




Dramatists Guild 
of America

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By Callie Kimball

I've got a Fringe hangover. The 2nd Annual Capital Fringe Festival kicked my butt for the 2nd year in a row. And I loved every sweaty minute of it.

Our nation's capital was built on a swamp, which means that Washington, DC screeches to a halt each summer as everyone who can afford to evacuate the stifling heat does so. Congress shuts down, the polar bears pant in languor at the zoo, and the only people around are the tourons ricocheting through the Smithsonian, devouring our national treasures at warp speed. For nearly three decades, the only theatre to be found here during the dog days of summer was the Washington Theatre Festival, run by Source Theatre. Each year new works would premiere over several weeks, from 10-minute shorts to full-length plays. Many of them were by area playwrights who got their start at the Festival. But Source's financial woes took a heavy toll and the Festival died a few years back, leaving theatergoers with nothing but iambs to feed on from the various outdoor Shakespeare plays around.

Enter the Capital Fringe Festival, the brainchild of co-founders Julianne Brienza and Damian Sinclair. I remember an inspiring meeting I had with Damian at a Chipotle in the summer of '05. He had recently left his post as Marketing Director at Woolly Mammoth to start a Fringe Festival right here in DC. An independent playwright, actor, and director myself, I agreed wholeheartedly there was a need for an administrative organization to help connect individual artists with venues and audiences. Damian believed there was an entire demographic hungry for the adventurous new work a Fringe Festival would bring to the city.

He was right.

July 2006 brought DC its the first annual Capital Fringe Festival, during which 18,000 tickets were sold to 97 productions performed over 10 days at various venues in DC. This year, 19,000

tickets were sold to 116 productions at over 20 venues. A few of the establishment theatres hoping to attract a younger, hipper audience called their regular programming that happened to overlap the Festival dates “Fringe.” This caused grumbling from some participants in a Festival designed to highlight the work of individual artists working outside the establishment, and word is that next year in order to qualify as a Fringe show, a production must actually open during the Festival dates. Fringe offerings this year ranged from new plays to adaptations of classics, from solo shows to experimental work, and from parodies (“Carrie Potter and the Half-Blood Prom”) to campy treats (“Blue Lagoon”). Acrobatics, dance, cabaret, and instrumental music were all represented at this year’s Fringe. And let’s not forget the mimes.

So why am I sharing this with you, my fellow Guilders? Face it—you’ve got to get buzz in order to be produced. Self-producing is a great way to generate buzz, and Fringe is a great way to self-produce. Local playwright Gwydion Suilebhan produced a reading of his play, “Abstract Nude,” at last year’s Fringe. This year he developed the same piece into a full production. I asked him why he chose to do a reading last year instead of a full production. “I needed to hear the work, to hear the rhythms of the play. Some think Fringe is a license to say I can put any old thing up. I don’t agree. We need to be respectful of the time we ask of the people who are in the audience. I didn’t want to abuse the trust of the people who have come to see my stuff in the past.” Gwydion explains the benefits of flying Fringe: “It’s a great place to make your first self-production. Fringe brings with it this sort of momentum. I’ve self-produced in other venues as well but Fringe makes it easy to say ‘Hey, you wanna work on this with me?’ It’s a self-made event and people know they’re gonna have to put their shoulder to the grindstone.” His strategy worked—based on last year’s reading, “Abstract Nude” was dubbed “the find of the festival” by *The Washington Post* and most of this year’s performances were sold out. What did he ultimately get out of participating in Fringe? “Production. Exposure. But more importantly, the bone-deep sense that I had written a good play that deserved an audience.”

Another success story is Josh Lefkowitz, a writer and performer whose solo performance, “Help Wanted,” was picked up by Woolly Mammoth for a second run after Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz caught the one-man show at last year’s Fringe. The success of that initial engagement led to a commission that will premiere at Woolly this November.

NYC solo artist Courtney McLean (who is relocating to Minneapolis in a few months) wrote and performed sold-out solo shows at Fringe last year and again this year. Courtney has the stamina of a ninja because she’s taking this year’s show, “Super Glossy,” straight from the DC Fringe to the Minneapolis Fringe and then on to San Francisco’s Fringe all in the span of eight weeks. I spoke to her today, in the middle of her Minni run, where she says reception to her show has been great—*The Onion* picked 30 must-see shows from the Minneapolis Fringe lineup and hers was one of them.

So what’s it like to produce your own work at Fringe? I did it both years and gained invaluable experience and exposure. I wrote new plays specifically for the venues I was assigned each year—last year I wrote a futuristic two-hander for a 60-seat art gallery, and this year it was a 28-character play set in Africa for Woolly’s 265-seat mainstage. Fringe is a self-producing event. You’ll be doing your own press release, production photos, and marketing, plus buying or building set and costume pieces. Then you need designers, a director, a cast, and a stage

manager. I produced both of my Fringe shows under an Actors Equity Association Capital Fringe Code, which meant I was free to use Equity talent as long as I followed a few easy guidelines and kept my budget under \$4,000. Panic is part of Fringe—you may as well plan on it. If you're gonna pitch a fit because the extension cord you brought has a grounded plug but all the outlets in your venue only fit two-pronged plugs, then Fringe is definitely not for you. Fringe is about getting dirty and having a good time. And sweating. Lots and lots of sweating.

DC's community of artists is tight. Many of us started out together at the Washington Theatre Festival years ago, and now it seems Fringe has picked up our narrative throughline. To wit: My first 10-minute play was at Source the same year Dan Brick, fresh out of NYU's Tisch, was their production manager. The next year, I directed a show for Dan's first company, *Purchased Experiences Don't Count*. A few years later, Dan co-founded Solas Nua with Irish-born Linda Murray. I ran into Dan on the street on the first day of Fringe as he was hauling equipment into a white van so he could go finish the build-out of one of the venues. (He was Production Manager of Fringe this year.) I stood there in the rain as he told me Linda had just gotten her Green Card so they can finally get married. I think that was the only time I paused during the Festival. My show opened the next day at Woolly, and once it closed, I took in eight shows but wished I'd had the stamina to see more. I saw a play about a cockroach, an adaptation of Goethe's *Faust* that promised (and delivered) free beer and popcorn, a wordless movement piece set on hay bales in an alley, and a show about an Irish pirate queen. It took me a full week to recuperate. I haven't decided if I'll participate next year, but if I do, I'll be sure and try something completely different. After writing and directing a 28-person show this year, something "intimate" sounds just right. I've been telling Josh Lefkowitz I want to write a one-woman show for him to perform.

I think he thinks I'm joking.

Applications for next year's Capital Fringe Festival will be online in November at capfringe.org. The dates are July 17-27, 2008.