

20-year milestone S.F. Fringe features 7 shows from New York City

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P.J. Walsh performs at a forward operations base in Afghanistan. He brings his personal story, "Over There," to EXIT on Taylor, Sept. 8, 10, 11, 13, 17 and 18.

Audiences outside of the city are so enthusiastic," said "Sousepaw: A Baseball Story" writer Jonathan Goldberg, who's doing a "minitour" of Fringes — San Francisco, Minneapolis and Indianapolis. "In New York, you wind up playing to the same 10 people who come to everything you do." Being on the road, Goldberg said, provides "a way to test the show, get different reactions, see what works with audiences."

"Being with the Fringe," he said, "it becomes a community event, a band of brothers, a sense of community that travels with you."

"Sousepaw" features the hard-drinking, fire truck-chasing, alligator wrestling, early pro football-playing, baseball Hall of Fame lefty (southpaw) pitcher Rube Waddell, who also has a Mission District rock 'n' roll band named in his honor, though Waddell's been dead for 97 years. "Sousepaw" finds him in a seedy hotel, employing a circus Reptile Girl to help him stay sober on the comeback trail.

"He probably had some sort of undiagnosed mental problems we would probably give him pills for and he'd be real boring today," Goldberg said. But as a misfit, Waddell's story, Goldberg said, is "very typically American: What do you do when the one thing you want to do in life is taken away from

you?"

Bob Brader, of New York's John Montgomery Theatre Company, has a very different story to tell. His "Spitting in the Face of the Devil," deemed Best Show of the London Fringe by Beat Magazine, is an autobiographical story of his coming to terms with finding out about his father's pedophilia.

"The most powerful thing we've experienced while touring," he said in a phone interview, "is a lot of survivors have come up and talked about their experiences." For that reason, Brader said, a portion of the proceeds from the five stagings of his play will be donated to Prevent Child Abuse California.

Brader is concluding a five-festival swing that wound through Regina, Winnipeg, Calgary and Victoria, B.C., on his way here. "You always want to find out or go to the best festivals you possibly can. That's probably why San Francisco is getting a lot of New Yorkers. It's a pretty major Fringe," Brader said.

P.J. Walsh also has a personal story to tell. "Over There" looks back on his career since the first Gulf War, when he was a Marine field medic, followed by a job in the White House as Bill Clinton's dental technician, and then a standup comic in the Blue Collar Comedy Tour alongside Ron White and Larry the Cable Guy, to the present, which finds him engaged in more serious theater.

"It's my story," he said, "from when I'm a kid to the present day ... the choices I made, a lot of coming of age, a bit of an education."

"It's not a comedy club show," he warns. "I'm telling my life story. Events made me change my direction." He still tours as a comedian to make ends meet, but put in two years

at theatrical school on his way to creating this show. It's been well received, he says, by audiences across the political spectrum, from ultra-liberal to conservative, and won a Best of L.A. Fringe this year.

"A lot of my work goes toward helping veterans," Walsh said, citing upcoming veterans benefit shows he has scheduled. "It's my mission to show what their service is and how we can't forget about them, whether we think we should be there or not. I can't control that, but we're a country at war right now and don't act like it. It's very sad."

He's played to San Francisco audiences before, at the Punch Line nightclub, for instance, and says, "Any excuse to come to San Francisco is never a bad one."

But if it's laughter you need, Tanya O'Debra may be just the ticket. Her show, "Radio Star," which she describes as a "pretty standard mystery plot" delivered as a spoof of '40s radio detective shows, is perhaps particularly apt for Tenderloin audiences, given that Dashiell Hammett once walked these streets. She voices 10 different characters and does sound effects as well, though she's taken pains to update the foul language.

She made her Fringe debut in Edinburgh, and this year has performed in Orlando and Montreal as well, where "Radio Star" garnered "best of" nominations in two categories.

In an email, she wrote that she'd put a lot of thought into which festivals to apply to. "When we talked about San Francisco, I mentioned that I won a pageant called Miss Fag Hag. Having heard a crazy rumor about a strong homosexual community, it just seemed like a no-brainer that we would bring the show here. And I know San Franciscans are fairly liberal folks, which is a bonus when you have a show as filthy as mine. Plus I haven't spent much time in S.F., so I'm pretty excited to get more acquainted with the city."

"Radio Star," she promises, is "just like the golden age of radio, only dirtier."

Columbia University student Simone Marie Martelle, earning her master's degree in playwriting, is bringing her "The Three Bears" production on the advice of a visiting lecturer at Columbia, Craig Lucas, who spoke highly of how the San Francisco Fringe Festival is particularly helpful to young dramatists' efforts to self-promote and get their work out there.

Then there's Rupert Wates, phoning from his Hyundai Santa Fe in a parking lot somewhere west of Indianapolis, where he'd been appearing at the Fringe Festival there. "I was quite lucky to get in," said Wates, an Englishman now based in New York, who unashamedly admits he's "hijacking the theater audience" for his music review, "Joe's Café" — 15 story songs he wrote based on true-life experiences people have shared with him in his travels.

"A listening audience is rare," he said of the lot of a musician playing mostly in bars. But, by turning a concert playlist into a play, voila, he gets an attentive audience. A former journalist in Europe, Wates explains that "most of the stories people remember or want to tell are painful. Those are the ones we remember." Being an outsider in America and a journalist, he said, "seems to give me the necessary perspective." Some themes include homicide, child abuse and incest, although the show includes lighter material, too.

Wates has 25 songwriting awards and four CDs on his resume since coming to the States in '06. On his way here from Indianapolis, he's got gigs at house concerts, coffee houses, wine bars, in Reno, at Salinas' National Steinbeck Center on Sept. 3 and at the Alternative Café in Seaside (Monterey County).

His troupe varies in number depending on the venue, but in San Francisco it'll be four. Besides himself, Wates will present three other singers, with a minimal guitar and keyboard backing, performing a total of six times. If it was simply a quality-of-life matter, he said, he'd live in San Francisco, but for him, show-biz requires a Big Apple home base.

Osato of "JapJAP" says the S.F. Fringe is a great place to accumulate press clippings, as most shows are reviewed. Exit's publicist for the past eight years, Gary Carr, elaborated, cit-

ing the many bloggers and online reviewers, besides the "usual suspects" of the region's newspapers who follow the goings-on.

Carr, formerly on the board of Theater Bay Area, says that, among the shows he's intrigued by this year, besides the New Yorkers' offerings, is "The Madogs of Diego." That's a freebie, and the group putting it on, Trup Sapsiway, is coming to the Exit Stage Left all the way from Mauritius, an island east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean.

Who needs Broadway? ■

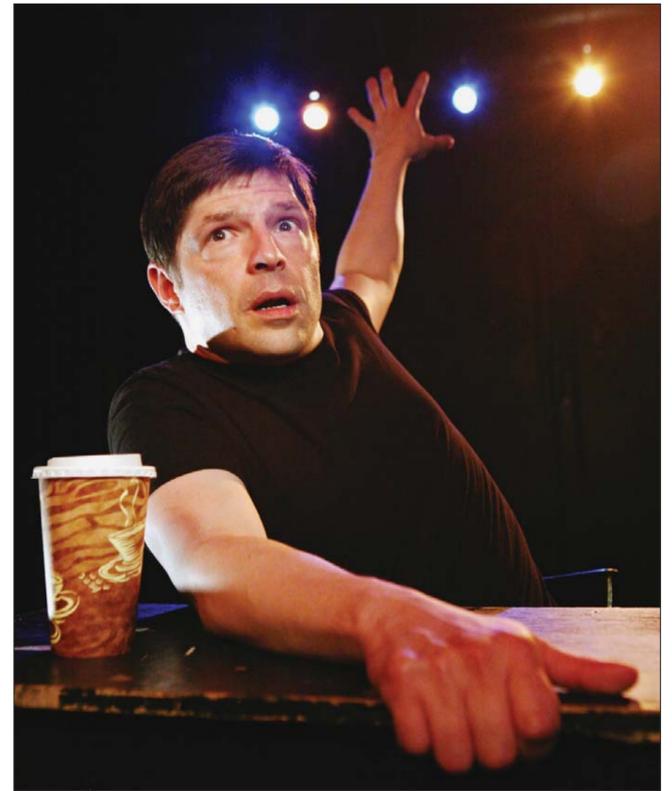


PHOTO BY SCOTT WYNN

Bob Brader's solo show, "Spitting in the Face of the Devil," is an autobiographical story of coming to terms with his father's pedophilia.

Pam Benjamin knocks out poems for anyone anytime about any topic at \$1 a crack. Sometimes a pleased patron pays her more.



PHOTO COURTESY P.J. WALSH



TENDERLOIN STARS



Pam Benjamin: Magic poetess pulls poems out of her hat for a buck apiece

BY ED BOWERS

STROLLING through U.N. Plaza, I happened to see Pam Benjamin, a poet friend for years, sitting at a small table upon which was a classic Olivetti-Underwood typewriter. A sign in front of her read, "Poems: Starting At \$1.00."

"What do you think you're doing?" I asked. "I'm selling poems." "Is this legal?" I asked. I'd often thought of selling my poems on the street, but I am all too aware of the police presence. Not everyone loves poetry.

"Yes, it's legal," she said. "All you have to do to work here is register on the Internet at www.artsmarketsf.org. You can get a spot to sell your art here." It's the Arts Market, Thursday's answer to the Wednesday farmers' market.

"How much does it cost?" I asked. "Nothing," she said. "It's free. I rent a chair from the library for \$2 and that's it. I sell poems every Thursday from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. I love my job! It's good for my writing and people love to get a poem. One day I made \$82."

She used to be a housewife in suburbia. Her husband made \$175,000 a year, and she was a high school teacher. But she gave it all up to be a writer in San Francisco when she fell in love with fiction and got her M.A. in lit-

erature from S.F. State. Then, rather promiscuously, she fell in love with poetry, and will get another master's in that subject in December. There are lots of starving unemployed poets in this city, not all with more degrees than a thermometer, so her dedication to the cause is both brave and admirable. She still has, however, the cheerful, harmless, wholesome demeanor of a suburban housewife, despite the tattoos on her neck.

"I try to look scary sometimes, but in spite of all my tattoos, it doesn't work. Besides, by my smiling a lot, I attract people who might ordinarily be wary of a street poet," Benjamin explained.

I guess people buy the package as much as the product.

"What's the most unusual thing that has ever happened to you out here while selling poems?" I asked.

"I've received a couple of marriage proposals. Back in the day (this project started Aug. 8, 2010) there were a lot of drug dealers around me getting into fights. One of them came up to me once and said, 'Girl, I respect your hustle,' and I took that as a high compliment."

A curious young man approaches Benjamin and says, "I think I have exactly one dollar." He asks her to write him a poem and she does, and he gives her his last dollar, then walks away smiling.

"You were totally concentrated while writ-

ing that poem," I said. "Is this job good practice for you?"

"Oh yes," she said. "I get to hone my communication skills through my writing. That's why I write poems. In San Francisco at poetry readings, people don't have the attention span to listen to stories, so I learned to write poetry. My writing is meant to communicate with people."

A nice-looking, middle-aged couple stop at her table. The man asks her to compose a poem about the negative and positive aspects of lawyers. Quite a challenge, especially the positive part, but she runs off a poem in five minutes, hands it to the couple, who then take her picture and have something to return home with when their vacation is done. They give her \$5.

"Monkey see, monkey do" is like a marketing mantra for a poet on the make.

"I've observed," she said, "that when people notice that I'm writing a poem for someone, they too become interested in buying a poem."

"Do you feel like you're commercializing yourself by selling poems?"

"As much of a socialist as I'd like to be, I'm really a capitalist. We cannot live in this society without cash. I can also use this venue to sell the two books I've written. I sell about one a week. Why sell them in stores when you can sell them yourself and keep all the money?"

"How do you write poems for people you don't know?"

"I get them to talk to me, and from what they say, I know what to write."

A smiling man approaches and asks her to write him a poem about his client, a "technical liaison" who is giving him a hard time and who he apparently doesn't like very much.

So, with the sound of a live jazz band playing in the background, and people lining up for the food trucks, in five minutes Benjamin knocks out a poem about a technical liaison (whatever that is), and gives it to the man who walks away happy. He pays her \$2.

"Write me a poem about writing poems for people," I request.

In three minutes she hands me the following:

To Warm Up

*The sun bathes my face in light beat
as another tourist snaps a shot.
"Look Mommy, a poet!"
And my bile rises a little.*

*But The Audience likes smiles,
a different kind of beat.
And bricks warm not enough to bake
bread or sleeping bodies.*

*Night time the warmth of strangers
dissipated to cold.*

Then she signed and dated it. Good job. ■



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMIOCO