-budget productions back-to-back over a period of time ranging from three to 10 days. The majority of fringe festivals around the world are nonadjudicated, meaning that a first-come, first-served template is usually instituted. This tends to result in a slumgullion of staged efforts, a free-for-all lambasting of rank amateur theatrics playing alongside slicker, more professional productions. Other fringe festival organizations have opted for an adjudicated process, hoping to reflect what they view to be their more discerning demographic.

When it comes down to defining the history of our country's problematic relationship with fringe theatre in general, and fringe festivals in particular (over a dozen successful festivals in the States at last count), is there any one city that will ultimately end up defining fringe for the United States? It has yet to be decided. With the first fringe theatre festival in the United States (Seattle) now

completely bankrupt and deader than Jacob Marley, and the largest fringe theatre festival in the United States (FringeNYC) finding itself on many artists' watch-your-back lists, could it be that Hollywood – arguably America's most braggartly shallow and whorish city - might prove to be the Eliza Doolittle of an American theatrical renaissance?

Viewed by outsiders (and many insiders) as a vacuous, soulless industry town; a binging purger in a cultural wasteland; an obsessive TMZ watcher of itself; and a self-indulgent, privileged, artistic-wannabe hack, could Hollywood actually lift us from the theatrical rubble currently muddying our shoes by establishing herself as a pillar of theatrical innovation and excellence? The answer is yes. That's if the first annual Hollywood Fringe Festival co-founder Ben Hill has anything to say about it.

Over coffee and tea at Groundworks Coffee in the heart of Hollywood at Cahuenga and Sunset (Larry King Square!), Hill tells me, "We often joke that fringe happens when the time is right - and the winds of fringe seem to be blowing west."

"As we live in one of the most artistically potent cities on earth, we will seek all varieties of artistic contributions: theatre, music, dance, circus, variety, visual art, street performance ... as well as forms of art not yet conceived. Very important to our core values [is seeing] artists of traditionally distinct mediums working in collaboration. There is a lot of this happening right now in Los Angeles - we'd like to provide a forum to encourage this modernization and collaboration in art."

Los Angeles theatre tends to simultaneously feed and eat its own. It's a somewhat isolated community based in part on its virtually invisible international presence. Even so, as all fringe festivals strive to operate on an international level, Hill feels that Hollywood has more than your standard appeal for artists from other countries.

"The beautiful aspect of having Hollywood and fringe in our brand identity is that both have international clout. In the international artistic community, fringe is a big, big name known throughout Europe and North America. Hollywood, of course, is one of the biggest brands on earth. Los Angeles is a 'world city' itself. This, in combination with a powerful Internet presence, should push the event out to the international arts community."

"In simple terms," Hill claims, "there is a demand right now for a fringe festival in Hollywood."

While that may or may not eventually prove to be true, fringe festivals are, by definition, a tricky mounting at best. It is my deeply held belief that a fringe festival must be defined by its local demographic. New York City, for example, should not use the same strategies or implementation as, say, Indianapolis or Phoenix. With each city's vastly different audience demographic, coupled with local artists' geographically specific aesthetic tastes and skills, only a

novice or a shyster would hold that fringe festivals should all be alike. Hill agrees.

"Traditionally, fringe festivals are huge organizing forces for the arts community in any city. Organization and promotion are two facets of success we'd like to bring to the arts community in Los Angeles." Ah. Promotion. Now, that's something Hollywood can certainly do well. And, a frequently overlooked fact about Los Angeles is that it has more annual productions per capita than any other city in the United States. With those factors in mind, the Hollywood Fringe Festival might just be onto something.

When the New York International Fringe Festival (FringeNYC) first announced it was going to be an adjudicated festival – meaning that rather than utilizing a first-come, first-served approach to the application process, artists would submit their work for approval before they were included - it created a tsunami of international ill will toward New York. How will the Hollywood Fringe Festival address its application process? Hill holds that "since most fringe festivals operate on a 'come-one, come-all' paradigm, the central [Hollywood] fringe organization will remain agnostic on all things artistic. [It will be] much like the original fringe festival in Edinburgh, Scotland. If you can find a venue to host your work, you are invited to participate."

One of the most difficult problems facing fringe artists worldwide is the cost-prohibitive nature of some cities' festivals. The Hollywood Fringe Festival has a unique take on this process as well. "The application fee will be very low, to encourage a large application pool and wide participation." Says Hill.

In utilizing this low-cost approach, the Hollywood Fringe Festival is fashioning itself as a social network like Facebook or MySpace, where artists can build a commonly housed page, fill it with videos, pictures, bios and such and find "friends" for their project through networking. In doing this, the artists are building both anticipatory buzz and developing potential audience before their show even goes into rehearsal. In other words, "friending" potential venues, audience members and other artists. "We've been spending a lot of time and soliciting tons of advice on devising a working model for the fringe. What we've created borrows from some of the biggest international fringe success stories - with a healthy portion of our own ideas. I'm also from a Web software development background. So, as the Hollywood Fringe Festival aims to be one of the most 'wired' festivals on the planet, a decent grasp on the technologies that power the Internet comes in handy. From my perspective, the Internet is one of the greatest organizing forces ever conceived. Using the Internet to unify the arts community around common causes is one of our fondest dreams."

With all of these artists arriving en masse next summer, I can't help but wonder where exactly does the Hollywood Fringe Festival think it's going to put these folk? Again, Hill presents an interesting strategy. One that includes active participation on the part of local venues. "Presenting companies representing LA's finest in dance, theatre, variety, music, etc. will monitor these [artist] applications closely and program projects into the venue they are hosting. Each artist [participating] in the fringe will be hosted by one of these presenting organizations, who are responsible for programming their venue."

In other words, if you have a space in Hollywood, or access to a space in Hollywood, you can become a presenting company. But the productions will not be assigned to your venue by the festival organizers. The venue itself will pick and choose productions

thought appropriate to its space. A comedy club, for example, could choose to house only stand-up applicants (thank god), an experimental space could screen specifically for artists whose aesthetic sensibilities reflect a shared vision, and so on. Either way it reads to me like a potentially powerful marketing tool for Hollywood venues seeking to broaden their audience bases. Regarding potential hosting venues, Hill has only one dictum. "Geographic proximity of venues is necessary in any successful multi-venue event. Venues must be located in the Hollywood area, most within walking distance of one another." There's also the added incentive of automatic festival inclusion of any production an established venue is already mounting during the festival dates. Double exposure for a summer production.

Okay. Artists upload their shows, and venues pick productions, but what, I wonder, about the artists whose work ends up getting lost or missed or ignored by a presenting company. Hill's answer is quick and well intentioned. "Those not chosen to participate in one of the secured venues have the opportunity to find their own venue." He smiles as I raise an eyebrow. "And we will help."

Speaking of help, as there's hardly any application fee, no charge to the venues, and traditionally, a first-year lean box office, where does the Hollywood Fringe Festival plan on getting its financial support? "It's a pretty dire time for new organizations to expect funds from traditional foundation and governmental sources. We've decided not to rely on financial support from these traditional sources for nonprofits. Most of our start-up funding comes from the community itself. In the months ahead, we will throw a series of events designed to showcase and promote local artists and provide our community a taste of what to expect in summer 2010. From these events, we hope to raise the basic operating capital we need to press into the first festival. We also envision plenty of help from local businesses here in Hollywood and greater Los Angeles who will gain from the cultural acclaim such an event brings to a community."

If this seems pie-in-the-sky, that's okay with Hill. "In times of economic uncertainty [the] arts need to band together." True enough. Like in many things lately, Hope seems to be playing a leading role.

Whatever the Hollywood Fringe Festival ends up being, it's clear that Ben Hill and his troupe understand that Hollywood is unlike any other city in the world, and they plan to make sure that its own definition of fringe will be counted among the roughly 35 other international festivals currently in existence. Whether that differentiation is culled via the online nature of its application process, the vision of unifying the various venues in Hollywood or the Hollywood party atmosphere that Hill envisions, I personally hope it succeeds beyond their wildest dreams. And that "5 Naked Women Dancing 2 ABBA!" if it manages to find a venue, doesn't steal either the thunder or the audience from that unique, difficult piece that's playing just up the street.

I'm hoping Hollywood is better than that.

State of Theatre in LA: Critic's Panel Discussion

LATR invites you to join us for a FREE closing day panel discussion with fellow critics from the LA Theatre scene. Panel begins at 1pm at Fringe Central on June 27th. More info forthcoming - hope to see you there!