

What to expect from this year's

S.F. Fringe Festival

That's not the answer — that's the perennial question

By JOHN BURKS

DON'T ASK CHRISTINA Augello, artistic director and San Francisco Fringe Festival co-founder, to predict the highlights of this year's 15-day extravaganza, which opens Sept. 11. She'd only be guessing, same as she has since the festival's inception 24 years ago.

The fun part for Christina is studying the synopses of the 35 productions to be staged to discern which will be the biggest treat. For her, she'll want to catch that performance first.

"There's always one that tickles my imagination. Always one in particular that I'm really looking forward to."

Which raises two questions: 1) How can it be that the Fringe Festival's head honcho has no more idea what to expect than the author of this story? And, 2) When she finally DOES decide which shows look most promising, is she ever disappointed?

"Not yet! I haven't been disappointed yet," she laughs. "I'm pretty good at reading the tea leaves.... And, you know, once the show gets rolling, it lives up to expectation ... or maybe expectations shift as it rolls on, and it's a great surprise. Either way."

How can it be that Fringe's artistic director has no idea what to expect? It's because shows are selected by drawing them out of a hat without regard to content. This year, about 120 indie theater

companies applied and 35 got lucky.

It's not strictly a random draw. Christina and crew first separate applications into four overlapping batches: dramas, entertainments, local and not local. Wouldn't want an overload of either dramatic arts or magicians & clowns — both genres totally fringe-worthy. And since SFFF's mission is to present works from near and faraway, they do their best to present a geographical spread.

Of the 35 theater groups in this year's Fringe Festival, 11 hail from San Francisco, seven from Oakland, nine from elsewhere in California, five from far-flung American cities plus one from Canada.

OUT OF A HAT COMES ...

Winners are drawn from four hats, and a suitable balance is achieved. At no point are value judgments raised concerning the merits of each production. This is a "non-juried" selection process — a practice followed by nearly all fringe festivals in the world, starting from the very first 68 years ago.

Fringe was born in 1947, in Edinburgh, Scotland. Today, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe bills itself as "the largest arts festival in the world," a claim hard to dispute, considering that last year's featured 49,497 performances of 3,193 shows in 299 venues over three weeks.

Edinburgh's beginnings were far humbler. '47 saw the founding of what

was called The Edinburgh International Festival, "created to celebrate and enrich European cultural life" in the wake of World War II. When eight theater companies showed up uninvited, international festival directors regretfully could find no room for them to participate.

Undaunted, the "uninviteds" cobbled together improvised venues nearby; "on the festival fringe," there to strut their stuff — and strike a spark that burns bright unto this day. These original fringe directors drew enthusiastic crowds, and "fringe" became an ongoing side-festival year after year. In 1958, the fringers declared themselves The Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society, which carries on even now.

The Edinburgh fest's constitution codified the ethos that drew those uninvited players to Scotland in '47. The society would "take no part in vetting the festival's programme." Nonjuried made official. EFFS would welcome all comers, exercising no control over what was presented. "To this day," EFFS declares, "that policy remains at the core of our festival and we're proud to include in our programme anyone with a story to tell and a venue willing to host them." That's the spirit of S.F. Fringe as well.

FRINGE BEGAT FRINGE BEGAT ...

Eventually, Fringe spanned the planet. The North American granddaddy is Edmonton's, founded 1982. Fringe would premiere in the U.S. in 1991 with the Orlando Fringe Festival; EXIT Theatre's S.F. Fringe the following year.

Now there are fringe performances also in Adelaide, Boston, Budapest, Cal-

gary, Cape Town, Chicago and Cincinnati. Not to mention Dublin, Glasgow, Halifax, Hollywood, Indianapolis, London, Melbourne, Minneapolis, Montreal, New Orleans, Orlando, Ottawa, Perth, Prague, San Diego, Singapore, Sydney, St. Louis, Tel Aviv, Toronto, Vancouver, Victoria, Washington, D.C., Winnipeg, and elsewhere.

WE ALL KNOW WHAT WE LIKE

A common complaint, one that Augello has heard through the years, is that people who want to attend are afraid they'll make a bad choice and choose shows they won't enjoy.

Augello mentions a local theater critic who has made a career of avoiding the Fringe Festival because of this "iffy" perception. Which she finds ridiculous. "I mean, we all know what we like. You like clowns, we've got clowns. Serious introspection, we've got that. Magicians, yes. Musical shows. You name it."

"So you decide which genre appeals to you and take it from there. All you need to do is consult the capsule descriptions on our Website."

OK, let's.

A quick sampler of this season's more evocative titles: "Date Night at Pet Emergency," "Wretch Like Me (or how I was saved from being saved)," "Fluffy, a Gorilla," "From Como to Homo," "The Rita Hayworth of This Generation," "hush."

Digging deeper into nuggets from the synopses: "Perpetual Wednesday": Two magicians, Walter and Bruce, find themselves locked in a police interrogation room. They've been accused of murder. But they can't quite agree on



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Christina Augello
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, SAN FRANCISCO FRINGE FESTIVAL

whether they committed it or not ...

"The Sieve of All Parts": A wild anatomical ride for both audience and performer, as solo artist Mandy Greenlee unveils a world of characters emerging from her heart, ovaries, pancreas and other organs. Exposing the personalities that live inside ...

"The Ineffable Experience of Impossible Achievements": Awarded a 2014 "Best of S.F. Fringe Festival," Sebastian Boswell II returns with a new show, featuring mind reading, strange physical feats and tales culled from his lifetime of travel to the far corners of the world, training with mystics ...

"Nice Is Not What We Do (tales of death & family)": Step right up for dueling eulogies! Members of a far-flung family swoop into town for their father's funeral, and Kathleen's sister says to her, "Say something nice." But Kathleen has a problem. She was Dad's sparring partner ...

Read 'em and take your choice, or choices. Augello admits there's an inevitable hit-and-miss aspect to the process, same as when you choose a movie to attend or a book to read. They're not all

created equal, but she doesn't get many complaints.

"Our audiences tend to be adventurous, given the nature of fringe," Christina says. "They're here to experience something new, here for discovery. And it's cheap. Our tickets go for \$12, even cheaper if you go for a package deal. So, if you didn't like this show, try another."

Shows run 60 to 90 minutes, and Christina recommends catching two or three the same day/evening. An afternoon performance, early dinner, a couple more evening shows — a double- or triple-header, plenty to chew on and still get home at a reasonable hour.

SORT OF LIKE BEING ROADIES

Fringe is just one of Augello's responsibilities. She's been EXIT Theatre's artistic director since founding the company with Managing Director Richard Livingston in 1983. Fourteen years ago she created DivaFest, an offshoot to support female theater artists. An accomplished actress herself, she's performed in numerous fringe festivals, in DivaFest productions and more.

But never once has she performed at the festival she founded. Not for lack

of opportunity, nor false pride, but because she thrives on nurturing theater and theater people. She wouldn't dream of doing anything that might interfere with that responsibility, one she sees as central to both EXIT's and the Fringe's mission.

"We're here to support the players and the writers," says Augello. She commands a staff, augmented by 60 volunteers, who deal with everything from publicity and housing to ticket sales, tech demands, helping out-of-town artists navigate the Tenderloin — everything it takes to put on the shows, aside from writing, directing and acting.

It's not unlike the services roadies perform for rock bands. Schlepping tons of instruments and gear, stringing guitars, setting up drumkits, plugging cords into amps, doing soundchecks, icing the libations and laying out the snacks, so when it's time to wait for the people, the musicians can concentrate on just that, without distraction.

Likewise S.F. Fringe. "We try to create a setting where all the companies have to do is perform — well, that, and they need to be able to set up their shows in 15 minutes and take them down in 15 minutes. That's mandatory so we can keep a tight schedule."

S.F. Fringe gives all proceeds to the performers: 100% of the box office. The organization offsets this by pursuing arts grants and donations, plus income from EXIT Theatre productions.

"It's all about the Fringe performers, not about us," says Christina with quiet pride, imploring this writer not to quote her too profusely in this article. "All about the performers."

San Francisco Fringe Festival will offer 150 performances by 35 indie theater

Photos of a smattering of Fringe performances with the dates they're on stage. Clockwise from top left:

Schnachtner vs. Schnachtner Abby Schnachtner picks apart her brains during a Vegas-style, on-stage fight. **The Interview** In a one-act tragicomedy, Melrose and Bug discover the meaningless nature of holding a job. **Zurich Plays** Dadaists present a surrealist spectacle of post-World War I Dada history, a West Coast premiere. **Perpetual Wednesday** Two magicians locked in an interrogation room and accused of murder ponder whether they committed the crime or not. **In Denial: A One-Woman Show** Clown Velma Patterson dreams of becoming a Broadway superstar and superhero. **The Ineffable Experience of Impossible Achievements** 2014 Best of SF Fringe winner Sebastian Boswell III baffles the audience with mind reading, odd physical feats and more.

Date Night at Pet Emergency After their dog ODs, solo performer Lisa Rotbman bickers with her husband about money and other comubial concerns. **Wretch Like Me (or how I was saved from being saved)** David Templeton's solo show about his teenage years as a fundamentalist Christian.

ater companies during its September 11-26 run at the EXIT Theatre, 156 Eddy St. For details, check out sffringe.org. ■

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9/ 13, 18, 20, 24



9/ 11, 19, 20, 25



9/ 12, 17, 19, 26



9/ 11, 13, 17, 19, 23



9/ 12, 15, 19, 20, 24