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Play Dates: Hot Tickets at the Fringe Festival

by John Townsend

The 14th annual Minnesota Fringe Festival is in full swing at various venues across Minneapolis. Many of the stage productions, as usual, feature queer themes. In fact, Fringe is penciled in on many queer calendars these days, because in a culture where images surrounding us are overwhelmingly heterocentric, it's rare to find an event where so much GLBT content is available to the general public—even in the relatively progressive Twin Cities.

*Bouffon Glass Menajoree*

There's also the creeping complaint we've heard in the queer community over the past few years that we're becoming just another market for profiteers to bleed for a quick buck. But at Fringe, you get grass-roots views of queer life ranging across generations.

It's apt to be more raw, more blunt, and more risky than what's seen in much of queer entertainment that edges toward the mainstream. So, in a culture defined by corporate constraints, the Fringe is a secret battlefield of artistic rebellion against market forces—forces that couldn't care less about the queer struggle and movement.

Such is clearly not the case with the following Fringe artists; it's in their blood, and it's their vision. And local audiences annually eat it up.

Los Angeles actor-writer Les Kurkendaal asserts, "The Minneapolis audience is the best audience there is. They are very intelligent and very open-minded. They appreciate good theater.

"Minneapolis is definitely my favorite place to perform. It's turned into the place where I test my new stuff. If it works in Minneapolis, then I take the show to other cities. The queer audience is always very friendly and supportive."

This year, Kurkendaal will not be doing new work but will be reprising his acclaimed Christmas in Bakersfield, wherein interracial lovers meet the parents. Imagine Brokeback Mountain meets Guess Who's Coming to Dinner.

Locally, you may be familiar with Stuart Holland's monologues from Patrick's Cabaret, where he's known for his character Mrs. Entwhistle. However, at Fringe, Holland will manifest a gay male character, Ernest Thistle Waite, in Earnest Ernest, a shrinking violet who has grown up in the shadows of dominating women. Holland notes, "He still lives in his mother's house, and fancies himself an inventor



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and an entrepreneur. He's never had a sexual experience, but longs for it...quietly."

One wonders what Freud might have said about humble Ernest. But surely he'd have admired the spunk of the Spoken Word Duo of Laura Bidgood and Curt Lund, who understand that to be an adult you must cut the cord, leave home, and come to terms with the world. The zany pair—a straight woman and her gay pal—returns this year with *Take a Left at the Giant Cow: A Beginner's Guide to North Dakota*.

Lund states that because of performing *Two Queers* and *a Chubby* with Bidgood at last year's Fringe Fest, "The official 'coming out' story has pretty much been told. I think my growing up gay in North Dakota contributed to, probably accelerated my desire to get as far away as possible. But our stories this year, about outgrowing our hometowns and home state, I suppose, are more universal than those we told last year.

"Lots of people, gay, straight and otherwise, will be able to identify with the mixed emotions behind growing up, leaving home, and then looking backwards at it all. Laura's and my stories are both told with a mixture of relief and embarrassment, a little nostalgia, and a healthy dose of awkward disbelief—Egads, did I really do that? Or say that? Or wear that?"

The self-identified, "wife and wife" team of performer Eli Effinger-Weintraub and director Leora Effinger-Weintraub attack hetero presumptions about gays and lesbians in *Bye-Bye, Beirut* set in Israel in the midst of an archaeological excavation crew. Eli says it relates, "How two of my straight crew-mates got it into their heads to fix me up with the excavation's only other lesbian and the disaster that resulted. It speaks to the misperceptions about the LGBT community that continue to pervade straight culture. So many straight people still don't understand that queer folks have certain physical types that we're attracted to, just like they do. Or that there are other queer people that we plain don't like.

"My crewmates looked at me. They looked at the other dyke on the trip. And they assumed we would be perfect together for no other reason than that we both dated women. The danger—a danger I experience first hand over the course of the show—was how easy it was to start believing that myself."

American Folksongs: The Ballad of Ferris Riley, in the words of playwright folksinger Rick Burkhardt, is, "primarily a metaphor for the way so much of our past—our gay past in particular—has disappeared. But the past the characters do manage to uncover is, to say the least, quite different from the past that one generally finds in the heteronormative halls of 'old-time' music."



Circumference

More contemporaneously, the popular team of performer Janelle Ranek and writer Jules Weiland present *Unintentionally Risky Behavior*. This pair might be compared to Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner. Like Tomlin, Ranek renders numerous viscerally eccentric characters with skewed but fascinating views of life. And some of them are clearly queer.

Playwright Jeffery Goodson's *Perhaps They're French*, in his words, "Is based on actual moments in my relationship with my partner of 16 years that came to define our love for each other and what our relationship would be. Not 'husband and wife' definitions, but how our personalities compliment each other and work to create what we have. Since Micky and Jed's relationship does not come with a standard hetero couples' blueprint or the baggage of that blueprint, they must discover and draw their own."

Bisexual Edna St. Vincent Millay, the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, penned the verse play *Aria de Capo*. At Fringe, you can catch this seldom-staged classic.

Director Hazen Markoe feels, "With Iraq dominating the news, and the all-too-high price we are suffering because of it, I feel that this show has much to say to today's audiences. I also feel that it is especially effective in that it avoids the preachiness that plagues too many theatrical works. It accomplishes this mainly through its use of absurdist humor, as well as quaint and classic stereotypes.

"I have updated some of those stereotypes slightly. For example, by changing the classic Commedia comic characters of Pierrot and Columbine into vapid soap opera types and making Cothurnus the 'Masque of Tragedy' into a mysterious impresario. In the end, however, the message remains the same; that war is, at heart, a childish and selfish endeavor that can never be ignored."

Another queer genius, Oscar Wilde, is offered up in *Salome*. Director Heather Quigley says it's "about how desires can be manipulated. *Salome* simultaneously desires one man—John the Baptist—while she is desired by a different woman—the Young Syrian—as well as by her stepfather, Herod. And she ultimately destroys all three, as well as herself, in her thwarted passions."

Quigley points out that because of English decency laws forbidding depictions of biblical characters onstage, *Salome* was banned in England in 1891. So, Wilde had it published in French. Some have mused that the character *Salome* is a cross-gender reflection of Wilde himself.

Another towering playwright, Molière, wasn't gay, but definitely caught theocratic hetero society with its pants down. Hence, one of the most acclaimed shows to hit Fringe from out of town is Tim Mooney's solo show, *Molière Than Thou*.

Lauded by critics in Montreal, Tampa, and San Francisco, Mooney says of the 17th-Century French dramatist that, "It was [the comedies] *Tartuffe* and *Don Juan* which made him the target of the church, not because they were in any way antireligion, but because they scored points against religious hypocrisy in the title characters themselves. In *Molière than Thou*, I dance deliberately across the surface of these issues, much as Molière himself would have had to do."

Master playwright Tennessee Williams, who was indeed gay, is spoofed in *Bouffon Glass Menajoree*. Parodied from *The Glass Menagerie*, this work was nominated for four 2007 New York Innovative Theatre Awards, including Outstanding Production, Original Short Script, Ensemble, and Director.

Another proven theatrical innovator, writer-director Matthew Foster, unveils *The Tyranny of God's Love*, an angry take on the proverbial American tradition of "positive thinking." If you're looking for sharp commentary on the binary, either/or way society looks at gender and desire, there's *FLUID*. Brooklyn's Erika Kate MacDonald plays Betty the Bisexual and a badass teenage lesbian rap star.

The wages of binary gender stereotyping is at the core of *I Hate Kenny G*. Solo performer, writer, and saxophonist Allegra Lingo reflects on, "being the only woman in a show that tours the country. And how due to my looks, and the fact that I'm a sax player, most often I'm mistaken for another guy on stage. And the double standard with which the audience views woman musicians."

Binary thinking is also defied in the cross-gender casting of Corrie Zoll's Elizabethan-style play, *Hystery of Queene Margaret*. And Detroit's Barebones troupe presents *The Way It Is* which includes a vignette about cross-dressing in a gay bar setting. Gay themes are also intrinsic to *Lay Down* and *Love Me*, which was received glowingly at the Dublin Gay Theatre Festival in 2006, and at this year's Fresh Fruit Fest in New York. And Amy Salloway, whose *Does This Monologue Make Me Look Fat?* was named best solo performance in Lavender three years ago, is still probing bigotry against extra pounds in *Circumference*.

However, queers and the heavysset aren't the only outsiders getting their due this year. New Fringe Executive Director Robin Gillette says she is, "extra-excited about our expanded focus on disability issues this year. We reserved five slots for performers with disabilities as a way to encourage performers who otherwise might find it hard to get stage time.

"We're also expanding our accessible performance options. We'll do 12 ASL-interpreted performances, up from eight in 2006, and 21 audio-described shows, up from 20 in 2007.

"A couple of firsts as well. *I Never Slept With Helen Keller* by Raymond Luczak, represents our first show entirely in ASL. 'Voiced for the Signing Impaired,' as the playwright puts it, not to mention our first deaf blind performer in the Fringe. Raymond has published deaf gay fiction collections."

Sam Jasmine, a blind DJ for KFAI-FM's *Disabled and Proud* will reprise her Minnesota Association of Community Theaters Festival Award-winning performance in Jon Skaalen's play *Helen of Boyd*. The cult-like nature of some treatment centers for the mentally ill is examined *Cathect Adult! Full Circle Empty*, penned by Tony Wentersdorf. And for those who need a scent-free show, there's Nancy Donoval's *Monster Movies with My Undead Dad*.

And disability on a gargantuan scale involves the hundreds of thousands displaced, killed, and maimed by the US occupation of Iraq. Veterans for Peace sponsors writer-performer Rachel Nelson's *Living the Questions*. In true Fringe defiance of conventional dramatic structure, the piece is complemented by Chante Wolf's photography and percussion by Sally Blumenfeld and Linda Melcher.

Of course, comedy is king at Fringe. And Lavender's own writer, Heidi Fellner, herself an accomplished actress with stellar comedy credentials, appears in *Soccerazzi*. Playwright Connie Kuntz says, "I wrote this play to poke fun at the fact that people can get away with anything—like not doing their job—as long as they just say or do something sexy. None of the characters are good at their job, but they are forgiven because they share the strange, common desire to be understood sexually.

"We are playing up the characters' myopic sexual perspectives via heaving breasts, humongous crotches, and their overall impatience to spill semen in and on the mouths, memorials, mistresses and...grandchildren of their community. And if the characters happen to get their faces on TV in the process, then so be it."

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