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Ordering Chaos: The Canadian Fringe Theatre Phenomenon

by

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B.F.A., University of Victoria, 1989

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Department of Theatre

We accept this dissertation as conforming to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

In 1982, the Edmonton Fringe began as a low budget experimental theatre event, and quickly became an annual celebration of performance that was (and is) a truly *popular* festival. Today, the Edmonton Fringe attracts 500,000 spectators, 200 street performers, and 150 theatre groups from across the country and around the world. Between 1985 and 1991, Fringe festivals were established in Montreal, Toronto, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Vancouver and Victoria. These 7 festivals constituted a 4 month theatre circuit for national and international travelling theatre and street performance troupes. All of these festivals continue to receive more applications from Fringe artist to produce, than they can possibly accommodate. Audience members are willing to stand in line for up to six hours to see a sell-out Fringe show. These events have stimulated a remarkable level of excitement and enthusiasm for theatre. Why ? How? These are the central questions that this work approaches from a number of different, and sometimes distinct perspectives.

“Part One,” Ordering Chaos, begins with a history of the Fringe that places the festivals in a larger context concerned with Canadian theatre, and in particular the historical relations, social and theatrical, between the alternative theatre movement and the Fringe, and between the Fringe and the postmodern. It includes a description and analysis of the Fringe Production model, Fringe performance, and excerpts from numerous interviews with Fringe producers, artists, and critics. “Part Two,” The Fringe Phenomenon, observes these events from two different perspectives; one is concerned with festivity, the other with popular culture; both observe the Fringe as a socio-cultural event. Depending primarily on Victor Turner’s anthropology of performance and John Fiske’s observations on popular culture, I examine the *festivals* as cultural performances. Linda Hutcheon’s understanding of the Canadian postmodern provides a context for conclusionary remarks.

Examiners:

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In the end, I thank Dr. Hughes for exposing as “real” -- indeed, as “hard” and “cold” facts -- the invisible boundaries.

Dedication

This text is dedicated to Michelle Cook. --*Tahabaht..*

This work is dedicated to Brian Paisley, Judy Lawrence, Joanna Maratta, Randy Smith, Larry Desrochers, Tom Bentley-Fisher, Greg Nixon, Kris Kieren, Nick Morra, and to the Fringe artist -- past and future -- for all the work you have done. You have my greatest respect and admiration.

Introducing !!!

... The Monster:

To all you demented cultural Dr. Frankensteins of the civilized world. Congratulations -- you've created a monster! ... A warm, vibrant, bizarre, theatre-hungry monster who eats up the elitism smothering the art form and instead serves up theatre at a bare-bones, street-level style that invites one and all to plunge into an eclectic smorgasbord of ideas and talent.

... . Edmonton.-- and in turn, the world -- has embraced the Fringe monster who will not be contained. The monster who reminds us of the strength to be found in freedom; who dares us to have the courage of our convictions; who demands we speak to each other directly, sincerely, passionately, unabashedly. ... here are artists speaking their minds and audiences speaking right back; here are uncensored ideas crackling throughout the streets and the alleyways; here are strangers becoming neighbours; here is an intimate, global community with a passionate, compassionate, and intelligent vision demanding that original thought be heard and explored. It does the spirit good to be here.

So, welcome. I'm glad you're here, not only embracing, but re-creating the monster and keeping him uncontainable. Judy Lawrence.

The first Fringe Festival I attended, in 1987, was the inaugural Victoria Fringe. Unfamiliar with the Edmonton and Vancouver Fringes, and having arrived from the East coast only a month previously, I presumed the festival was an event unique to this city. I took note of its quirky character, the affect of walking back and forth among three peculiar little venues, and attending a number of different performances in a single evening. In the end, I questioned if the unusual nature of this event was indicative of the character of my new "home town".

With my curiosity piqued, the following year I travelled to Edmonton's Fringe. Although I was, by then, considerably more informed on the subject of Fringes, I was completely overwhelmed. When I arrived there were no empty hotel rooms in the district. The surrounding cafés and bars were crammed with seats that spilled into the streets. Every conceivable surface: lamp posts, sidewalk, windows, awnings, trees,

barriers, tents, park benches, people -- everywhere and everything -- was plastered with posters, handbills, and photo-copied reviews. The festival site was a confusing maze of venues, buskers, beer tents, food kiosks, and long, long, *long* line-ups of people. The shifting crowds were a mosaic of people: young, old, hippies, executives, teenagers, bikers, families, and couples. The throngs of people drifting through and swarming around a three block radius were so thick it was impossible to distinguish road from sidewalk or park from parking lot. There were buskers on every corner and street performers in every park and empty lot. They were playing classical music, rock n' roll, folk, and jazz. Some told stories using people from the crowds as characters. Some performed interactive mime routines. Others juggled fire and swords. One rode a 16 foot unicycle yelling "and now for my finale -- THROW ME THE BABY." It was truly chaotic.

That evening, I stayed up late into the night scrutinizing the 102 pages of my Fringe program. In the morning I made my final choices, organized my program with red circles and stars, and ventured out to become "one of the crowd". I found my way through the maze to venue 9, The Walterdale Theatre. While standing in line, I made the first of many changes to my schedule: an actor from a performance I had planned to see was passing out handbills and talking about his production; when he left, a group of people who had seen the show agreed it was monotonous and meaningless. Word quickly traveled up and down the line-up. As the week went by, I continued to cross out previous choices, make new ones, and sometimes I renewed old ones. Frequently, I made no choice at all -- relaxing with a new friend and a cold beer instead. Deciding which performance to see, and wanting to see more and different shows with each conversation, are what most impressed my memory. The buzz of talk, the laughter, and the debates, it was all very unusual: strangers talking at length to me, and to each other, about theatre, actors and stories. It was a celebratory and festive theatre event. I

came away from that experience with one central question — how and why did so many people come to be so animated and talkative about *theatre*?

Method:

I began asking questions at the Victoria Fringe in 1988 (There were 3 “Fringe cities” then: Edmonton Vancouver and Victoria). I spoke with the producer, Randy Smith, I made up audience surveys, and I interviewed artists and audiences. I asked people to talk about the plays they were seeing and what they thought about the event. I asked the artists about the shows they were producing and their social encounters. I gave these interviews to Smith, and in 1989 he invited me to the first annual Fringe Festival Producer’s Conference (hosted by TheatreSpace in Vancouver). It was at that conference, in a long narrow room with an eclectic group of lively, talkative, and, I thought, visionary people, that I began to formulate ideas and make material arrangements for a research trip that would include *all* of the Fringes. When I made that trip in 1991, there were 7 festivals that created a 4 month festival tour. This circuit of Fringe festivals began in Montreal in mid June and finished in Victoria in early October.

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Carrying with me a bundle of books and my miniature tape-recorder, I arrived in Montreal in early June and proceeded to travel west by bus, stopping for an average of two weeks in each “Fringe city,” for the next 4 months. On the way, I gathered more than a hundred taped interviews with artists, producers, critics, and theatre-people of all types. Frequently, the microphones were turned around and my research became the subject of interest; I was often queried about the irony of an academic “taking the Fringe seriously.” I video-taped more than 50 Fringe plays, snooped and rummaged through every Fringe office, and mailed home several packages of paraphernalia: programs, news-clippings, posters, hand-bills, and Fringe schedules. I also attended

at least 250 Fringe productions, and made just as many new friends and associates. Once home, I realized I had created my own Fringe monster -- made up of bits and pieces of "facts", dozens of different people's insights, hundreds of theatrical images and wonderful personal memories. In the end, when I finished "ordering things," my monster was missing an essential Fringe organ; it was all brains with no heart.

The following spring, 1992, I worked collaboratively with 3 actors and co-created, directed, produced, and toured with, *Death in the Doll's House* (between Winnipeg and Victoria). I almost discovered the heart of the matter. While I learned how to produce on the Fringe, and was able to experience first hand the types of relationships that develop between artists and their audiences, by the end of that tour, the experience of creating theatre on the Fringe had raised a new set of questions. I wanted to understand better the effects, theatrically and socially, of the evident tensions that the festivals create: tensions between the remarkably democratic design of the production structure and the anarchic nature of some Fringe productions; between the everyday-work-a-day world that surrounds the festivals and the festivities that intrude on the mundane; between the clash of theatre and festivities, the streets and the venues, the low and the high; between artistic expression and social restraints.

In 1994, I conducted an experiment that allowed me to test the boundaries of the Fringe, socially and critically. I was one of 3 collaborators in a project called *The Happy Cunt, a true story*. We co-created through research and rehearsals a self-proclaimed "radical elemental feminist" play about language (note, *we were not then, nor have we ever been*, radical elemental feminists: see Appendix). We created two clowns, HAG and NAG, who blatantly appropriated, used and abused other people's texts and ideas, and generally caused a commotion as they travelled across the country. We encountered both irate and delighted spectators *and* numerous people in the streets who had not (yet) seen our performance. We were interviewed by the RCMP and city

police, and put “under investigation” by the attorney general’s office in two provinces. There were meetings with the producers, Fringe security officers, and a memorable encounter with the Strathcona Business(mans’) Association in Edmonton.¹ And, of course, we received massive amounts of media attention: praise and abuse.

This experience helped me to answer a number of questions with more confidence. In 1995, I crossed the final line toward completion of my research when I presented a “performance/lecture” for the Association for Canadian Theatre Research, at the Learned’s Society Conference in Montreal: *geste pour happy cunt* (See Appendix).

The Scope of Things:

“Part One,” Ordering Chaos, begins by examining the Fringe festivals from an historical and descriptive perspective. Chapter 1, “The Politics of Identity in Canadian Theatre,” creates an historical context in which to “fit” the Fringe. I suggest that the Fringe Festivals provided a much needed production opportunity for an independent and ex-centric small theatre movement that began in the late 1970s and represented a diverse collection of “outside” voices: feminists, black, native, gay, poor, and “others”. Chapter 2, “Summer 1982: Exit Shakespeare, Enter the Strathcona Fringe,” answers questions respecting the origins and growth of the Edmonton Fringe: what were the historical factors that inspired and enabled the founding of the inaugural Fringe festival in Edmonton 1982? How did that festival work and what did the event look like and feel like for the people involved? What precipitated the remarkable and rapid growth of the Edmonton Fringe? Chapter 3, “The Fringe Circuit,” is divided into two parts; one describes the 6 inaugural festivals that, along with the Edmonton Fringe, created the Fringe circuit; the other provides description of some of the early travelling Fringe artists. Chapter 4, “The Fringe Production Model,” is equally descriptive yet more pragmatic; I impose order through categories and components in order to make sense of the Fringe as a “production model”. Chapter 5, “The Art of the Fringe,” has, I am

told, a deceptive title. This is because the “art of the Fringe” is better understood as craft (and crafty) and as technique (and cunning). Fringe artists, the successful ones, “use” the production circumstances that the Fringe model creates and stimulates. . *How* they do this is the focus of this chapter.

“Part Two,” The Fringe Phenomenon, remains concerned with the essential question – What creates and stimulates all the excitement and energy on the Fringe? Nonetheless, in the final chapters I change my perspective; in place of description and re-counting, I turn to anthropology and cultural studies in order to observe the Fringe in two different contexts; both are concerned with culture as performance, and in particular how cultural performance both shapes and makes sense of social reality. This section is prefaced with a brief description of “culture in process” and a short story reflecting on that process. Chapter Six, “Culture on the Fringe: Clowns and Festivity,” introduces Victor Turner’s ideas about *liminality* and social process. I draw a number of parallels between anthropological insights concerned with festivity as a cultural performance and the performances of “Mump and Smoot” AKA “The Clowns of Horror”. Chapter Seven, “Popular Culture on the Fringe,” grapples with definitions, theory, and historiography – all in context with an analysis of one of the most “popular” Fringe plays: *Saskatchebuzz*, created by one of the most popular Fringe companies: Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie. I argue that the Fringe creates a space that invites “popular” production and *reception*. strategies. Chapter Eight, “ex-centric culture: the fringe and the postmodern,” reflects back on the introductory chapter, and comments on the relations between the emergence of the Fringe and the Canadian postmodern.

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**Journal Excerpt:**

**10 April 1994, "The Explanation"**

We want to answer the questions and doubts about the title of our production, *The Happy Cunt*, before they begin to haunt you – as they have us.

The title reflects the content of our work. We are committed to exploding language that traps and devalues women. We want to shock, to confront compliance and acceptance: we challenge the commonsense meaning of the word 'cunt' – dirty and shameful, and certainly not to be spoken by women. We are liberating other words: Hag, Nag, Nymph, Witch, Bitch, Cow, et.....

By the end of the Fringe tour we will have 'recruited' thousands of Happy Cunts across the country – all wearing the '*I'm a Happy Cunt*' happy face buttons.

We have thought long and hard about the possible repercussions of discovering the meaning of the word 'cunt'. In the end, we found the courage in our convictions and the faith in our talents to proceed with the same honesty that found the title. We honestly asked ourselves, 'what word frightens and shames women the most?'

The Fringe is the only place where this kind of theatre can be produced.

Sincerely *The English Madhatters*: Erika Paterson, Diana Dent, and Deb Pickman.

cc - Fringe Producers.

**11 April 1994, Vancouver**

We are in the thick of our show – working furiously and with great energy. Diana, Deb, and I have been researching feminism for the past four months – and now we're about to go into rehearsals.

Jennifer (my daughter), is touring with our "4 company" caravan this season; Way Off Broadway has hired her as a technician. We're

collaborating with four companies, renting two vans, and going on the road with a computer, photo-copier and Button machine -- trying to cut individual costs. We are also collaborating creatively -- creating our individual shows with each other; we are co-producing, co-directing, and co-designing. So far it has made the administrative side of touring more efficient, and fun. It is too early to know how the artistic, social and, emotional aspects of this collaboration will unfold.

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Judy Lawrence, X Marks the Spot, 10th Anniversary Fringe: Edmonton Fringe Festival Program,  
Edmonton: Chinook Theatre, 1991 : 11.

<sup>1</sup> They were upset about our poster ; one of the men pounded his fist on the table and asked if we would "climb up on this table and spread *our* legs for all to see

## Part 1: Ordering Chaos

### Preface:

In terms of Canadian theatre history, the most provocative aspect of the Fringe festival production model is the “first-come first-served” application process. Everyone and anyone is welcome to submit an application to produce on the Fringe. Everyone involved is a potential Fringe play-maker; theatre artists, musicians, dancers, stand-up comics, street performers, Fringe critics, researchers, and audience members have all produced on the Fringe

The primary mandate of each festival producer is to provide for artists to produce themselves independently, inexpensively, and unfettered by adjudicated evaluation. The unique Fringe canon of “first-come-first-served” should be understood as an explicit rejection of the tradition and politics of artistic adjudication: to be measured by “one’s peers” by the “criteria of artistic excellence.” The concept of artistic excellence was one of a number of principles that helped to legitimize the establishment of arm’s-length public funding (instituted by the Canada Council in 1957). As embodied in the arm’s-length funding philosophy, excellence is a multifunctional concept; *one* of its functions is to support artistic work that strives to achieve an expression of humanity that is “universal.” – Art that transcends its historic, geographic, and particular moments of relevance, revealing universal emotions or timeless truths, is thought to be the most valuable art.<sup>2</sup> Applied to theatre, this criterion evaluates scripts and performance primarily in terms of *artistic* experience.<sup>3</sup> It is this concept of theatre, as a principally artistic experience, that the Fringe rejects and counters with its evaluation of theatre as *social* experience.

Ideally, on the Fringe, evaluation is a social *process* that begins with the event of the festival and crystallizes in the theatre at the moment of performance; the value of a performance is measured by the response of the audiences, other artists, and the media. Congruent with this is a concept of theatre as a social *event* that finds its greatest value in relation to its community, and most specifically, its particular audience. On the Fringe that community is unique, it is a collection of people – artists, volunteers, the public and the media, that come together for a 10 day and late into the night festival that is a lively and provocative theatre event with its own set of “rules” -- its own criteria for both social and artistic activities.

The Fringe not only rejects the criteria and ideology of artistic excellence, it also uses government-directed funding with results that raise questions about a fundamental truism of “established” Canadian consciousness: the notion that arm's-length funding is sacrosanct for the protection of artistic creativity and integrity. These two principles, excellence and arm's-length, have been fiercely protected as both immutable and inseparable since the establishment of the Canada Council. The *Applebaum-Hebert Report*, presented in 1982, reiterates the Massey Commission's arm's-length ideology:

State support of the arts can have a liberating effect on creative energies only if allocated through arm's-length mechanisms. Without these mechanisms, we put at risk not only the diversity of cultural expression, but also the fragile and unpredictable creative process itself. <sup>4</sup>

When artistic endeavours are funded by government directed agencies (which are not arm's length, for example, the Department of Communications [DOC], Federal Job Development agencies, and the Ministry of Human Resources) the criteria for funding are most often concerned with the social as opposed to the artistic. And, these criteria necessarily change to reflect the concerns and initiatives of the government in power. Generally, the artistic qualities most valued by government-directed funding agencies are essentially promotional; art that promotes urban rejuvenation, economic activity,

audience development, national unity, international respect, corporate sponsorship, tourism, public approval, multiculturalism, safe sex, and any number of government initiatives or policies, is considered, by government directed funding agencies, to be the most valuable art.

For the most part, the government agencies that fund the Fringe do so to fulfill objectives that have little to do with what the Fringe provides for artists, or for what those artists produce; they support the event, not necessarily the theatre.<sup>5</sup> This kind of funding, divorced from the principle of arm's-length funding, is precisely what insulates and protects the Fringe artists from the manipulation of state or corporate agendas. Ironically, this type of insulation and protection of artistic creation is, of course, one of the prime intentions of the arm's-length philosophy.

The Fringe festivals present an intriguing paradox. The festivals represent a generation of theatre artists who reject the notion of artistic excellence (as a definitive measurement for the value of their work), which is the legitimizing principle of arm's-length funding, and, who in the same instance, are perhaps the only publicly subsidized theatre artists creating work in a quintessential arm's-length situation. To understand the Fringe phenomenon in context with the cultural politics of arts funding, it is best thought of as a rejection of those politics and policies – and a turning away from the resulting institutions of Canadian theatre production.

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<sup>2</sup> The criteria of excellence also enabled the Council to make a distinction between amateur and professional, which was considered necessary for both practical and artistic reasons. From a practical point of view, there was only so much money to be distributed, and for the amateur artists, excellence was meant to provide a goal, a target to be reached, a challenge to become professional. There were ramifications involved in drawing the line between amateur and professional. One was the concurrent belief that the audience required standards of excellence in order to be enlightened.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Paul Knowles, in his essay on the Mulgrave Road Co-op Theatre in Nova Scotia, recalled that the Canada Council queried the Co-op as to whether “the company’s commitment was to

---

its art or its community”? “[C]ommitments which the Council read as conflicting, and one of which was outside its mandate.” See “Stories of Interest: Some Partial Histories of Mulgrave Road Groping Towards a Method,” Theatre History in Canada (THC) 13. 1/2 (1992): 110.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Holmes, ed. Canadian Conference of the Arts, A Little Applebert: A concise version of the report of the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee, (1983): 2.

<sup>5</sup> For the most part public funding comes from the following: Federal Job Development Grants, Student Employment Grants, Section 25 Employment Grants, Municipal or Provincial Arts councils, the Federal Department of Communications Cultural Projects Grants, corporate sponsors and fundraising events.

## Chapter One:

### **The Politics of Identity in Canadian Theatre History**

#### **Introduction Framing the Fringe**

To discover yourself is a political act in this country. Paul Thompson.<sup>6</sup>

Not a state theatre with its burden of high-salaried incompetents ... or a civic theatre to be tossed about by politicians. Not a coterie theatre to be the vehicle of literati and esthetes. Just a forthright, ingenious, native, friendly theatre, living for and by a wide enough circle of friends to support it, rather as church lives or a club. ... Such a house, then, will be built in the expectation that people may come to the theatre to spend the evening, may possibly arrive early, may stay late, may like to eat or perhaps dance after the play. Roy Mitchell.<sup>7</sup>

In many ways the Fringe festival production structure provides for a theatre that fulfills the visions of earlier critics and artists. The call for a *Canadian* Theatre began at the turn of the century.<sup>8</sup> For a number of decades following, a host of critics and artists wrote about the need for drama written by Canadian playwrights.<sup>9</sup> In 1967, the Dominion Drama festival hosted an all-Canadian festival.<sup>10</sup> In 1971, the Canada Council hosted two conferences that resulted in the *recommendation* that government subsidy be dependent on 50% Canadian content. In the 1970s, the alternative theatres found their legitimacy in their quest for a Canadian identity. This generation expressed an urge to make the envisioned “Canadian” theatre more popular (primarily in the sense of less elitist). The urge to be popular paralleled two alternative mandates: to “break down the barriers” between the art, the artists, and the audience and to create a theatre concerned with a distinctly regional or local identity. Each of these expectations for a Canadian theatre has been fulfilled by the Fringe; there are festivals in each region of the country, and each one presents a number of local, regional, and national companies. On average, between 60 and 80% of the work is new and mostly created by Canadians. The festivals are decidedly indigenous; they are certainly more popular than elite, and without question, the “barriers” have been broken.

The Fringe is a reasonable response to the changes that the alternative theatres introduced in the 1960s and 70's: philosophical, artistic, stylistic, technical and political. There are obvious similarities between the mandates, aesthetics, and production techniques of the early alternative theatres and Fringe festival production in general. Jim Garrard, founder of Theatre Passe Muraille, wanted to make theatre "as popular as bowling."<sup>11</sup> Brian Paisley, founder of the Edmonton Fringe, attributes the popularity of the Fringe to its three essential ingredients: "theatre, sunshine, and beer." This common urge to be popular is one of the most significant congruences of mandate between the alternatives and the Fringe. The quest to reach a popular audience naturally influences aesthetic choices and, in turn, is itself influenced by prevailing forms of local and popular culture. Two examples of performance principles that arise from a popular mandate and are typical to alternative and Fringe production are the privileging of the actor over other elements of production, and involving the audience, in some measure, in the performance. In the most general of terms, both alternative and Fringe theatre stress the value of theatrical process over that of product, both significantly alter the fourth wall relationship between actor and audience, and both create unique production opportunities for original work by new artists. Fringe theatre presents not so much a new way of working – as a way that has found a new time and place.

### **The Alternative to Fringe Continuum**

In the annals of English-Canadian theatre history, development during the post-centennial period is likely the liveliest on record. Although many young theatre workers had entered the scene, most regional theatres across the country seemed unreceptive to new Canadian talent and uninterested in the development and performance of new Canadian work. Many of these new workers saw the Canadian theatre establishment during the late 1960s as either the last vestiges of British imperialism or the new frontier of American colonization. *Feeling like outsiders, they took advantage of alternative funding of the day* – grants such as Opportunities for Youth and Local Initiative Programs – to create vibrant new theatre operations run on a shoe string. These so-called 'alternative' theatres may be divided into roughly two categories: those who concentrated on the development of new playwrights – for example, Tarragon Theatre and Factory Theatre Lab in Toronto - and those working in collective creation. Diane Bessai.<sup>12</sup>

The alternates [or alternatives] are the heroes in this cultural drama: nationalistic, committed to Canadian playwrights, young, radical, and self-consciously experimental. As convention has it, they began as expressions of the familiar American concept of radical theatre, and evolved a nationalistic ideology: the weak faded away and the strong survived; they legitimized playwrighting as a profession in this country; they spawned a generation of new actors, designers, and directors, and eventually they ate the mainstream. ... [T]he alternates have transformed the conditions of their existence to become the new mainstream. Alan Filewod.<sup>13</sup>

When the Fringe began in the early 1980s, the alternative generation had begun to adopt a more “mainstream” way of producing theatre; during the 1970s they created formal associations, adapted the established “not-for-profit” company structure with a board of directors, built infrastructures through organizations like Playwrights Canada, contributed to critical journals, and fought for and won recognition and special funding categories with the Canada and provincial arts councils. In the 1980s they began to acquire buildings with lobbies, comfortable seats, and mortgages. These are all activities that Fringe companies have not, in general, pursued; after fifteen years Fringe theatre has not made any similar efforts toward establishing artistic or organizational legitimacy because it is missing the institutionalizing impulse of nationalism that so influenced the alternative theatres *and* Canadian theatre historiography.

The Fringe producers, and most of the artists involved, have little concern for creating an indigenous or distinctly Canadian theatre. Fringe critics have never been interested in crediting the festivals with achieving the long sought after goal of a *national* theatre.<sup>14</sup> The Fringe generation is no longer engaged with discovering or presenting a definitive “essential” *Canadian* identity. This is one of the key differences between the Fringe and the alternative movement. Another important difference is that the alternative movement experienced a relatively rapid process of unification (between 1968 and 1975), while the Fringe has remained remarkably, and determinedly, fragmented and chaotic for 15 years.<sup>15</sup>

The founding artistic mandates of the alternatives, which, to echo Filewod, “were strong enough to survive,” express a number of different approaches to theatre production. For example, Toronto Workshop Productions (TWP, 1959) was committed to left wing politics and a mandate to create a highly skilled ensemble based on Joan Littlewood’s techniques. John Juliani’s *Savage God* (Vancouver: 1966) presented a series of experiments involved in “the mixing of the processes of art, life, and therapy.”<sup>16</sup> No two performances were the same.<sup>17</sup> Theatre Passe Muraille (Toronto: 1969) began as an educational experiment concerned with the relations between theatre and community (at Rochdale college). When Paul Thompson took over the role of artistic leader in 1972, the company became dedicated to the actor and the process of collective creation. Factory Lab (Toronto: 1970) began as a theatre committed to the Canadian playwright; Tarragon (Toronto: 1971), as a theatre dedicated to establishing a standard of excellence for new Canadian scripts, and Toronto Free (1971) was a free theatre: “ideologically and stylistically.”<sup>18</sup> The Mummers Troupe (St. Johns: 1972) “presented socio-political issues relevant to the people of Newfoundland,” using a range of presentation styles from “agit-prop to musical fantasy.”<sup>19</sup> The one common bond between these early alternative theatres was an overall spirit of experimentation that was integral to the counter-culture of the 1960s.

There were a number of forces that worked to consolidate these relatively isolated experiments of the early alternatives, and ultimately gathered these artists into a unified movement dedicated to the creation of an indigenous theatre. The wave of cultural nationalism, shaped and funded by the Liberal government in the 1970s, had the most significant influence on defining a new common ground. Whatever their initial impulses, “the alternative theatres found themselves in the forefront of a popular nationalistic movement.”<sup>20</sup> Denis Johnston points to two forces that helped to assimilate “the alternative” with “the national”: “massive injection of public subsidy” and enthusiastic “nationalist critics.”<sup>21</sup> Filewod agrees: “the new theatre movement

may have been inspired by the American experimental theatre, but it was institutionalized out of its underground beginnings by federal cultural policy, which encouraged nationalism and provided easily obtainable grants through job creation programs.”<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the 1970s, critics focused on the alternative work that adopted nationalism, as an artistic and organizing force, to such an extent, the movement came to be defined by the activities of the overtly nationalistic companies. Filewod developed an overview that highlights this urge to impose ideological uniformity through critical and historical analysis. The title of his essay, *Erasing Historical Difference*, states his central concern: the urge to unify “erases the fact that what is constituted as fringe and popular today were integral, overlapping, but essentially contradictory elements in the formation of the independent theatre of the 1970s.”<sup>23</sup> Filewod might well have added feminist theatre to the list of genre whose differences were “erased”. The early feminist theatres were integral to the development of independent theatre (For the purpose of this introduction, I am suggesting that all of the work created, directed, and produced by women in the 1970s can be named “feminist theatre”: the presence of authentic women’s experience and expression in the theatre challenged the condition of their exclusion, and in turn represented a feminist politic – independent of the particular work). Significantly, the number of shows directed, written, or collectively created by women have represented up to 60% of a single Fringe festival.<sup>24</sup>

The Fringe festivals did not receive the same kind of enthusiastic critical support and serious academic analysis as the alternative theatres; nor did they receive any substantial support from the arts councils. After more than a decade of successfully attracting audiences, these festivals did not influence the Canada Council’s funding categories: the Fringe festivals and Fringe artists remained ineligible for Canada

Council funding. In some measure, it is this absence of critical attention and financial support that enabled the festivals to remain truly experimental and always chaotic. More interesting, Fringe companies were not influenced by forces of cohesiveness through common ideological bonds, as were the alternatives; first with the counter culture, then nationalism, and more recently post-colonialism.

### Counter Culture to Fringe Culture

The first thing to remember about the Canadian Theatre Movement is that it began with little or no nationalistic aspirations; beyond the aspirations of its founders to create situations in their own country, in which they could begin their careers. ... The real influences were Fritz Perls and Timothy Leary, Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, Tom O'Horgan, Cafe La Mama, Julian Beck, Judith Malina and the whole ensemble of the Living Theatre; in short a host of European and American artists, *most of them primarily dedicated to the ethic and aesthetic of 'doing your own thing'*. Martin Kinch.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of doing only Canadian plays was an accident. ... This policy, however, did not stem from any passionate nationalism. Rather it was a simple and arbitrary way of escaping the Canadian theatrical rut of following fashion. ... By limiting the Factory to only new Canadian plays, we were forced to abandon the security blanket of our colonial upbringing. ... We also discovered to our surprise that the country was indeed ready for a surge of nationalism in many fields and we were on the crest of a timely wave. Ken Gass.<sup>26</sup>

Theodore Roszak, who coined the phrase [counter-culture] ... identifies the ideological foundations of the counter-culture as an opposition to hegemony by a utopianist idealism, which promoted an egalitarian ethic through the advocacy of participatory democracy on a localized level. Baz Kershaw.<sup>27</sup>

In Canada, and internationally, the emergence of the alternative theatre movement was part of a much larger social movement. It was one of a number of activities that were expressing new ideologies of social relations (for example, alternative schools and communes). Its social base was part of a new cultural phenomenon: "a series of counter-cultures, equivalent in their radical reappraisal of society to the nineteenth century Romantics, and based (as romanticism was) in a new generational awareness."<sup>28</sup> It began as a middle-class youth phenomenon, which, in Canada, was

encouraged by the federal government through funding programs: “Opportunities for Youth” and “Local Initiative Projects”. The criteria for this funding were based on inventiveness and need in the context of social experimentation and participation.<sup>29</sup> These programs supported (and in some cases helped to begin) the early alternative theatres and the early feminist theatres.<sup>30</sup> They also provided grants for a number of different alternative life-style movements through educational and business ventures (such as the “back to the land movement” through project grants for fish farms and other ecologically minded and rural based alternatives). In order to understand the full impact of the counter-culture on theatre in Canada, it is important to keep in mind the extent of the movement.

Despite their diverse beginnings, and in keeping with their counter-culture roots, there is one element of production that *all* of the early alternative companies shared, they had to create their own context for production. The creation of an alternative theatre required new spaces and new audiences. Paul Thompson is often quoted for having declared that audience to be “the really interesting people who never go to the theatre.”<sup>31</sup> Here, there is an obvious parallel with the Fringe festivals; they too create their own context. But, the alternatives had a significantly different relationship with establishment theatre, than did the Fringe. Because these artists began with a counter-culture ideology, with aspirations to change social relationships by creating *real* alternatives, they needed to legitimate and constitute themselves as a viable force in relation to establishment theatre; indeed, as an institutional force in their own right. The “do our own thing” ethic, which was deeply rooted in the expressiveness of the counter culture, played an important role in shaping the organizing principles for an alternative context. “Doing your own thing” was not only a challenge to the authority of the status quo; it was also a way of breaking away from established hierarchies and structures. As an ethic, “doing your own thing” requires egalitarian and participatory practices. This counter-culture ideology supported many of the practices that defined the early

alternative theatres as “alternative”. For example, open-door policies,<sup>32</sup> collective and collaborative administrative and theatrical procedures, informal performance spaces, a tendency to “demystify” the processes of production and increase the audiences’ status,<sup>33</sup> single ticket prices, and, casual dress and behaviour. Baz Kershaw suggests that these kinds of practices provide an index of a general commitment to counter-culture ideas of participatory democracy.<sup>34</sup>

### Nationalism

Our concern in the ‘70s for creating and producing *Canadian* theatre had left us in a void. Brain Paisley.<sup>35</sup>

[T]he search for identity seems to be at odds in Canada with the search for national unity. Charles Taylor.<sup>36</sup>

Nationalism emerges in the modern age as a legitimate form of identification. Charles Taylor.<sup>37</sup>

Canada has passed from a pre-national to post-national phase without ever having become a nation. Northrope Frye.<sup>38</sup>

Debates about nationalism and nationhood have provided a foundation for theatre criticism since its inception. At the turn of the century critics expressed a sense of cultural nationalism that was unabashedly imperialistic. Canada was a “child of the Empire”: a “faithful son” ready to “put on the armor of national manhood,” a loyal daughter “coming of age”.<sup>39</sup> Nationality, like maturity, was “a matter of cultivation, high feeling, and consciousness.”<sup>40</sup> While the rhetoric of the colonial framework shifted – from imperialism, to Dominion status, to the Massey Report’s “true Canadianism”<sup>41</sup> – from 1860 to 1960 criticism remained informed by a romantic 19th century concept of nationalism.<sup>42</sup> The idea that nations are like individuals, that they develop from a youthful innocence into a mature independence, is evident in the Massey Report: Canada is personified as “a young nation struggling to be itself,” and “true unity belongs to the realm of ideas.”<sup>43</sup> With the Massey Report, the intimate relationship between a national identity and individual identity reached its height – and

the beginning of the end – of its expression. After a century of cultural criticism oscillating between embracing and rejecting cultural dependence on British models, with a parallel and consistent bias against American influences (and in particular the free- enterprise approach to artistic production), the Report once again endorsed the historical dependence on Britain, predicated on a romantic idea of “imperial nationalism”. The colonial contradictions inherent in the quest for a national identity (which by definition must be autonomous) bound by “high feelings and consciousness” were intensified by the development of cultural policy following the Report.<sup>44</sup> The Canada Council and its beneficiary cultural organizations were “invariably modeled on British originals, and often enforced by a cadre of British and British trained directors and cultural bureaucrats.”<sup>45</sup> The renewed nationalism of the 1970’s, what Filewod termed “post-colonial nationalism” was, in this context, a “nationalistic revolt against the perceived dominance of an imperial model,”<sup>46</sup> a model that significantly influenced theatre practice, criticism, and historiography for a hundred years. The nationalism, which sanctioned the alternative theatres, was predicated on a distinct break with the past.

In the early 1970’s Canadian theatre research became a profession, but “post-colonial” was not yet a typical term of reference or analytical tool. There was a period of “overlap” when the new and unabashedly nationalistic school of theatre scholarship and criticism naturally relied on the old methodologies. Initially, research concentrated on compiling evidence of a tradition of an indigenous or authentically Canadian theatre. Theatre was studied as a “discrete entity”. The focus was on the dramatic text, and criticism continued to rely on the discovery of universal themes that could legitimate a Canadian canon.<sup>47</sup> However, as Richard Plant recalls, “fundamental was the casting of ‘Canadian’ as a critical term that often subverted, or set up a tension with, universal values and localist or regional values.”<sup>48</sup> This critical tension points to an interesting contradiction in the historiography of Canadian theatre. A nationalistic movement

motivated a re-evaluation of regionalism and localism; once renounced as “narrow, limited, parochial, backward, outdated and isolationist,” the regional and local became viewed as positive sources of authenticity in the quest for a national identity.<sup>49</sup>

In the late 1970s, Bessai identified the tradition of regionalism in the theatre as originating “in the peculiar geography and cultural conditions of the colonial and post-colonial era.”<sup>50</sup> Bessai’s recognition of the regional and local impulse in the theatre as a manifestation of post-colonialism accommodated an analysis of nationalism as a post-colonial force in the emergence of the alternatives in the 1970s. In his analysis of collective creation, Filewod expanded on Bessai’s observation by articulating an understanding of localism that was not bound by geography, but rather by “shared experience” that may include “prison inmates” or “prairie grain growers”.<sup>51</sup> This critical shift had a significant influence in formulating later research that focused on text and performance in the wider material and ideological context of production. But this analysis did not begin in earnest until the mid 1980s.

In the theatre, the regional and localist impulses resulted from a desire to locate the source of indigenous culture not in the realm of “high ideas,” but rather in the social and the historical. Contrary to the scholarship of the early 1970s, alternative experiments emphasized the socio-cultural context of theatre. Both collective creations and playwright-generated performance depended on the actor’s abilities to a much greater extent than established theatrical practice. Initially the actor’s role expanded with the counter-culture tendency toward egalitarian and participatory practices. In conjunction with “Canadian” becoming a critical term of reference, the boundaries of the actor’s role were further shifted. Through research and improvisation the actor’s personal response to the social and historical became central to creating “authentic” characters.<sup>52</sup> Predominantly, playwrights worked with a “neo-naturalistic mode” that explored the relations between the individual and the Canadian environment.<sup>53</sup> Because

the particular social or political circumstances belonging to the audience were the source of the actor's or writer's research, their role in the process of production increased, and in particular, their role in the process of constructing meaning. First person monologues, as direct exchange between actor and audience, was a common technique that stressed the reciprocal and intimate relationship between theatre and community. John Gray observed that the event of having a particular audience becomes "just as important as what's happening on stage."<sup>54</sup>

There was then, in the alternative theatre, a distinct movement toward the particular and the individual: the regional, the local, the personal – a movement, which theoretically contradicted nationalism and the quest for unity and homogeneity. Nonetheless, nationalism was the force that legitimated the alternative experiments and accordingly facilitated the establishment of a professional *Canadian* theatre.

Johnston has attributed the enthusiastic support of "declared cultural nationalist" critics in Toronto, Nathan Cohen, Herbert Whittaker, and in particular Urjo Kareda, with "bestowing mainstream status on these theatres [the alternatives]"<sup>55</sup> He argues that these critics "perceived themselves," not only "as journalists," but equally as, "part of the process of establishing theatre in their community."<sup>56</sup> Plant describes a similar nationalistic bias among theatre historians eager to "legitimize" both Canadian theatre and the study of it; they wanted "an indigenous theatre, they sought careers based on it, and they went about fashioning the world from which they would derive their authority and identity."<sup>57</sup> In a retrospective essay, Denis Salter describes the situation as one in which historians conceived themselves to be part of "an historical phase of post colonial definition," that was "justifiable as an exercise in self-legitimation."<sup>58</sup>

Following tradition, the search for legitimation began with the dramatic text.<sup>59</sup> Anthologies brought a "sense of canonization" richly informed by a "concern for conceptualizing theatre on the homogeneous national image."<sup>60</sup> Research focused on

documentation. In the 1970s, a flurry of publishing bibliographies and performance calendars began; this type of work was considered necessary and “fundamental to an analysis that would follow once the ‘facts’ were available.”<sup>61</sup> Echoing this idea, Filewod suggested that “the documentary theatre enabled actors and directors to locate and test the raw material out of which playwrights could begin to fashion a national drama.”<sup>62</sup> As for the evident contradictions: the theatrical concern with the relations between performance and audience conflicts with the scholarly concern for the text, and the regional and local and personal impulse in the theatre conflict with the critical quest for a national theatre and concurrent identity – these tensions, according to Plant, were “resolved into a sense of a homogeneous Canada.”<sup>63</sup> However, he continues:

Often ill-defined and the subject of repeated debates about ‘what is a Canadian?’, this image of national homogeneity ignored the cultural, racial, sexual, political and other differences...<sup>64</sup>

In the mid 1980s there was a brief sense that a cycle had completed. The alternatives had become the established and Canadian theatre research had become a legitimate discipline with the concurrent academic association and journal. And then, as Salter describes it, “Everything – and I mean *everything* – began to change.”<sup>65</sup> The same people who had worked to establish the discipline began to recognize that the nationalism, which had fueled so much enthusiasm and scholarly activity, had, unwittingly, also worked to exclude the rising number of artists whose work reflected a different political identity – for example, popular, feminist, native, lesbian and gay theatre and “others”. Pointing to a number of cultural forces, including the practice of criticism and historiography, which in the 1970s sanctioned this exclusionary impetus, Filewod suggested that there was a problem with Canadian theatre historiography, that there were evident “contradictions” and “unresolved questions.”<sup>66</sup> In retrospect, Salter said it appeared that “theatre historiography – conceived and executed within the

ideology of nation-building – [had] in fact achieved exactly the opposite of what it had intended.’<sup>67</sup> He asked:

Did the search for national legitimation and canonical authority ... mark a retrogressive need to invent a centralizing ‘great tradition’ at the expense of the ex-centricity and the margins.<sup>68</sup>

It is at this point that post-colonial becomes a more common critical term of reference, and the theatrical activity that had been excluded from the boundaries of critical concerns came to be recognized and named – “the marginal”.<sup>69</sup>

### The Ex-centric

In 1985 the Canadian Theatre Review published one of the first of a number of “special” editions that focused on the margins: “Feminism & Canadian Theatre”. The essays deal with a tradition of theatre that had been active for more than a decade; yet, editor Robert Wallace introduced the issue by explaining he felt “ill-equipped” to edit it.<sup>70</sup> Wallace’s lack of confidence reflects one of the consequences of critical and historical exclusion. For the most part, the essays are more personal or biographical than historically descriptive. The titles of some of are illuminating: “Fear of Feminism,” “Two Steps Backward from the One Step Forward,” and “Ms. Unseen”. The latter refers to director Svetlana Zylina, who in 1973 was a co-founder of the Women’s Theatre Cooperative in Vancouver.<sup>71</sup> It was Zylina’s experience as an M.F.A. Directing student at the University of British Columbia that provided the catalyst for her early work with feminist theatre:

Svetlana chose to direct Federico Garcia Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* for her thesis, and it received generally good reviews by both the student and mainstream press. However, the head of her department informed her that it was unacceptable as her thesis production because *its all-woman cast did not reflect “the human condition.”* If she wanted her master’s degree she would have to direct

[another] play ... Svetlana pointedly chose to direct John Herbert's *Fortune in Men's Eyes* – which has of course an all-male cast. ... Her ability to direct work about 'the human condition' being ably demonstrated Svetlana [graduated].<sup>72</sup>

Zylin's story is one of a number that recount the exclusion of women's *experience* from what humanist thinking posited as an ultimate value for artistic work: an expression of a "universal human condition". Her story illustrates the general situation in which women *artists* were also excluded.<sup>73</sup>

Pamela Hawthorn, who began the production wing of the New Play Centre in 1972, described the climate for women directors throughout the 1970s and 80s: "in most cases in order to work ... it has meant creating a separate environment."<sup>74</sup> Creating a new context and audience for their work is precisely what the early alternative theatres were doing. The commonalities between the early alternatives and the feminist theatres are striking. In the 1970s both of these movements were innovative stylistic forces in the theatre, each experimented with collective creation, de-emphasizing specialization and breaking down the hierarchical structure of traditional theatre; both introduced a more politicized content to the stage, and often turned to a reassessment of historical and political events for sources; each emphasized process over product, and both the alternatives and the feminist theatres attempted to "demystify and popularize what has traditionally been an elitist art form."<sup>75</sup> Evidently, "the search for a distinctly Canadian identity called into question the same colonial and colonizing influences that feminist art challenged."<sup>76</sup>

In the 1970s, women actually lost previously held influence and authority. Eleanor Wachtel notes, "when theatre 'came of age' - i.e. began to involve *relatively* big budgets -- women moved from the centre to the periphery."<sup>77</sup> In 1987, Theatre History in Canada published its "special" issue on women in the theatre. Louise Forsyth's

introduction provides another account of how the historical role of women in the theatre diminished with the establishment of the “professional” theatre:

[T]he major role women once played in the theatre seems to have become a phenomenon of the past. As long as Canadian theatre was primarily amateur, it was an area in which women could assume roles of leadership, take initiatives and exercise significant influence. ... As [the] shift from amateur to professional has occurred, that is to say as theatre direction came to involve the management of large sums of money and to be of political interest, men have taken over.<sup>78</sup>

In the universities, scholars interested in researching and documenting the history of the exclusion of women “encountered silence and indifference when they undertook research to study the problem, ... or else they met resistance to attempts to bring about change.”<sup>79</sup>

Centering the root cause of their exclusion in the politics of identity, feminist theatre artists pushed the movement toward the personal to its extreme. “The personal is the political” was the axiom. This principle was a liberating statement that joined two sides of a long entrenched philosophical dichotomy; in its praxis it worked toward disrupting established boundaries between the private and the public, fact and fiction, life and art. Playwrights began to discuss their work in terms of discovering a feminine aesthetic that could break through centuries of Aristotelian aesthetics. Betty Lambert wrote, “on some fundamental level, I wanted to break the tragic code”.<sup>80</sup> The “one-woman show” became a common form for women artists because, as Forsyth explains, “monologues [are] particularly well suited to presenting the conflict between *normal* social discourse and what women’s inner voices are saying.”<sup>81</sup> Performance art became an important genre for feminists seeking an aesthetic to foreground the “private” body in “public”, and is perhaps the most profoundly personal of feminist art: “your subject is your form”.<sup>82</sup> Stand-up comedy and cabaret also became common forms for feminist work.

In part this reflected the type of venues available to artists who worked with no public funding: bars, coffee shops, small galleries, conferences, and night-clubs. More pointedly, satire and parody are explicitly political genres inasmuch as they always contain the object of their attack.

In the feminist theatre, there was a clear determination to expose and celebrate the personal at an individual and bodily level and to break through traditional categories of discipline, genre, and context. In 1985, at the “Women in Theatre” conference, Cynthia Grant said,

What we want to do is revolutionize form as well as content. We do not want to imitate institutions or catch up with anyone. Women want to alter the current state of values.”<sup>83</sup>

This revolutionary impulse was reflected by a rising sense of solidarity between artists, which manifested itself in a strong urge toward collaborations and gatherings. It is impossible to talk about the development of feminist work, or the larger theatrical arena of traditionally excluded work, without referring to conferences and festivals.<sup>84</sup> The early feminist festivals signaled the beginning of a larger festival movement across the country that included artists from diverse cultural and social backgrounds whose common bond was their mutual exclusion from the benefits of public funding -- and too often critical and academic concerns. When the once easily obtained LIP and OFY grants disappeared, women and other independent artists began to create an alternative form for creating and producing their work -- festivals.

### **Festivals**

Festival, as the context for performance, was created by artists determined to experiment and produce their work outside the boundaries of the established professional and commercial theatre.<sup>85</sup> Festival, as a production model, can take and

has taken many forms.<sup>86</sup> The proliferation of festivals that emerged in the 1980s represented an eclectic group of artists. Typically, the selection process for these events aimed at encouraging a range of experimentation in narrative and performance genres, and including new artists whose work reflected the theatrical urge to break the rules of form and content. The performances were usually 60 to 90 minutes in length, often ran late into the night, and the time between shows became an extended intermission in which spectators and performers would eat, drink, and socialize. The tickets were inexpensive, and the theatres small. The nature of resources demanded that the productions were equally inexpensive, flexible, and adaptable. The festival context easily accommodates one-person shows, stand-up comics, and performance art.

Of all the festivals that have appeared and disappeared in the past fifteen years, the Fringe is unique in that it has no selection process. This, combined with remarkably low application fees and ticket prices, has resulted in a theatre festival that is uniquely accessible and inclusive. In these terms, the Fringe provided precisely the type of production conditions that were in demand in the 1980s. They provided a structure for *independent* theatre production. By “independent” I mean theatre companies that developed outside the *established* ideological and material structures for producing theatre, which present work that challenges or subverts theatrical conventions and criticism, and use venues not previously seen as theatre spaces: bars and cafés, art galleries and conferences.

While some will argue that the festival context, by virtue of its economy, is a manifestation of the funding crisis that began in the 1980s, it is important to keep in mind that these artists were not traditionally awarded arm's-length public funding, that this type of theatre was traditionally considered to be outside the boundaries of “excellence”. In many ways the festival movement appears to reflect a determination to

remain “outside” and independent by creating a “self-centered” production model – a model that employs its own criteria for inclusion *and* its own terms of evaluation.

### Conclusions

The emergence of both the professional theatre and Canadian theatre historiography came in the wake of larger emancipatory and egalitarian movements that challenged authority and institutions. In the theatre and criticism, these movements were contained by the boundaries of nationalism. There is good reason for rethinking the counter-culture roots of the alternative movement; many contemporary social movements in large part issued from the late 1960s – in particular the feminists, native, and gay rights movements. These are the very movements, which, when represented in the theatre, are now called “marginal”. Clearly, what these theatrical movements experienced was a process of exclusion. A process that, in part, was enabled by the positing of “Canadian” as a critical term.

Significantly, both artists motivated by nationalism and independent artists worked toward legitimating the social and the personal as an artistic expression of authenticity. They worked to break down traditional theatrical hierarchies and conventional boundaries with the same general result: the role of the actor and spectator in the theatrical event increases, and the relationship between actor and audience intensifies as conventional boundaries are traversed. Conversely, the authority of the text diminishes as it becomes one of a number of equal components of production. The increased significance of the actor as collaborator and authenticator in the alternative theatre was pushed further in the independent theatres, where actors are also writers and producers. The same can be said of the audience’s experience. In the independent theatre, audiences often gather in a specific context (for example conferences, lesbian bars, neighborhood projects, and festivals) and they too have a heightened relationship to performance through the particular nature of this context. Susan Bennett understands

this as a movement toward the “democratization” of the arts that she indicates began in the 1970s:

The boundaries between the subjects, the creators, and the receivers are no longer distinct and such a move signals the democratizing of the arts. ... Theatre no longer remains the sole domain of the educated and economically-able few.<sup>87</sup>

The common practices, shared by the early alternative and the independent theatre, also appear to lie at the foundation of Filewod’s defining character of “Popular Theatre” -- “in which the significance of the theatrical event requires a personal or ideological relationship between audience and subject matter.”<sup>88</sup> And interestingly, Kershaw suggests that the roots of post-modernism in the theatre are found with the movement to equate text, actor and audience as equally significant components of production; “many of the alternative groups ... were practicing post-modernists in this sense before the dubious dawn of post-modernism proper.”<sup>89</sup> Much postmodern practice and theory treat performance as text in which all codes [including the gathering of an audience] are of potentially equal value.<sup>90</sup>

As Filewod has argued, in the 1970s there was a large and diverse emerging theatre movement, of which a single component was privileged with critical and state support, while others went on to create different opportunities for work that overtly challenged critical standards and theatrical “norms”. These “other” theatres, because of their experience of exclusion, demonstrate a more enduring attachment to the forces of democracy, the urge to be popular in the sense of being “connected” to one’s audience, and the dubiousness of post-modernism. Each of these forces had an impact on how the independents shaped their organizing principles and context for production.

Here, clearly, we begin to see the roots of the Fringe festivals. The organizing principles of the Fringe are influenced by a spirit of democracy that is outstanding for

an arts event: anyone and everyone present is a potential Fringe play-maker – “the good” and “the bad” are determined by the spectators. In terms of the popular and political, the Fringe context has an interesting impact, while there are many overtly political theatre companies producing on the Fringe, the *event* of the festival diminishes the politics of any particular production. This is not to say that the festivals are somehow apolitical. Rather, there is an ongoing social dynamic between the individual productions and the Fringe event which fragments and diminishes any single point of view. This is one of the aspects of these festivals that make them truly popular theatre events: the audience plays a central role in the production of meaningfulness.

All festival production structures create a special event, that in turn influences the theatre produced. In this respect, the Fringe festivals are especially eventful: presenting between 60 and 140 companies, performing an average of seven shows each over a ten day period, from noon to 2:00 a.m., to small audiences that constitute huge crowds. The type of impact this has on individual productions also points to the postmodern:

If one views the Fringe, not as 75 different productions but as a single multi-faceted artwork, as some Fringe devotees clearly do, it perhaps comes as close as one can get to a truly post-modernist work of art. The total absence of evaluative criteria in the entrance requirements, the lack of any hierarchy in the way shows are programmed, and the extreme cheapness of participating in the festival, means that there is no privileging of any artist or style at the Fringe; it is a form of theatre to which the marginal have full access, and from which no style or content is excluded. Individually, many shows may be far from the postmodernist mode, though some do adopt the subversive and deconstructive techniques favoured by this school of criticism; collectively however, they subvert each other, so that after seeing five incredibly diverse shows in the course of a steaming Winnipeg summer day, one tends to float free from any standards, artistic or social and simply enjoy ‘the play of differences’, the quintessential postmodern aesthetic experience.<sup>91</sup>

In 1981 Martin Kinch reflecting on the alternative movement described it as a time when “one actually believed that one could do anything, and sometimes did [,] (...) [T]here was an extraordinary idealism then, a belief among actors, directors, and writers that we were breaking through to a new balance between performers and audience”.<sup>92</sup> But, he concluded, “along with everything else that relates to the late-Sixties idealism, it [extraordinary idealism] has now dissipated.”<sup>93</sup> The following year, Brian Paisley produced the first Fringe festival with a budget of fifty thousand dollars, a determination to provide equal possibilities for all the artists involved, and an abundance of idealistic energy. Fringe producers and artists echoed the same sentiments of idealism and equality that were key to the beginnings of the alternative theatres; they too believed they had reached a “new balance” between artists and audience. The energy and idealism of theatre artists did not dissipate. What changed, significantly, is the cultural milieu.

Linda Hutcheon points to the 1960s as “the time of ideological formation for many of the postmodernist thinkers and artists of the eighties.”<sup>94</sup> She continues, “it is now that we can see the results of that formation.”<sup>95</sup> In the alternative theatres much of the artistic energy and purpose of the 1960s may have dissipated. Nonetheless, since the early 1980s, there has been an energetic and growing independent theatre movement, which is deeply linked with the “breakthroughs” or the *results* of the 1960s. It is, primarily, this independent theatre movement that sustains the energy and purpose of the Fringe festivals.

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#### Journal Excerpt

**28 June 1991, Toronto:** The city of my childhood. Checked out the corner of Church and Isabella streets. “Dirty Louis’ 24 hour restaurant” and all night drug store is still in business. The poor old

neighborhood is sand-blasted, spruced-up, *expensive*, but, thankfully, as gay as always. Today, while waiting to meet with Sarah Mueling (Director of the small theatre caucus TTA) I met Rick Salutin (playwright, free-lance journalist and columnist for the Globe and Mail Arts Section) -- casually. I was sitting at an outdoor café, he was walking down the street. A new friend introduced us. We talked about Canadian theatre, past, present and future. Salutin is terribly pessimistic, and I am, no doubt, over-optimistic. He mourns the lost of nationalism as a driving force for Canadian culture. He firmly and unrelentingly associates nation with culture by arguing that "nation is defined by culture." When I asked him to talk about his favorite Fringe shows, he told me he has never gone to the Fringe -- he is "not interested." It is, he says, "a ghetto." He adds, with a sigh of regret -- "and after we fought so hard through the 1970's for recognition and respect as *Canadian* artists." For Salutin, the Fringe is an obvious disappointment. I explained my enthusiasm for the festivals by expressing my sense that these events are cultural performances that *celebrate* difference. At this point, Sarah Mueling arrived and we began to speak about "the canon" and "the centre" and "difference". Salutin left, he was busy. Sarah and I made friends when we noticed how often we both made quotation gestures while talking.

It is interesting that when I talk with Salutin and numerous others "in the know," the conversation tends toward a discussion about capitalism and the consumption of culture, or appropriation, and other, I think, unnecessarily pessimistic concerns for what the Fringe is "*doing*" to or with theatre. When I talk with women artists, the conversations tend to be more optimistic and enthusiastic. Perhaps it is me relating to women differently? But, there *are* a lot of women working on the Fringe -- relatively speaking.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Thompson, qtd. in Diane Bessai, The Canadian Dramatist Volume Two : Playwrights of Collective Creation, Series ed. Christopher Innes, (Toronto : Simon & Pierre, 1992) : 36.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Mitchell, (1929) qtd. in Renate Usmiani, Second Stage : The Alternative Theatre Movement in Canada , (Vancouver : Univ. of British Columbia P, 1983): 23.

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<sup>8</sup> Anton Wagner, "Critics and Criticism," The Oxford Companion To Canadian Theatre, ed. Eugene Benson and L. W. Conolly, (Toronto : Univ Toronto P, 1989) 123.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 122-23.

<sup>10</sup> For further description of the DDF see Betty Lee, Love And Whisky: The Story of the Dominion Drama Festival. (Toronto : McClelland and Stewart, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> Bessai, Playwrights 33.

<sup>12</sup> Bessai, Playwrights 13.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Filewod, "Erasing Historical Difference: The Alternative Orthodoxy in Canadian Theatre," Theatre Journal 41.2 (1989): 210 -223. Filewod raises question around this version of history; he states "I've become dissatisfied with it, because there are too many unresolved questions and contradictions." \*Note: The terms "alternative" and "alternate" are both used to describe the same theatres and movement.

<sup>14</sup> "[T]o be particular is to hold points of view that often are made invisible by the dominant discourse." Robert Wallace, Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada (Saskatoon : Fifth House P, 1990): 12.

<sup>15</sup> See Denis W. Johnston, Up the Mainstream: The Rise of Toronto's Alternative Theatres, (Toronto : Univ Toronto P, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> James Hoffman, Oxford Companion To Canadian Theatre History, (Oxford C.) Eds, E. Benson and L.W. Conolly, Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989 : 492.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 282.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Rudakoff, Oxford C. 556.

<sup>19</sup> C. J. Skinner, Oxford C. 357.

<sup>20</sup> Filewod, Oxford C. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Johnston, 6 -7.

<sup>22</sup> Filewod, "Theatre, Navy and the Narrative of 'True Canadianism,'" Theatre Research in Canada (TRC), 13:12 (1992): 103.

<sup>23</sup> Filewod, Erasing 210.

<sup>24</sup> Saskatoon's Fringe program for 1991 indicates that over 60% of the productions were created by women. Rina Fraticelli's unpublished report on the Status of Women in Canadian Theatre (1982)

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demonstrates that on a national level women represent 10% of produced playwrights [this number increases to 25% in Youth Theatre], and 13% of directors. See Canadian Theatre Review (CTR), 43 (1985) and Room of One's Own 8.2 (1985) for more excerpts from this report.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Kinch, qtd. in Filewod, Encounters :19. Kinch was involved with Theatre Passe Muraille between 1969 and 1972. For a brief period he was artistic director, following Jim Garrard and preceding John Palmer.

<sup>26</sup> Johnston, .80.

<sup>27</sup> Baz Kershaw, The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention, (New York : Routledge, 1992): 39.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Hay, "Cultural Politics," Canadian Theatre History, Selected Writings, ed. Don Rubin, (Toronto: Copp Clark 1996): 312. These funding programs began as a means to off-set unemployment caused by rising inflation. OYP grants "made modest sums available to cultural groups all across the country for summer activities. The criteria were not - as in the case of Canada Council grants - professional training or contacts within an exclusive artistic community, but inventiveness and financial need of individuals in the larger context of social experimentation and participation. The Department of Manpower's Local Initiative Program was originally designed as a winter works scheme to ease seasonal unemployment ... in 1971-72 alone more than two and a quarter million dollars was spent on just theatre groups by LIP."

<sup>30</sup> Amanda Hall, "Dialectical Drama," Work In Progress, Building Feminist Culture, ed. Rhea Tregeboved, (Toronto : Women's P, 1987): 84. "Red Light Theatre, founded by Francine Volker, Marcella Usting and Diane Grant, was the first feminist theatre to receive a LIP grant in 1974. Starting with a federally funded LIP grant, Red Light subsequently survived on an average of \$10,000 a year to fund three or four annual productions."

<sup>31</sup> Bessai, Playwrights 27.

<sup>32</sup> Johnston, 80. Ken Gass, founder of Factory Lab Theatre, believes that the early survival of the Factory depended on such a policy: "People began to take the Factory seriously because it was open. Certainly it wouldn't have survived if it had simply been my domain... Anyone could join in, anyone could help, and there was no real pecking order to watch out for."

<sup>33</sup> Bessai, Playwrights 14.

<sup>34</sup> While an emphasis on the counter-culture roots of the alternative movement helps to delineate an historical relationship between this cultural movement and theatrical practices, it does not account

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for the origins of those practices. Bessai traces a line of collective creation which begins with Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht in the 1920s. Her overview demonstrates that alternative theatre conventions which relate to the counter culture ideology of egalitarian and participatory practices with an emphasis on local community: collective creation, docu-drama, ensemble techniques, improvisation and audience participation, were developed before the counter-culture began to have an influence on theatre production. Nonetheless, these early collective practices, like those of the alternative movement in the 1960s, were devised as a theatrical means to "reach new audiences," and they too expressed the "inadequacy of conventional theatre" to reflect a rapidly changing cultural environment.

<sup>35</sup> Brain Paisley, Interview, 1991.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Taylor, Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism, (Montreal : McGill-Queens P, 1993): 20.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. x.

<sup>38</sup> Northrope Frye, Divisions on a Ground ( Address to UNESCO 1977).

<sup>39</sup> Filewod, "Theatre, Navy, and the Narrative of 'True Canadianism'," TRC 13. 1-2 (1992): 97. Volker Strunk points out that there was a common pre-war Canadian assumption that "imperialism was a genuine expression of cultural nationalism." Probing Canadian Culture, Peter Easingwood et al, (1991) : 132.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Easingwood, ed. Probing Canadian Culture, (Augsberg : AV - Verlag 1991): 3.

<sup>41</sup> "[I]n the cultivation of things of the mind, Canadians -- French and English speaking -- can find true Canadianism." Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences 1949-1951, (Report) (Ottawa, The Kings Printer 1951): 271.

<sup>42</sup> For an overview of critical writings which substantiate this see Easingwood et al. . Also, see Filewod, "Theatre, Navy and the Narrative."

<sup>43</sup> Report, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, 47. "Romanticism is a deepening of the modern aspiration to what I have called emancipation, to finding one's human purpose in oneself, autonomously. ... Hence nationalism ... is part of this modern drive to emancipation. It connects naturally with the demand for self-rule."

<sup>45</sup> Filewod, "Theatre, Navy and the Narrative" 102.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Plant, "An Alternative Scholarship : Canadian Theatre Study 1970-91," Theatre Research in Canada, 17. 3 : 190-202.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 196.

<sup>49</sup> Bessai, "The Regionalism of Canadian Drama," Canadian Literature 85 (1978): 7.

<sup>50</sup> Bessai, Ibid. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Filewod, Encounters 21.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 13. In the case of documentary collective creations the "responsibility for authenticating the material of the play was passed onto the actor, who in effect reported the findings of his [sic] own research" to the audience.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Plant, Oxford C., 160.

<sup>54</sup> Bessai, "Discovering the Popular Audience," Canadian Literature 118 (1988): 9.

<sup>55</sup> Johnston, 253.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Plant, 192.

<sup>58</sup> Denis Salter, "On Native Ground : Canadian Theatre Historiography and the Postmodern/Post colonial Axis", TRC 13. 1/2 (1992): 137.

<sup>59</sup> Plant, 195.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 199. Plant points to his own work to provide examples. In 1978 he and Anton Wagner edited Canada's Lost Plays: Volume One: The Nineteenth Century. Wagner has subsequently edited three more volumes in the series. In 1984-5 three anthologies of plays were published: Richard Perkyn's Major Plays of the Canadian Theatre 1934-84 [Toronto: Irwin, 1984], Jerry Wassermann's Modern Canadian Plays, [Vancouver: Talon Books, 1985], and Plant's Penguin Book of Modern Canadian Drama [Toronto: Penguin, 1984]. Plant suggests, "for an excellent commentary on these anthologies, see Robert Wallace, "Constructing a Canon: A Review Essay," Theatre History in Canada (THC) 10. 2 (1989): 218 -22.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 195.

<sup>62</sup> Filewod, Encounters 23.

<sup>63</sup> Plant, 196.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Salter, "On Native Ground" 135.

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<sup>66</sup> Filewod, "Erasing Historical Difference." .

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> In his essay, "Marginality and English Canadian Theatre" [TRC 17.3 (1992) 217-225], Robert Nunn makes the point that there is "a range of possible relations between margin and centre." Canadian plays, he says, "are always already marginal", "in the positive sense of asserting a difference from an imperial centre."

<sup>70</sup> CTR 43 (1985) 4.

<sup>71</sup> Lynne Fernie, "Ms. Unseen," CTR 43 (1985): 60. WTC's "goals and strategies were similar to those of current feminist collectives: to provide plays, readings and workshops that spoke from and to the position of women in society; and to provide a context in which women would be encouraged to create meaning, rather than simply portray existing meaning. [With] an all-woman cast and crew [,] all decisions were made collectively."

<sup>72</sup> Lynne Fernie, 60. (Italics mine).

<sup>73</sup> In a national survey of 1156 productions staged at 104 Canadian theatres between 1978 and 1981, women represent 10% of playwrights, 13% of directors, and 11% of artistic directors. From Rina Fraticelli's 1982 unpublished report on the status of women in Canadian theatre -- commissioned by the federal government in anticipation of the Applebaum-Herbért cultural policy reviews. "The Status of Women in the Canadian Theatre." Excerpted in Fuse 6.3 (1982), in Amanda Hall, "A Dialectical Drama" *Work In Progress*, in *Room of One's Own*, 8.2 and in CTR 43 -- The report has never been published in full.

<sup>74</sup> Qtd. in Lynne Fernie, 63.

<sup>75</sup> Amanda Hall, 83.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>77</sup> Eleanor Wachtel, "Two Steps Backward From the One Step Forward," CTR 43 : 12. For example, in Vancouver, Dorothy Somerset started the theatre department at UBC, Jessie Richardson was active for half a century in Vancouver's theatre (Vancouver's new theatre awards are named in her honour - as are Toronto's Dora Mavor Moore award for new theatre named in honour of this great dame of Canadian theatre). Joy Coghill and Myra Benson established the Holiday Theatre in 1953. In 1967 Coghill became artistic director of the Vancouver Playhouse. Yvonne Firkins was one of the founders of the Arts Club Theatre, Elizabeth Baal founded the Carousel Theatre, and Pamela Hawthorn developed the New Play Centre. When the Waterfront Theatre opened in 1979, it hosted three companies that

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were each headed by a woman artistic director. Katherine Shaw founded West Coast Actors, a group that folded in 1982. Director Jane Hyman, who has been working professionally in theatre in Vancouver since 1965, says that “historically women were in charge of theatre in this city.”

<sup>78</sup> “Women in the Theatre of Quebec and Canada,” *THC* 8 .1 (1987): 5. Forsyth also notes, “The well-documented report prepared by Rina Fraticelli for Status of Women Canada, “The Status of Women in the Canadian Theatre” (1982) remains the most eloquent study to date of the disadvantaged position of women in Canadian theatre.”

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* Forsyth locates the source of women’s exclusion in terms of identity politics; it was “deemed to be inherent to women’s inferior experience and very way of being, which has been seen to be of little relevance for most men and removed from their criteria for quality. She quotes Rina Fraticelli’s report : “In dismissing the substance of women’s lives as insignificant, inappropriate, uninteresting and bland, the theory of gender discrimination finds its most efficient strategy.”

<sup>80</sup> *Room of One’s Own*, 18 .2 (1985) 21.

<sup>81</sup> *Oxford C.* 204 (*italics mine*).

<sup>82</sup> Amanda Hall, 94.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>84</sup> For example, here is a partial list of festivals : Rhubarb Festival: Toronto 1979, The Festival of New Works: Toronto 1980, Faces of Women: Newfoundland 1980, Fireworks Festival: Toronto 1980, Women’s Perspective Festival: 1983, Women in Words: Vancouver 1983, Celebration of Women: Edmonton 1983, Short Takes for Women: Vancouver 1984, The Next Stage: Montreal 1985, GroundSwell Festival: Toronto 1986, Women in View Festival: Vancouver 1989, Breaking the Surface Festival: Calgary, 1991, New Voices/FemFest: Calgary 1992.

<sup>85</sup> Witness to the proliferation of theatre festivals produced across the country is *theatrum*’s regular Festival department.

<sup>86</sup> There are a number of characteristic which make these festivals different from the long established theatre festivals such as Stratford, Shaw and Charleottetown – which are not really festivals but rather summer theatres operating on a repertory basis. These established festivals differ from the new festivals in three important ways; i)they are relatively exclusive by virtue of programming mandates, ii) location and iii) costs.

<sup>87</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, (New York : Routledge, 1990): 10.

<sup>88</sup> Filewod, *Encounters* 8.

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<sup>89</sup> Kershaw, 103.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Douglas Arrell, "Paradigm Shifts at the Box Office, CTR 66 (1991): 24.

<sup>92</sup> Wallace, 30.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>94</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism," A Postmodern Reader, ed. Linda Hutcheon and Joseph Natoli, (New York : Univ of New York P, 1993): 248.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 249.

## **Chapter Two: Exit Shakespeare - Enter the Strathcona Fringe**

### **Before the Fringe**

If the Citadel has anything to do with it, Edmonton is going to be the most exciting theatre community in Canada. Joe Shocter.<sup>96</sup>

Edmonton's present theatre community began to develop in the late 1940's when the University of Alberta established a drama department.<sup>97</sup> In 1965, Edmonton's regional theatre, The Citadel, was founded in a renovated building with 277 seats. A decade later, a number of new theatre companies began to emerge.<sup>98</sup> Northern Lights Theatre began producing lunch-time shows in a 180 seat theatre in the Edmonton Art Gallery.<sup>99</sup> Theatre Network was founded as a non-Equity collective company with a mandate to create work based on Albertan themes and communities. The company raised \$650,000 and renovated an old steam plant into a 240 seat theatre. In 1980 they re-organized as a community theatre, and in 1981 they began producing "Theatre Sports" on a weekly basis. Stage West, also founded in 1975, provided commercial dinner theatre complete with television and film celebrities. Catalyst Theatre, perhaps the best known "social action" theatre in the English Canada, was founded in 1977.<sup>100</sup> Catalyst was one of the the principal founding companies of the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance (CPTA); in 1981, it initiated the national "Bread and Roses Festival of Popular Theatre".<sup>101</sup> Workshop West began in 1972 with a mandate to develop new plays by Alberta writers.

When the Fringe began in 1982, Edmonton had an active and diverse theatre community. In 1989, Filewod described Edmonton's theatre community as unique. It was, he argued, the only theatre community that concurred with the rationale and ideology that shaped both theatre criticism and funding categories throughout the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>102</sup> The "mainstream/alternative model" was shaped in the early 1970s when the arts councils, led by the Canada Council, began to establish a rationale for

funding the numerous new small theatre companies across the country. The model theatre community was to have at its centre a large regional theatre, which would, “act as a catalyst to validate the alternatives.”<sup>103</sup> Filewod describes this model as dynamic and inviting controversy. He asks,

What could be better? It was the institutional realization of an ideological relationship between mainstream (which means big) and alternative (which means small), and which accorded with a bourgeois model that understands culture in terms of polarities: high/low, establishment/avant-garde, commercial/experimental.<sup>104</sup>

However, he adds, “the only place the model seemed to work was in Edmonton where Joe Shoctor, the powerful lawyer who founded the Citadel Theatre, straddled the mainstream and defied anyone else to ‘jump his claim’.”<sup>105</sup>

There is little doubt that the Citadel is the paradigmatic mainstream theatre within the ideological model for funding.<sup>106</sup> At the same time that a significant number of new theatres emerged in Edmonton, the Citadel received substantial new support to maintain its position in the centre of the community as the biggest and most expensive theatre providing for a large subscription based audience. In keeping with the model, the new theatres received minimal support maintaining their validity as satellite theatres offering “alternative” theatre experiences to a smaller and more spontaneous audience: lunch-time theatre, collective creations, and local playwrights.

The Fringe emerged within this “model” theatre community, yet it neither influenced nor overtly challenged the ideology of the model, initially, in any significant way.<sup>107</sup> The Fringe remained determinedly “on the fringes” for a number of reasons. Professional status and adjudication were both necessary criteria for arts council funding. As a non-adjudicated event, it was not eligible for arts council funding. Early critics considered it a “non-professional”, the criterion for determining professional

status was “money” – if an artist was paid, she was considered to be professional.<sup>108</sup> As well, to conform to the dialectic of “the model” the Fringe needed to be an “alternative” to “something”. Indeed, upon leaving his position as Artistic Director for the Citadel theatre in 1987, Gordon McDougall suggested that, “What is needed in Edmonton is an international festival as in Edinburgh to which *the Fringe can be justifiably appended*”<sup>109</sup>

### Brian Paisley and Chinook Theatre

Had I stayed in Canada after graduating, there is no doubt I would have become a part of the alternative theatre movement. However, when I returned in the mid 1970s, the alternative theatres were established and I was not a part of that momentum. Brian Paisley.<sup>110</sup>

Brian Paisley, founder of the Edmonton Fringe, graduated from UBC’s theatre department in 1968. Upon graduation he worked in theatre in England and Ireland, returning to Canada in 1975. Once home, he accepted an offer to start a theatre for the Northern Lights college in Fort St. John’s in Northern Alberta: Stage North. Paisley’s attributes his work in this small northern community, and his absence from the Canadian scene in the 1970s, with giving him, “a *different* perspective on the *possibilities* for theatre in Canada in the 1980’s.”

The first Stage North production, *That Dam Show*, was based on a controversial community issue surrounding the construction of a dam. Paisley invited the towns’ people to write down their feelings about the construction. The show was a compilation of the submissions he received: “we put the material together, someone wrote a text, someone else wrote music for it, and – it was a smash hit!” The enthusiastic response inspired Paisley, and his partner Ti Hallas, to create a professional wing of the college program to tour the area. This was the beginning of Chinook Theatre. The company soon began creating original work for young people.

Initially, this was a practical choice. Touring adult theatre was not financially viable, school tours were. Creating children's theatre had a significant influence on Paisley; he found a renewed desire to experiment;

... that work was completely open-minded stylistically. Children are not only *willing* to imagine anything, they also *demand* more imaginative stage moments per minute. It offered me a unique freedom to experiment.

In 1980, two things prompted Paisley to move the theatre to Edmonton, the company "needed some cross-fertilization, and Edmonton was fertile ground for an alternative children's theatre company." Chinook created and produced eight shows and toured four times before producing the first Fringe in 1982. In retrospect, Paisley sees the evolution of Chinook Theatre – with its beginnings in community theatre, then professional children's theatre, and finally producing the Fringe Festival – as "an absolutely logical progression." The concept of theatre as a social experience rooted in community and the freedom to experiment stylistically, are two of the underlying principles of the Fringe production model.

### **Exit Shakespeare:**

One of the organizations that commissioned Chinook theatre was Summerfest, a civic organization that distribute funds for summer activities (such as the annual Folkfest and Jazz Festival). In 1981, the Summerfest organizers began to have difficulties; some of its artistic advisors decided to produce and award funds for their own events. A conflict arose between independent artists and the organization. Eventually a crisis erupted and the independent producers withdrew their services. To make matters worse, during this conflict the city cut back its funding to Summerfest. In turn, Summerfest cut the grant for the "Shakespeare in the Park" summer season (produced by Northern Lights Theatre) in half, from \$100,000 to \$50,000. Northern

Lights theatre accordingly canceled its program. With a \$50,000 budget, and a volatile relationship with the theatre community, the Summerfest people approached Brian Paisley for solutions. The organization needed an inexpensive theatre event, and they also needed to make amends with the arts community.

This set of circumstances -- the dual crisis that the Summerfest organization experienced and the resulting ruptured relationship between the organization and the artistic community -- is significant. The eventual resolution of this crisis, the inaugural Fringe, exemplifies a theoretical theme that informs the whole of this text: Victor Turner's cultural theory about the social and cultural dynamics of crisis and innovation. In brief, when individuals, communities, or organizations and institutions experience a crisis, the potential for innovation and significant change emerges; the greater the breach in relationships, the greater the potential for significant change.

The Fringe was an innovative solution to a crisis that, in part, arose from a dilemma that is inherent to arts funding organizations in general -- this is the incidents of arts council advisors and adjudicators awarding funds to themselves.<sup>111</sup> There are two reasons for noting that the "Summerfest crisis" played an important role in the beginning of the Fringe. There was a tendency in the media to endow Brian Paisley with almost supernatural visionary powers -- Paisley does have a charismatic personality, and this, no doubt, played a role in bringing together all the people and enthusiasm necessary to support his proposal. Nonetheless, the potential for the Fringe did not emanate purely from Paisley's vision. This is a point that Paisley has often argued:

The Fringe was a natural extension of the Edmonton theatre community. All the ingredients were in place; a strong theatre community, a good student population, a dead summer season, and a general feeling of dissatisfaction with established ways of producing theatre. Brian Paisley.<sup>112</sup>

Three things influenced Paisley's proposal to Summerfest. One was his familiarity with the history and character of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Another was the character of the Old Strathcona district in Edmonton. Finally, and perhaps most influential, was a prevalent sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo among local theatre artists.

After meeting with Summerfest organizers, Paisley was walking down Whyte Avenue in the Old Strathcona district noting the urban geography of the area. The empty store fronts and large commercial spaces, the alleyways and the old town character of Strathcona reminded him of the Edinburgh Fringe. There were numerous "fringe-like venues" within walking distance. This, combined with the sense of dissatisfaction in the theatre community, prompted him to consider the potential for a festival like the Edinburgh Fringe in Edmonton.

The Edinburgh Fringe Festival began in 1947 when a number of artists, dissatisfied with the elitist programming of the Edinburgh International Arts Festival, decided to create a festival of their own. They produced their work independently in empty stores and church basements on the "fringes" of the official festival. Capitalizing on the presence of large audiences attending the official festival, they promoted themselves in the streets with posters and handbills. This Fringe eventually grew into a huge international event spanning four weeks, covering most of the city, and with a reputation equal to, if not greater than, the "official" Edinburgh festival.

What Paisley used as a model for the Edmonton Fringe was not so much the Edinburgh Fringe *per se*, but rather "the concept of dissatisfied artists creating *their own* festival in a multiple-venue situation." Edmonton artists: playwrights, actors, designers, and directors, were, in general, unhappy and impatient with the "insular nature" of the established theatres -- "big and small". These people "wanted more challenging and innovative work." In the early 1980s "people were ready to

experiment again, they were eager for more interaction with international companies, for more outside influences.”

Beyond these factors, the first Edmonton Fringe had very little else in common with the Edinburgh Fringe. Most significantly, there was no established festival with large and already present audiences, nor was there a comparable tradition of independent production and touring among Canadian theatre artists.

Paisley has frequently qualified the relationship between Edinburgh’s Fringe and Edmonton’s:

The Edinburgh Fringe works in a very different way – it is an administrative structure, not a production model. The artist there have to find and rent their own venues, lighting and sound equipment, and hire technicians on their own. There was no way in the world I was going to be able to turn to theatre people in 1982 and say ‘find your own venues, your lights, and your technicians, and I’ll sell your tickets.’ The idea was too absurd. In Canada, we were not prepared for that kind of independence.

Instead, he proposed a production model that would use the \$50,000 budget to rent spaces and technical equipment, hire technicians, print and distribute a program, and invite a number of companies to apply to produce their own work on a first-come - first-served basis. There would be no need for a central box office, because the companies would sell their own tickets and keep all of their revenue. Administration would be to be kept to the bare minimum. There would be no selection committees or artistic director. Venues would be outfitted with a minimum of equipment: twelve lighting instruments, a tape deck and speakers. Paisley projected that between 15 and 20 companies would apply. He was surprised when 47 companies applied. With the decision to accept every application, Paisley also made what was to become a significant choice – in order to accommodate every application, he expanded the

festival schedule and programmed shows from noon to midnight. His impromptu decision to extend the schedule with day-time and late night shows had a significant influence on the later development of festive activities and carnival atmosphere.

### **The First Fringe: Edmonton 1982**

It was blustery and rainy. You could point out the Fringe people on the streets by their leather jackets, blurry eyed looks, and their sense of mission. Michael Green <sup>113</sup>

It was crude and rough and very bare bones. And, it was unbelievably fun! Robert Astle.<sup>114</sup>

I remember that, on opening day [1984], I felt like I was participating in some kind of medieval fair. My wife, my brother and myself wandered up and down the Fringe site, giving out handbills amidst delighted but somewhat disconcerted potential theatre patrons. There was a sense among all participants that we were involved in the creation of something important. Ken Brown.<sup>115</sup>

The first Edmonton Fringe was a small and unusual theatre event with 47 theatre companies, 5 venues, 200 volunteers, 7500 audience members, and an average ticket price of \$3.00. My interviews with artists of the inaugural Fringe were concerned with acquiring an image of the first Fringe, a perception of the initial response from artists, audiences, and critics, and a sense for how the festive and celebratory behaviour began.

Michael Green, now of One Yellow Rabbit Theatre in Calgary, recounted how his company at the time, Icarus Theatre, came to produce at the first Fringe. He was in Edmonton working with Theatre Calgary on a school tour when he met Paisley at an audition at Chinook Theatre. Like Paisley, Green was working in children's theatre in order to survive financially. They went for a drink at the Old Strathcona pub and Paisley described his plan for a "big festival of experimental theatre."

That was in October 1981. He explained his concept and I thought it was the most ‘hare brained’ idea I had ever heard, so I said – ‘you bet! You put on a festival and we’ll come.’<sup>116</sup>

Green returned to Calgary and talked with his associates in the theatre community. Six theatre companies from Calgary produced at the first Fringe.<sup>117</sup>

According to Stewart Lemoine, the founder of Teatro La Quincidia from Edmonton and a playwright and director who began his career on the Fringe, the attitude among the Edmonton theatre community was more reticent. The initial response to Paisley’s idea was:

... not outstandingly enthusiastic. The general feeling before the event was rather more a willingness to give it a chance and see what happens.<sup>118</sup>

Robert Astle, co-founder of Small Change Theatre, remembers the inaugural festival as “incredibly small, but a great beginning and a *great* celebration.”<sup>119</sup>

Paisley recalls the inaugural opening ceremonies with sentiment:

There were fifteen people at the first opening ceremony. The Old Strathcona Town Band was playing at the gazebo [in the Old Strathcona park]. One of my fondest memories of the Fringe is of those fifteen people. Thirteen of them were from the media. Every time someone wanted a photograph, the rest of them would put down their cameras and gear and stand with their backs to the cameras and face the gazebo.<sup>120</sup>

Paisley’s sentiment has as much to do with gratitude for the media’s initial support as it does with the fact that today the opening and closing ceremonies are wonderfully social events that involve dozens of Fringe artists and thousands of people. The closing ceremonies include “improvised” productions of classics. In 1992, at least 2 dozen

actors improvised *The Wizard of Oz* for a crowd of 4000 people sitting on the grass under the stars.

### The Festivities Begin

I needed to create a “no excuses kind of theatre event” and then say, “Here is everything you need, *now do what ever you want!*” Brian Paisley.

Of all the people I asked to explain why and how the festive behaviour began, Paisley was the least able to articulate a definitive answer. His was a vague perception of “things happening” by their own volition:

It began as a strange little event -- nobody really knew what it was. We put up a few banners, and yes we had a parade of performers, but the street performers and the beer tents came later [in year three]. Even though there were no beer tents, things *were* happening in the streets and in the alley ways. The “festival” part of the Fringe, or the Fringe party really did begin on its own volition that first year.<sup>121</sup>

The Fringe artists were better able to pinpoint the roots of the festive dynamic. Robert Astle provides an answer that represents a consensus from my interviews: “it was the freedom”:

The freedom given to us as artists is what initially stimulated the party. The freedom to do *whatever* we wanted. That is what we were celebrating.<sup>122</sup>

It was this sense of freedom that prompted One Yellow Rabbit to begin what is now an essential Fringe tradition – artists promoting their work in the streets:

Because there were no boundaries, no preconceptions, no expectations, we were free to do anything. ... We went into the streets and did a “promo-type” performance for *Leonardo’s Last Supper*.<sup>123</sup>

The first street performance began as a *spontaneous* solution to the necessity of gathering an audience for a poorly promoted event. While it is evident today that street performance on the Fringe plays a significant role in provoking a festive experience; initially, it was neither planned, promoted, nor organized. Rather, as Green explains:

People were driving by in their cars wondering what the hell was going on -- they had NO idea what we were doing, or why. Neither did we, really. We had never done street performance before -- *we just did what we needed to do to get in an audience.* <sup>124</sup>

The sense of exhilaration and celebration that the early Fringe artists describe was a direct result of the absence of normal administrative apparatus. It is interesting that Paisley was not able to pinpoint this initial impetus for festivity, because he was of course the administrator. However, his key administrative idea was to provide and impose as little administration as possible: "from day one I said we are going to put the artists and audience together and eliminate everything in between."<sup>125</sup> This is particularly interesting in light of current anthropological theories concerned with the social functions of festivity in its contemporary manifestations. Some argue that festivity has lost both its power and purpose because of administrative apparatus eliminating the possibilities of chaos.<sup>126</sup>

The ideological convictions substantiating the elimination of administration were founded in a philosophy about the relationship between theatre production and community experience. Paisley articulates this philosophy within a mandate to re-unite audience and artists:

Theatre in [English] Canada, ten years ago, was essentially a very boring experience. People went to a nice building with an impressive lobby and comfortable seats, always at eight o'clock on a full stomach, and typically saw a tedious piece of theatre -- then went straight home and paid off the baby-sitter. When we *did* see an exciting piece of theatre, we still went straight home. There was no tradition of

interaction, no place to go to talk about what we'd seen, no communication, and certainly no shared revelations. Where was the interaction that makes theatre a part of community?<sup>127</sup>

The absence of administration was of course also a financial and practical necessity. There was neither time nor money to organize and mandate a selection committee, administer and staff a box office, or create and finance a promotion campaign.

The freedom which Fringe artists experienced was accompanied by an increase in responsibilities. They were given the freedom *and* the responsibility to select or create material of their choice – free of thematic or aesthetic adjudication as well as self-censorship created by fear of rejection. The first Fringe artists were also responsible for selling their own tickets and in turn they received 100% of their box office. And of course, they were responsible for promotion and gathering their audiences.

Festivity, in the true sense of the word, evokes chaos. Accordingly, it is a social experience that requires a dynamic beyond planning and administrating. Here it appears that this dynamic consists of a combination of economic necessity, the absence of administrative constraints, and the resulting freedom to experiment.

### **The Festival Grows and Grows**

By 1987 the Edmonton Fringe was advertising itself as “the largest theatre festival in North America,” with 10 venues accommodating 125 theatre companies, 500 volunteers and over 350,000 people attending.<sup>128</sup> In 1994 things began to level off; there were 13 venues, 150 companies, 1000 volunteers, and 450,000 people in attendance. Expecting to discover the impetus for the rapid popularity of the festivals, I asked artists to remember their immediate response after producing on the first Fringe.<sup>129</sup>

According to Green, "the first Fringe was mainly for the artists; important connections were made, people met each other, and worked with each other subsequently."<sup>130</sup> In general, artists measured the success of that Fringe more in terms of social experiences than artistic achievements. The audiences were also an important component. By all accounts, the response of the inaugural Fringe audience was particularly enthusiastic and generous. By some accounts, people were seeing ten shows a day, and these people were outstandingly vocal -- inside and outside the theatres. Robert Astle describes the effect of this: "that audience gave us a sense of empowerment, they helped us realize we could do something with our *own* work."<sup>131</sup> Stewart Lemoine attributes a great part of his success as a playwright on the opportunity to prove his work *in* performance with this outspoken audience.<sup>132</sup> Brad Fraser credits the lively engagement of early Fringe audiences for renewing his inspiration to write for the theatre.<sup>133</sup>

Why did the Fringe audience grow so quickly? Directors, actors and writers in the community may have been dissatisfied, as Paisley describes, but there is no reason to assume Edmonton audiences were discontent; as noted, the theatre community in Edmonton offered an abundance and diversity of productions. Christ Dafoe has made a similar observation: "the fringe's appeal to artists is obvious," he says, "but the reasons for the growth of its audience are harder to pin down."<sup>134</sup> The enthusiasm for the Fringe cannot be measured by the quality of the plays. Those performances are long gone; some artists have trouble recalling the title of their first Fringe production. And, as Stewart Lemoine remembers, "there were no shows successful enough to claim triumphs or launch careers."<sup>135</sup>

When I asked Paisley how much he could tell me about that first audience, he chuckled at his immediate memory. He described himself and others running around after the sun set "persuading innocent people" on Whyte avenue to come into the

venues.<sup>136</sup> Apparently they were successful; an early review of the Fringe describes people in business suits “transforming themselves into theatre buffs.”<sup>137</sup> As well, a large percentage of that first audience was made up of Fringe artists and volunteers. “Seventy-five hundred tickets were sold to mostly artists, volunteers, students, and a number of people who stumbled, or were dragged, into the event.”<sup>138</sup>

That a significant part of the audience were Fringe artists helps to explain why they were unusually outspoken and festive, but it this does not explain why those “innocent” members returned next year with their friends and family. Lemoine thinks that they returned with friends for the same reasons that the artists returned in increasing numbers:

People kept saying, ‘hey there are possibilities here.’ It was evident that it was well worth doing it again. This sentiment was shared by the audience. They thought to themselves, “Well that was interesting, if they do it again I’ll certainly go.”<sup>139</sup>

“Interesting possibilities” is an important concept here. Potentiality with unpredictability was an essential ingredient of the first Fringes. The 1982 program advertises 47 productions of such diversity that the possibility for discovering a preferred type of performance is great. However, the potential of each production is relatively unpredictable. The price of the tickets, a maximum of five dollars, allowed for a large audience -- but could they be attracted without a promotion budget? The “interesting possibilities” for both the artists and the audiences contained self-evident elements of risk. Clearly, the opportunity to take risks is a great part of the Fringe attraction: for artists and audience.

The program schedule for the first Fringe contains a challenge to the audience to be active participants *because* of the risks. Paisley describes the event as “a direct confrontation between artists and audience.” He advises that no artistic judgments have

been implemented because – “that’s your job.” He points to the necessity of “word of mouth”: “if you saw a show you liked, tell your friends, tell anyone on the street ... if you just sat through a terrible two hours, try another show.” He warns some shows “may appeal to you, some may appall you,” and in conclusion he writes, “... now we’re ready for the final, essential ingredient – you, the audience. It’s your show now.”<sup>140</sup> While many theatre programs will echo this sentiment to the audience, the stressed absence of previous artistic judgments, and the diversity and number of choices, makes this invitation to take control much more poignant.

The 1982 program indicates the extent to which the first Fringe artists and audience were willing, and evidently enthusiastically so, to experiment with the exotic, the unashamedly deviant, the new, the unique, the foolishly funny, and the deadly serious. Flipping arbitrarily through the pages of the program, here is a random description of performances:

Mansamente is an *adult* puppet show about the lives of Brazilian peasants and Indians, produced by Grupo Conatdores De Estroios from Rio de Janeiro.

Shakespeare the Sadist: Four young adults trapped in an identity vacuum, for whom films seem to merge frighteningly with reality. This confusion leads to a surrealistic vision that casts William Shakespeare in a snuff flick. Produced by Studio Theatre (11), Calgary Alberta.

Hold Me, written by cartoonists Jules Feiffer: Humorous and biting sketches of our attempts to communicate. ... social satire with wit and perception. Produced by The Out of Toon Players from Saskatoon.

The Crammer Brothers Fusion Band: A melting pot of jazz, Indian Ragas, reggae and classical music performed by Edmonton’s only heavy metal beboppers. A look at the future of music.

Hokum Pokum Bogus Pocus: A close cousin to Vaudeville ... combines magic, music, mime, circus, skills and music ... a series of stupendously hilarious feats. Produced by Theatre on The Spot from Victoria.

Blow Job: A viciously realistic comment on the societal pressures of industrial England, produced by Studio Theatre (11), Calgary.

Macbeth: Amazing, only four actors for more than sixteen roles ... Produced by Chinook Touring Theatre, Edmonton.

Getting Out, by Marsha Norman: Rape! Incest! Broken Homes! Prostitution! Prison!... A new script, produced collectively by a group of actors from around the world.

The Story of Lord Halewyn: a dramatic re-telling of the oldest known Flemish folk tale ... produced and performed by Jan Henderson.<sup>141</sup>

An overview of the entire program does not produce a dominating theme, type of performing company, or theatrical genre. The mixture of productions appears to cover all the possibilities. The one common motif is an irreverence for, and a deviance from, the established traditions of theatre production.

### Conclusions

The inaugural producing companies offered a wide range of talent and backgrounds: established alternative theatre companies, unknown (yet, established in their own right) experimental companies, collections of theatre students, international award winning companies, collectives of Equity actors (working independently, selecting their directors for material of their choice), and both established and unknown story-tellers and musicians. These artists presented a disparate selection of productions and a range of talent and potential. Yet, there were no categorical divisions for the audiences. There were no main stages and second stages, no prime-time shows and noon shows; the shows began at noon and ended at midnight for the entire eight day festival with no regard for a balance of content and time of day. One could begin the day by seeing *Getting Out* (a play about rape and incest) at noon, and end the day with *Hokum Pokum Bogus Pocus*: at midnight.

The abundance and diversity of shows, the irreverent times and places of performances and “being dragged off the streets” into the venues, no doubt stimulated a sense of confusion and chaos. The insistence that audiences judge the value of performances by their own criteria, and the challenges and opportunities to be outspoken about their opinions, created incentive for people to experiment and take

risks with their selections. The inevitable interaction between artists and audiences in line-ups and on the streets, and the provision of a central gathering place to eat, drink and talk between shows, contributed to a stimulating atmosphere of camaraderie *and* debate.

Each of the intrinsic elements of festivity were evident on the first Fringe: inversion of status' (the observers became participants, actors became the audiences), necessity and experimentation, irreverence, over-indulgence, chaos, and camaraderie. There was an element of excessiveness to the entire event. Some of the companies overindulged with their experiments, creating shows with titles like Shakespeare the Sadist, and Titus Adronicus; or Scrotum's Revenge. The audiences overindulged by seeing several shows in a single day. Paisley was being excessive when he scheduled shows from noon to midnight.

Provoked by the invitation to be outspoken, the diversity of selections, and the absence of "normal" artistic evaluations, the audience experienced a similar sense of freedom and celebration as did the artists. An understanding of the audience as festival participants provides some answers to the question of what stimulated the rapid popularity of the Fringes. What the Fringe had to offer, which none of the other theatres in Edmonton offered, was a unique social and cultural experience that is best understood as festivity.

Despite the chaotic and confusing nature of festivity, there is a unifying and coherent aesthetic implicit in festivity as a cultural performance genre. Throughout history festivals have been times when people collectively conjure up cultural chaos by abandoning normal rules of social conduct, disregarding social status', and over-indulging in physical and social pleasures. Why people do this, and with what consequence, are the subjects of following chapters.

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### Journal Excerpts

**13 June 1991, New York City:** On my way to Montreal this afternoon, to begin my monster of a research trip at the inaugural Montreal Fringe. The sun is shining, my visit here was always interesting— especially attending the “Welcome Home Desert Storm Veterans Parade.” Now that was an anthropological experience.

**14 June, Montreal:** A magical and carnivalesque city. I am staying with Hélien, whom I met at the Learned’s conference in Kingston, she makes me feel wonderfully welcome. The Fringe Producers, Nick and Kris, are a couple of kids – almost. But, so far, my first impression is that you would *have* to be terribly and terrifically naive with wide-eyed optimism to attempt what (I think) they are about to achieve.

The Fringe office is a huge empty space. The “paper trail” consists of one almost empty filing cabinet and a computer, which I am about to rummage through. The atmosphere is chaotic; there are people painting Fringe signs, other people are claiming ‘sleeping spots’ – just in case. The place is a mess with back-packs and suitcases. Fringe programs are stacked in the middle of the room, paper is strewn everywhere, and everyone appears hyper.

**Same day, later:** So busy it is time to slow down and see what is in front of me. First, the site: St. Laurent Blvd. The street is real busy and real interesting. I’m told this is the dividing line between the French and English sides of town. I ran into Kris unloading garbage at 9:00 a.m., and then I saw her again, packing cases of beer into the tent at 2:00 p.m. There is also an “official” Fringe club; a new bistro called The Blue Banana is sponsoring the festival via cheap beer for the artists – and in return, they are hoping to attract business. Right now the place is conspicuously empty.

**Same Day, 2:30 a.m. -- post-Fringe opening-night party in the beer tent:** The party was lively, the tent was packed full and abuzz with enthusiastic people. I talked at length with two dozen people – not including close friends and acquaintances. The line-ups for the “porta-potty” were long and sociable. There was an occasional whiff of

marijuana coming from behind the tent. The buzz of conversations included talk about theatre and language, theatre and poverty, theatre and Montreal. Kris and Nick are gutsy people. The media are excited/delighted about the festival; there is an obvious need for production opportunities, at least in the English theatre community. The artists, for the most part, are young and eager to prove themselves, as well, I'm told, "they have nothing to lose." Makes me think of Janis Joplin -- "just another word for freedom."

**15 June, Opening morning:** I began my day with a 9:00 a.m. interview with Michel Vias, in his living room. He enlightened me on the Franco theatre -- it was an intriguing "nut-shell" history told with a reserved, yet fascinating first hand accounting. Arrived at the Fringe site 11:00 a.m. The parade disappeared behind a misty rain and a steady flow of otherwise occupied people on St. Laurent. Only two actors gave me handbills. By 2:00 p.m. it was pouring down with rain. I headed for the refuge of the beer tent; others had the same idea. As the day progressed, a steady trickle of artists appeared, some still in make-up or costume. beer tent consensus: the audiences were *really* small, except for 1774's production of *How Ibsen Got His Start* -- a satire on the Centaur Theatre. Rumor has it, they sold-out their house. Without line-ups it is too hard to pass out handbills -- especially considering the language issues in this city. So says the beer tent buzz. And it does buzzzzz.

**16 June:** Still raining. The beer tent is popular -- people drift in and ask "what's happening?" The outdoor site is a closed off side street that faces the parking lot, that is the beer tent.

**17 June:** Still raining. Seeing 5 shows a day has its affects -- as does meeting people in the beer tent who I have stood in line with, and hence we had seen the same show, and the discussions begin ... if I ever get home before 2:00 a.m. I will write about this.

**18 June:** The rain has turned to mist again. My feet are always wet and I have worn a hole in my sandal from walking up and down, and up and down, and down and up St. Laurent Blvd. -- between an eclectic collection of Fringe venues. Only a week, and I feel I know the character of this part of town, intimately.

**19 June:** Michel Vias interviewed *me* today -- I gave him a nut-shell history of the Fringe and my theories on the social and cultural aspects of the festivals. He is going to have the interview translated and published in Jeu.

**20 June:** The sun is shining and people are no longer soggy. The stage in the street finally begins to attract some crowds -- and interesting ones at that. Tonight a group of 6 eloquently dressed "mid-fiftyish" people gathered at the perimeters of the crowd, who were sitting on the pavement. They wore their wealth with fur coats and expensive shoes. As they stood watching Charlie Brown's juggling feats, Kris quickly rounded up some chairs for them. She placed the chairs in front of the "other" crowd. When the well-suited sat down, the scene was intriguing. After the show, I spoke with this group. They told me they were eager to support an event like the Fringe, but they were "disappointed" that it had not been better advertised -- "if not for that clown [sic], we would not have stopped and found out that this is a *theatre* festival, we all support English theatre." They also confessed that, while appreciative of Kris' hospitality, re: the chairs, they felt conspicuous taking front row seats "in front of all the others sitting on the street like that."

**21 June:** Started my day with coffee with Nick and Kris. They have had their home hydro cut-off, and they can't pay their rent because they invested their own moneys to solve numerous unexpected expenses. They have asked, and Foresight theatre has agreed, to do an extra benefit performance for the Fringe.

**23 June:** The final weekend and I wonder what all the material I have gathered gives me? I have interviewed 25 artists, all of the media on site, some of the audiences, street performers, technicians, the volunteers, and of course Nick and Kris at length. I have seen 25 shows. I've had a fantastic time. And, I will have a good long bus ride to Toronto to contemplate it all -- or perhaps, to sleep.

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<sup>96</sup> E. Ross Stuart, History of Prairie Theatre: The Development of Theatre in Alberta, Manitoba

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and Saskatchewan 1833 - 1982. (Toronto : Simon & Pierre, 1984): 208.

<sup>97</sup> See Stuart. The drama department opened in 1947, the studio theatre in 1949. In the late 1960's, graduate programs in directing, designing, and play writing were established.

<sup>98</sup> In the mid 1970's dozens of small theatres emerged across the country. They began on "easily obtained, but short-lived make-work LIP (Local Initiatives Projects) and OFY (Opportunities for Youth) grants." See Filewod, *Erasing*.

<sup>99</sup> In the first two years, the company produced 25 plays for an audience of 20 thousand, and in 1977 they established a 'playwright's unit' for new scripts. Stuart.

<sup>100</sup> Filewod, *Oxford C.* 80. In 1980 the company had a budget of over \$400,000, most of which came from The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission and other social activist agencies.

<sup>101</sup> CPTA originated at the Bread and Roses Festival sponsored by Kam Theatre, Thunder Bay 1981. The founding companies included Catalyst, Theatre Energy, Mummies Troupe, Great Canadian Theatre Company and Tomorrow's Eve.

<sup>102</sup> Filewod, *Erasing* 203.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 204.

<sup>106</sup> In 1965, Shoctor bought the old Salvation Army Citadel with three silent partners at a cost of over two hundred thousand dollars. On opening night Gold Seat tickets cost one hundred dollars and the entire theatre sold out. In 1966, the Canada Council gave the Citadel its first grant and, as is often the case, other funding agencies followed suit. When the theatre sold 93% of its available tickets, grants increased substantially. In 1975, the Citadel launched a second stage, and in 1976, the new Citadel complex was constructed downtown. The complex has four theatres, the largest being the Joe Shoctor theatre with 685 seats. One million dollars of the cost for the new complex came from a Secretary of State grant, three and a half million from other government sources, and three million more was raised from private and corporate sources. Stuart 213.

<sup>107</sup> Today, both the ideology and the funding categories which locked the mainstream/alternative model in place have changed. There is little doubt that the Fringe festivals, along with the unprecedented emergence of festivals throughout the 1980's and across the country, have played a role in influencing the changes.

<sup>108</sup> According to a number of theatre professionals (artists and critics across the country) "money"

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is the defining criterion for professionalism.

<sup>109</sup> Qtd. in Ann Nothof, "Three for the Road," Canadian Theatre Review, (CTR) 50 (1987), (*italics mine*).

<sup>110</sup> Brian Paisley, Interview, 1991. The following un-cited quotes are from the same interview.

<sup>111</sup> "The arts professionals who acted as advisors more often than not received funding." See Tom Hendry, "Massey and The Masses", CTR 4 (1974). "

<sup>112</sup> Paisley, Interview, 1991. The following un-cited quotes are from the same interview.

<sup>113</sup> Michael Green, Telephone Interview, 1992.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Astle, Interview, 1992.

<sup>115</sup> Kenneth Brown, Personal correspondence, 30 Nov. 1992.

<sup>116</sup> Interview, 1992.

<sup>117</sup> These companies were: The Loose Moose Theatre Company under the direction of Keith Johnson; Studio Theatre 11 produced two shows, *Shakespeare the Sadist*, and *Blow Job* (both original productions); Ronnie Burkett, an Emmy award winner for Puppetry, *The Plight of Polly Pureheart*; One Yellow Rabbit, now internationally renowned for their experimental theatre which combines dance with performance, *Leonardo's Last Supper*; Mary Jo Fulmer, a dancer, produced an original piece called *Waiting for the Moon*.

<sup>118</sup> Stewart Lemoine, Interview, 1992.

<sup>119</sup> Astle, Interview 1991.

<sup>120</sup> Paisley, Interview. 1991.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Astle, Interview.

<sup>123</sup> Green, Interview.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Paisley, Interview, 1991.

<sup>126</sup> See Michael M. Bristol, Carnival and Theatre (New York: Methuen, 1989).

<sup>127</sup> Paisley, Interview, 1991.

<sup>128</sup> Edmonton Fringe Festival Program :Edmonton : Chinook Theatre 1987. The attendance figures for all of the Fringes are based on "head counts" at the festivals, not the actual number of

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tickets sold. Many people attend the festivals for the street performance and Beer tents, never purchasing a ticket for an indoor performances. For example, figures for Edmonton's 1986 Fringe show that the artists earned \$250,000 in ticket sales, which translates into approximately 40,000 tickets, while attendance reached 350,000. Today, the Edmonton Fringe sells approximately 70,000 to 80,000 tickets among 300 companies, and has an attendance of over 450,000 people.

<sup>129</sup> It is important to note that my interviews present a limited perspective because I spoke exclusively with artists who continued to produce on the Fringe for several years.

<sup>130</sup> Green, Interview. After the 1982 festival, Green joined One Yellow Rabbit, one of a handful of theatre companies that emerged with the Fringe. Astle and Jan Henderson founded Small Change Theatre on the Fringe and worked together, with Jan Miller, for eight years producing original work nationally and internationally.

<sup>131</sup> Astle, Interview.

<sup>132</sup> Lemoine, Interview.

<sup>133</sup> Brad Fraser, Interview, 1992.

<sup>134</sup> Globe and Mail [Toronto] 28 June 1991.

<sup>135</sup> Lemoine, Interview.

<sup>136</sup> Paisley, Interview, 1991.

<sup>137</sup> Rosemary McCracken, "Fringe Theatre is front and centre as Edmonton Parties." Calgary Herald 26 Aug. 1984: E1.

<sup>138</sup> "85% of the 1984 Edmonton Fringe audience were under 45." Institute of Urban Studies, The Winnipeg Fringe Festival Report, (Univ of Winnipeg: 5 Oct. 1988): 21

<sup>139</sup> Lemoine, Interview.

<sup>140</sup> Paisley, "A Fringe Theatre Event" 1982 Edmonton Fringe Program Edmonton : Chinook Theatre 5.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

### **Chapter Three: The Fringe Circuit**

The energy and excitement come from the artists – local and visiting – meeting each other on common creative ground. Brain Paisley.<sup>142</sup>

Between 1985 and 1991 a circuit of seven Fringe Festivals was established: Montreal in mid-June, Toronto in late June, Winnipeg in mid-July, Saskatoon in early August, Edmonton in mid-August, Vancouver in early September, and Victoria in late September.<sup>143</sup> Each of the festivals doubled audience numbers between the first and second year, and most continued to double their numbers into years' three and four.<sup>144</sup> This circuit began and grew in a haphazard way. Other than an informal annual Fringe Producer's Conference (inaugurated in 1989), there was no real organization linking the producers from each city. They facilitated each other in a limited manner, and they also disagreed with each other about fundamental concepts of the production model. However, *all* of the producers did (and do) adhere faithfully to Paisley's first principle of Fringe production: non-adjudicated programming selected on a first-come-first-served application process. And, all agree *in principle* with returning 100% of the box office to the artist.<sup>145</sup>

In 1985 Joanna Maratta, an energetic director in Vancouver, decided to borrow Paisley's model and produced the Vancouver "Theatre and Performance Arts Fringe Festival" – a month following the Edmonton Fringe.<sup>146</sup> The 1986 Vancouver Fringe hosted 93 theatre companies in 8 venues for a 9 day festival with shows running between noon and midnight; 23 of these were touring companies and 7 of these were international. The following year, Randy Smith produced a Fringe festival in Victoria. This was a small event running for 3 days, between 6:00 p.m. and midnight, with 3 venues, applications were limited to local companies; 18 shows were produced. The next year, 1988, Victoria's Fringe expanded to 5 venues running performances from

noon to midnight for 5 days; 29 companies produced, 11 of these were touring companies, and 6 of these were international. In 1988 the Winnipeg Fringe began with a bang -- attracting audiences and crowds larger than anyone had imagined; 30,000 people attended the festival and 16,000 tickets were purchased. Sixty-five companies performed, the festival ran for 9 days in 5 venues, 29 were touring troupes, 9 were international. With Winnipeg's inaugural Fringe, the circuit changed directions in more than geographical terms. Winnipeg's Fringe is produced by the Manitoba Theatre Centre, Canada's oldest regional theatre. And, it was the first "circuit" Fringe to create the same kind of festivity and enthusiasm as Edmonton's festival. When Winnipeg's Fringe was such an outstanding success, some people began to wonder if the Fringe was going to be a Prairie phenomenon. The following year, a group of small theatres in Toronto held an "ad hoc" meeting and decided they needed a Fringe festival. As would be expected, the 1989 inaugural Toronto Fringe was different in a number of interesting ways. There are no numbers available on the make-up of the first Toronto Fringe, but in the following year, only 5 out of 45 companies were touring troupes, and only 2 were international (the Toronto festival has never attracted a large percentage of touring groups for a number of reasons discussed below).<sup>147</sup> In 1990, 25th Street Theatre in Saskatoon (one of the country's oldest alternative theatres) provided "the missing link" in the circuit by hosting a 5 day festival with 5 venues, and 35 theatre companies -- of which at least 12 were touring groups, 3 were international.<sup>148</sup> A year later (1991), a group of young people in Montreal -- who had come to the city from various parts of Canada to attend university -- produced a 9 day, 5 venue Fringe festival. Forty-five companies produced (there was also a "waiting list" of 50 companies), 24 of these were touring groups, 2 were international.

As the circuit began to grow, each Fringe depended on a variety of sources for income.<sup>149</sup> Because the festivals returned ticket revenue directly to the artists, the application fees and beer tent revenue are the only common source of income. The

amount of funding varies greatly. The inaugural Winnipeg Fringe had a budget of \$167,305, while the first budget for the Montreal festival was \$35,000. None of the festivals began with expensive or extensive promotion campaigns. On average the festivals allot 2% of the total budget for promotion.<sup>150</sup> Each Fringe was produced with an absolute minimum number of people. The Montreal, Toronto, and Saskatoon festivals were unable to support a single year-round position, and only two of the festivals were produced by companies that owned or rented a permanent theatre space: M.T.C. in Winnipeg and 25th Street Theatre in Saskatoon. It is surprising that a theatrical event as popular as the Fringe Festival circuit was created with so little formal organization, money, administration, or facilities.

### **Part One: The Festivals**

As companies and artists meet formally and informally, they are caught up in a cross pollination of ideas and aesthetics.<sup>151</sup>

#### **The Vancouver Fringe - 1985**

| <b># of Venues</b> | <b># of companies</b> | <b>Tickets sold</b> | <b>Revenue to artists (aprox).</b> | <b>Festival Attendance</b> | <b>Budget</b>                  |
|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>7</b>           | <b>70</b>             | <b>4500</b>         | <b>\$18,000<sup>152</sup></b>      | <b>4500</b>                | <b>\$50,000.<sup>153</sup></b> |

Year one we worked out of the back of our cars. Year two the Fringe club was our office. Year three we got pagers, moved the club to the Cinderella Ball club, and the phone booth on the corner was my personal office. Year four we got the walkie-talkies. Joanna Maratta.

Joanna Maratta founded TheatreSpace in 1983 with a mandate to “provide a catalyst for creative energy by providing a space, opportunities, and an audience for independent theatre artists.”<sup>154</sup> Maratta left a public relations career in the forest industry, sold her house and invested her money in what she considers, “an extremely idealistic and perhaps naive vision.”<sup>155</sup> She rented a space in Gastown and put out a call

for submissions, auditions, and proposals; 125 people responded. Fifty of these people came together to form an independent and co-operative company of artists (writers, directors, actors, poets, and performance artists) – a “TheatreSpace.” After 18 months the company was unable to attract any funding. In the fall of 1984, when TheatreSpace received an application for the Edmonton Fringe, Maratta began to think that hosting a Fringe was a way to fulfill her mandate *and* a means of survival for her “vision.”

In retrospect, it appears inevitable that Paisley’s model would be transplanted. By 1985 Edmonton’s Fringe had grown substantially and enjoyed both professional and critical support.<sup>156</sup> When Maratta consulted with Paisley about the prospects of producing a Vancouver Fringe, he not only encouraged her to proceed, he travelled to Vancouver to assist with the organization. When TheatreSpace put out a call for applications in the spring of 1985, 70 companies applied; there was evidently a great need for the production opportunities the Fringe offered. Like Paisley in Edmonton, Maratta explains this response by pointing to an overall climate of dissatisfaction in Vancouver’s alternative theatre community. The prevailing grumbles of dissatisfaction in Vancouver were distinctly different from those which Paisley described; in Edmonton people wanted more challenging work and the freedom to experiment – in Vancouver people were seeking opportunities *to* work:

People needed an opportunity to showcase their work; to bring to the attention of the established theatres the amount of talent that is present in Vancouver – so much was going unseen or not produced. The mandate was based upon a desire to demonstrate the riches of the alternatives we have in this town.<sup>157</sup>

Paisley had a limited influence on Maratta’s production choices. Technically, the Vancouver Fringe followed the basic mechanics of Edmonton’s model, scheduling shows from noon to midnight and selling tickets an hour before show-time in front of

the venues. However, the Vancouver Fringe was different from the Edmonton Fringe in notable ways. Maratta was cautious about adapting the Edmonton model to her community:

The notion that the Fringe model can be transplanted like something handed to you on a platter is wrong. You have to pay careful attention to your own community. It is too easy to say, 'I'm going to take this model and impose it.'<sup>158</sup>

As well, the inaugural Vancouver festival was significantly larger than Edmonton's. Like Paisley, Maratta accommodated *every* application.<sup>159</sup>

The most evident and influential difference between Edmonton's and Vancouver's Fringe is the aesthetics of the two sites: Old Strathcona in Edmonton and Main Street in Vancouver. The ambiance and character of Edmonton's site were quickly noted as essential to the Fringe attraction:

The nine festival stages were all located on two blocks of the city's Old Strathcona area. The proximity allowed theatre goers to hop from play to play and soak up the colorful ambiance of the turn-of-the-century district with its red brick buildings, mature trees, espresso bars, delis and vintage clothing shops.<sup>160</sup>

Contrast this description with one written by Stephen Godfrey about the Vancouver Fringe:

Unlike Edmonton's Fringe, the Vancouver Fringe is located in one of the ugliest and most inhospitable sections of the city, a commercial and light industrial area which is sliced by three main thoroughfares and bordered on one side by auto-body shops. The ten venues are scattered throughout a landscape which seems architecturally determined to hide their existence.<sup>161</sup>

Maratta chose this "inhospitable" site because among the body shops and stretched along Main street are a number of older buildings housing arts organizations that

provided inexpensive Fringe venues (almost) within comfortable walking distance (Heritage Hall, The Vancouver Little Theatre, the Western Front Art Gallery, the Grunt Gallery, the Cinderella Ball Palace). The roaring traffic along Main street, the lack of ambiance, and the long walking distances (uphill) between venues – combined with the fact that creating a “true” festival was never a priority for Maratta – have resulted in a Fringe festival that is decidedly lacking in festivity.

Maratta did not attend Edmonton’s Fringe until 1987. And when she did, her assessment of the festive behavior was not positive:

I did not go into the beer tents. To be honest I was quite appalled by them. The Chinook beer tent was the favorite among the biker crowds. It was a hang-out. I stood across the way and watched and what I saw was people sitting there from noon to midnight who couldn’t care less about the festival.<sup>162</sup>

Paisley re-counted a story about this “biker crowd” that would no doubt surprise Maratta, and which explains in part why the Edmonton Fringe is so popular:

The beer tents are “licensed lobbies.” We had to prove that beer tent patrons are also theatre goers to satisfy the licensing permit (that’s why you have to have a program to get into the tents). One day, the authorities were doing a site check. There was a large group of leathered-up bikers in the Chinook tent. They pointed them out to me, so I said, ‘Well lets go take a closer look.’ As we walked toward their table we could hear them arguing about one of the plays. We stood there for a few moments, and sure enough, one of them took out his program and asked which show they were talking about. He took out his pen and circled it. The point is, that just because these people don’t look as if they would be theatre goers – well, THAT is the point.<sup>163</sup>

Paisley’s enthusiasm, for a “free for all, breaking down the barriers, chaotic and risky celebration of theatre,” had little influence on Maratta. She was cautious about the type of image she was projecting:

I have been extremely careful from the beginning not to give the festival false hype. Unlike Paisley, I've never wanted to steer the festival toward a 'hyped-up' event.<sup>164</sup>

The programming was organized more categorically than Paisley's model allowed. Venues were oriented to specific types of work. For example, The Western Front Gallery was programmed as an exclusively Performance Art venue. The decision to equate specific venues with particular types of performance made the Vancouver Fringe less confusing and chaotic. The titles and descriptions in the program suggest that the performing companies were, like Maratta, relatively more conservative; they too were less inclined to "hyped-up" promotion .

While the early Vancouver artists described a similar sense of empowerment via the self-determination that the Fringe offered them, they did not express the same initial propensity to celebration and frivolity as was the case in Edmonton. While the Vancouver festival had a Fringe club since the beginning, because of the wet weather in September, it is always an indoor space that is traditionally dark and un-inviting for "innocent audience members" There is no real "hub" or common gathering place along Main Street. On the whole, Maratta created a more organized type of festival -- with a greater focus on administration than festivity. The Vancouver Fringe audiences did not grow as rapidly, nor did the event become as popular as most of the other Fringes.

### **First Impressions:**

Dark Horse Theatre Collective, Vancouver:

In April 1985 we were a rag-tag group of semi-professionals who had worked together on several projects under our own and others' auspices, and who wanted to do it again. ... We had aspirations. We would produce our own shows, maintaining high standards and possessing artistic integrity. What we didn't have were funds. Capital. Money. ... September, 1985. Opening night. It went !!! Next day, a review in the Sun!! And that night? More audiences! Amazing? Maybe there was something to this producing stuff after all.

The truth of the matter is that the Fringe gave us our first opportunity and we've never looked back.<sup>165</sup>

Nicola Cavendish, Actor, Vancouver:

I can honestly say, after due thought and consideration, that my fondest memory of the Fringe festival, and there were many, was standing every evening at the back door of our makeshift theatre and counting out the loot. I felt like a real actor in the ancient sense of the word.<sup>166</sup>

Chris Chreighton-Kelly, Writer, Poet, Performance Artist, cultural bureaucrat, Vancouver:

Well, strictly speaking this is not a memory. ... Maybe it's a hope, maybe even a vision. But then vision is really only memory in fast forward/scan/pause. ... It holds forth the crisis that creates the new, the instant of re-invention, the performance that merges us – that communicates not just “to” an audience but “with” them. ... The Vancouver Fringe Festival, when it works/when we let it work, offers us the “prescience” of this present: the chance, when finding out, to also find “in”.<sup>167</sup>

### The Victoria Fringe - 1987

| # of Venues | # of companies | Tickets sold | Revenue to artists (aprox.) | Festival Attendance | Budget    |
|-------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| 3           | 22             | 1500         | \$6,000                     | 2500                | \$50,000. |

“We try to create chaos and then control it.” Randy Smith-

This community has a strong sense of isolation. We need a solid framework; a network of support and encouragement. The Fringe should bring everyone together: dance, music, theatre, performance. Break down our own definitions of theatre. And, create opportunities for self-employment.<sup>168</sup>

Randy Smith was 22 years old when he founded Intrepid Theatre company in November 1986. Smith was studying directing and designing at the University of Victoria when he composed the original mandate: “to facilitate local artists by stimulating production opportunities for new and experimental work.”<sup>169</sup> After a successful inaugural year of productions, in March 1987, Smith wrote a proposal for Intrepid to host a Fringe. “The Fringe,” he told his board of directors, “is the perfect vehicle for Intrepid’s longevity, financial security, and fulfillment of mandate.”<sup>170</sup>

Before organizing his proposal, Smith invited Maratta and Paisley to present a workshop weekend on “how to produce a Fringe.” Smith’s personal notes from that weekend outline the *agreed* upon principles for producing a successful Fringe festival:

**The Host Company’s mandate:**

- To act as facilitators with a first come first served policy.
- To accommodate the *local* community; the Fringe can only come alive with the infusions of assistance, energy, technical, and financial support of Victoria.
- To go after a non-traditional audience and to encourage a broad based audience.
- To always keep advertising to a minimal; the companies *must* take responsibility for their own promotion.
- To allow the producing companies to shape the image of *their* festival each year.
- To finance the bare minimum of organization.
- To make the venues technically good.
- Lighting is the fundamental scenic element in Fringe production.

**Fringe Artist:** The Fringe *must* be ‘artist-generated’.

- They are the cultural producers, the entrepreneurs.
- The artists provide the platform for risk by taking risks.

**Fringe Audience:** Must take the risk to be equal partners with artists in judging the quality of art.

- The audience is responsible. They get what they choose.

**Fringe Festival:** Must allow the quality of art to be determined by the relationship between actor and audience.

- Should be a catalyst for linking up artists and community, artists and business, and artists from different communities by creating a social atmosphere of networking, mingling and socializing.
- The Festival should be at least 50% local.<sup>171</sup>

These are the basic principles that Paisley and Maratta outlined for Smith and his board of directors. Paisley emphasized that, “after six years of the Edmonton Fringe,” his prime strategy for production was, “to *observe* what works, and *preserve* what works with a little stimulation – and *as little interference as possible*.”<sup>172</sup>

Both Paisley and Maratta cautioned Smith that the Fringe production model was not necessarily a formula for success. Paisley stressed that it depended on artists and audiences taking risks, he pointed to the vitality of Edmonton’s community to help explain the rapid success of its festival: “You’ve got to *have* a vital theatre community to sponsor such an event, and Edmonton’s got it.”<sup>173</sup> Victoria’s theatre community was substantially smaller than Edmonton’s – and, it was *precisely* a sense of vitality that Intrepid was attempting to *create* by hosting a Fringe.

Intrepid needed more than a set of principles. In the interest of facilitating the beginnings of a Fringe circuit, Paisley suggested that they “break” the “first-come-first-served” rule by making a “quiet call for submissions.” He offered to encourage “the best shows of Edmonton and Vancouver to play in Victoria.”<sup>174</sup> While contemplating Paisley’s advice and offer, Smith met with other professionals in town to encourage their participation. Glenis Leyshorn, Artistic Director of the Belfry Theatre, stressed how small the talent pool is in Victoria, and she expressed concern about the Belfry opening its season in the middle of a festival. Colin Gorrie, General Manager at Kaleidoscope Theatre, showed interest in the prospect of producing on the Fringe. *But*, he urged that professional groups “that depend on a certain revenue would need to receive special considerations: re, venue assignments, number of performances, and

time slots.”<sup>175</sup> “The question is,” Smith told his board, “do I fit their concerns into my design, or do I do it my way and wait for them to come around?”<sup>176</sup> He pointed to Paisley’s advice: “serve your own constituency first” But, he asked, who would make up that constituency? Who was the Fringe going to serve?

After many queries and much discussion, Intrepid decided to begin with a trial run. Smith turned down Paisley’s offer of “a little stimulation” in the form of quiet applications to well-established Fringe companies. Instead of a nine-day festival open to national and international companies, the event ran for three days and invited only local companies to apply. The artists paid a \$75.00 application fee and received 80% of their box office. Twenty-two companies applied, and were accepted. Many of these people were University of Victoria students and graduates who created companies specifically to produce on the Fringe. The festival was not a financial success for the artists (the average box office was \$25.00), but the Fringe stimulated a strong enough level of enthusiasm and excitement in the community to launch a full length festival in 1988. And, Intrepid came out in the black.

For Smith, creating a chaotic festive atmosphere was a central concern. On my first visit to his office, he enthusiastically showed me a copy of Harvey Cox’s book, Feast of Fools, and proceeded to engage me in a long discussion of the possibilities and merits of creating an authentic theatre carnival complete with festive drinking, feasting and frivolity – in downtown Victoria. He argued,

Victoria is a real suited-up community; I want people to get casual, relax, have fun, take a few risks -- hell, go crazy! This town needs that kind of energy.<sup>177</sup>

Victoria is a small, quaint city with a downtown core that borders the harbour and contains a number of “village square” type of spaces. For the beer garden and outdoor stage, Smith chose Market Square -- a large square with sculptures, trees, benches, and

an outdoor performing space surrounded by three stories of an old wooden market. The stores, cafés, and restaurants in the Square invite a young, and “hip” clientele, much like the Strathcona area in Edmonton. Despite this attractive setting, Market Square did not become a central gathering place for Fringe audiences or performers.<sup>178</sup> Instead, the heart and the aesthetic of the Victoria Fringe are characterized by the “downtown” nature of the city; it is the old city streets and the spaces between the venues that become the “hub” of the festival: the bars and cafés; the alleyways and the harbour. And more recently, the street performers have lured the crowds down to the causeway. Because Victoria has such a small city core, the festival covers downtown; yet all the venues are in comfortable walking distance. As quaint a town as this may appear to be, after dark, the homeless, the drunks, the street kids, and the prostitutes mingle freely with the Friday night crowds. Wendy Vousden, one of the feminist comics from Sensible Footwear, told me, a little indignantly,

We think that the Victoria Fringe should have told us we were going to be *in a red light district*. When I was walking back last night a man rolled down his window and asked how much for a blow-job!<sup>179</sup>

### **First Impressions:**

Michael D. Reid, Theatre Critic for the Victoria Colonist:

*Fringe benefits* is a people-watcher’s paradise. Inside the beer tent, an eccentric senior citizen and a young athlete were overheard debating the merits of a political play. Nearby children cavorted about and squealed with delight at the antics of a hard-working clown. Sitting next to me in one venue was a well-behaved dog. The audience is a mixed bag. In some cases five bucks seems like a real bargain, in others, you could feel ripped off. .... The repertoire runs the gamut from the beautiful to the bizarre.<sup>180</sup>

Randy Smith, Artistic Director of Intrepid Theatre and Fringe Producer 1987 - 1992:

I knew it was going to work when I heard a person complaining to the volunteer ticket sellers about the content of one of the shows. She was really angry. Passion. Controversy. Debate. Hell, people talking about theatre, that's what makes a Fringe work.<sup>181</sup>

Alan Hughes, Intrepid Board member and professor of theatre history at the University of Victoria:

I remember running from one venue to the next and meeting others doing the same thing. I met an actor who said the Fringe would fail because it was "just" people from the theatre department at UVic.. performing for each other. I was determined to help Randy prove him wrong. Did, too.<sup>182</sup>

After the inaugural Victoria festival, the Fringe circuit began to develop in a number of important ways. Paisley translated his principles for Fringe production into an 80 page manual: Fringe Theatre Event, A Guide for Production. A common process of development between inaugural Fringe festivals began to appear. While each Fringe was distinct, by virtue of the nature of the host company and the circumstances existing in the larger community, each new producer tended to follow the guidelines Paisley presented to Intrepid theatre: 1) consulting with Edmonton, 2) consulting with the larger community, and 3) isolating the unique needs of each theatre community.

### The Winnipeg Fringe - 1988

| # of Venues | # of companies | Tickets sold | Revenue to artists (aprox). | Festival Attendance | Budget                    |
|-------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| 5           | 49             | 1600         | \$64,000                    | 30,000              | \$167,305. <sup>183</sup> |

The unique aspect of our festival is that it is produced by a regional theatre. In Edmonton and Vancouver the Fringe grew out of a reaction to mainstream theatre, here it is different. Ours was more a recognition that theatre can be produced a number of different ways. Larry Desrochers<sup>184</sup>.

According to a number of theatre professionals, the idea of starting a Fringe Festival in Winnipeg had been a topic of discussion since the early 1980's. Colin Jackson, the General Manager of Prairie Theatre Exchange (Winnipeg's "alternative" theatre), told me that PTE had seriously discussed the idea of hosting a Fringe in 1985; but, at that time PTE was also making plans to find or build a new theatre complex. "Frankly," he said, "we missed the boat on that one."<sup>185</sup> In 1986, Larry Desrochers began to discuss the idea of hosting a Fringe in Winnipeg with Rick McNair, then Artistic Director at MTC. Like Paisley, McNair had worked in theatre in Britain and was familiar with fringe theatre and impressed with the Edinburgh Fringe.

When McNair and Desrochers presented a proposal to the board of directors of MTC, the response was cool. The non-juried, first-come first-served programming policy disturbed them. From the board's perspective, a non-juried festival contradicted MTC's mandate of "setting the standards by which theatre is measured."<sup>186</sup> The board members continued to ask "what if this kind of play applies -- or that kind of play?" McNair and Desrochers kept explaining that, "this was not an issue, that no one even reads the potential scripts."<sup>187</sup>

It took a lot of convincing for the board. The idea of accepting companies on a first-come first-served basis with no quality control was entirely foreign to them. We informed them on the growth of Edmonton's festival and the success and benefits that the Fringe brought to that community. I stressed that the lack of selection process was a part of the way the model worked, and a *big* part of why the audiences were so excited. I explained that the first-come first-serve was intrinsic to that success. The most important question for the board is almost always whether or not an idea is going to make money or lose money. We demonstrated it obviously worked in Edmonton, and surely people in Winnipeg are not that different from people there. In the end, having the Edmonton model to refer to is what convinced them. <sup>188</sup>

There were of course great advantages in having a large and secure theatre like MTC host a Fringe Festival. MTC's reputation brought instant legitimacy to the Fringe; unlike the other Fringes, the inaugural Winnipeg festival received significant public funding; corporate sponsorships were easier to solicit, MTC shared overhead and staff costs, and provided publicity and venues. There are also disadvantages:

Initially the negative aspects of having MTC produce a Fringe were tremendous. The theatre just could not take the Fringe seriously. We were constantly concerned that they might back out at the last minute. Confidentially speaking, Larry and I always had a contingency plan that would enable the project to go ahead without MTC. The other problem is of course MTC's capacity for falling in love with the Fringe for all the wrong reasons -- and possibly renegeing on its responsibility to the local small theatre community by telling companies that request assistance with play development to "go do a Fringe play." And there is the constant danger of MTC trying to take too much control and somehow over-riding the non-juried process.<sup>189</sup>

At this writing, Winnipeg is the only Fringe that has censored Fringe plays, not the productions, but rather their titles and posters: *The Fuck Machine* in 1993 and *The Happy Cunt* in 1994. This is worth considering in context with McNair's fears in 1991.

#### **The Influence of the Edmonton Model:**

On the basis of on Edmonton and Vancouver's experience we estimated an attendance of 6000 people for the first Fringe [the actual figure was 30,000]. What I did not account for was the fact that I had the model to work with. While they were inventing the wheel, I was adjusting the spokes. It was a remarkable advantage. Larry Desrochers.<sup>190</sup>

In 1987, Desrochers re-mounted his MTC studio production of *Salt Water Moon* on the Edmonton Fringe, he also spent six extra weeks in Edmonton studying the principles of Fringe production.<sup>191</sup> Noting that the outdoor performances act like

commercials, “in a psychological sense, for people who are just hanging about, or passing by – they see the outdoor stage and then they see the ‘info booth’, and then they ask “what’s going on?” –He decided site location was paramount to the success of a Fringe.

The Winnipeg site, Old Market Square, is located in the Exchange district, just east of the downtown business area and across Main street from the Centennial Centre. The site borders on an older commercial area of town (the Exchange District), which was experiencing a recent flurry of gentrification. Market Square proper, was in the process of being developed into a civic “cultural area”.<sup>192</sup> This was also the case with the Old Strathcona district in Edmonton. In both cities, civic officials were excited about popular arts-oriented events being scheduled for these sites. Both areas are historic districts, both offer a number of theatres in walking distance from each other, and both contain outdoor stages surrounded by park. The similar site aesthetic is one of many parallels that the Winnipeg and Edmonton Fringes share. Both festivals also have a variety of venues -- ranging from the comfortable and well-equipped large or small theatre, to the horribly hot and ill equipped small space.

Typically, the Fringes open with a party or a dance on the eve of the festival, and in Edmonton there is always a parade of actors in costumes at noon on opening day. In Winnipeg, the inaugural opening celebration was unique. Because Market Square is surrounded by a business district, a parade seemed inappropriate for an opening event. Determined to follow the Edmonton model as closely as possible, Desrochers wanted to, “do *something* to kick off the festival -- to get people out early and set up expectations for fun.”<sup>193</sup> In the end, he choose a pancake breakfast in the park: “The Flat-Out Pancake Polka Party”.<sup>194</sup> This is a particularly interesting event: Old Market Square park is also home to a number of urban-aboriginals, so while a pancake breakfast may conjure up images of the Ladies Auxiliary, at the Winnipeg Fringe this

event included an open stage with rock n' roll playing (at 9:00 a.m.!) to an eclectic gathering eating breakfast together: performers in costume, street performers, audiences, children, and the homeless.

Desrochers also utilized his trip to Edmonton to advertise and encourage performing companies to apply for Winnipeg's festival. Sak Theatre, a Florida based street performance troupe, took up the offer. According to Desrochers, "they made the outdoor stage":

Those guys are remarkable, they would do a show for two people until the stage began to happen. By the end of the week people were phoning to ask when Sak was performing.

Sak has had a significant impact on most of the Fringes in terms of stimulating an outdoor audience. Four of the popular Edmonton theatre companies produced on Winnipeg's first Fringe: *Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie* (*Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie*), Theatre Network (*Theatresports*), Grant MacEwan Theater Arts (*Alice in Concert* by Elizabeth Swados), Leave it to Jane Theatre (*Personals* by William Finn and *Goblin Market* by Peggy Harmon and Polly Pen), and The Comedy Troupe (*Free Food and Beer*).

### **Consultation with the Community:**

Consultation with the theatre community was relatively uncomplicated for two reasons: the idea of a Winnipeg Fringe had been an object of discussion among the local theatre community for at least a couple of years and, Winnipeg was already experiencing the emergence of a 'fringe theatre community' seeking out opportunities to self-produce. In part, this was happening because many artists had already been producing on the Edmonton Fringe, and, in 1986, they had successfully lobbied for Arts Council funding aimed at independent self-production.

Because the theatre community was aware of the potential of a Fringe, and already eager to participate, Desrochers was able to focus most of his pre- Fringe attention on the public and the media:

It was a process of education. First, we focused on the public. We began telling people what they needed to know in order to participate in the event. People understood that a Fringe was something wacky, off-centre, and different. We stressed that this theatre was going to be fun, not formal. They may not have grasped the whole concept, but people understood that they were welcome to participate, to be a part of the event. Meanwhile we also spoke to the media casually for three months before we announced the festival. By the time we did make a big media announcement they knew what the Fringe philosophy was, they understood the first-come-first-served policy, and how the event worked – as much as they could without having experienced a Fringe.<sup>195</sup>

#### **Unique Needs of the Community:**

“I think there was a real need for an event that offered a sense of community.” Larry Desrochers.

For the public, the Fringe was yet another summertime festival in a city of festivals: the Folk Festival, the Mime Festival, the Dance Festival, the Black-o-rama Festival, and others. Yet, Desrochers feels the Fringe did, and does, offer a unique sense of community that was lacking, yet growing ever more important:

In an age when we are growing more and more away from community oriented experiences, the Fringe offers an event in which people come together to share stories and commonalities against a large socio-economic range of people who live in the community. The Fringe brings people together in a unique way because there is no preferential treatment, not for the artists, not for the audiences. It doesn't matter if you drive a Jaguar or if you've been on U.I. for two years -- you stand in the same line-up, pay the same price, and drink in the same beer tent. I think this is what the

community responded to, a sense of community beyond socio-economic concerns.

### **First Impressions:**

Chris Johnson, Drama department, University of Manitoba:

The 1986 Vancouver Fringe was my first experience at the Fringe. It was very laid back, very avant garde. This was my first impression of what our Fringe would be. But when Winnipeg started it was different; the event was for everybody and it was *really* festive!<sup>196</sup> Winnipeg's first Fringe Festival was the most exciting theatrical event I've experienced since coming here nine years ago. I think it might well prove, in the long run, to be one of the most important in the city's theatre history, coming a close second to the founding of the Manitoba Theatre Centre. The implications of the eight day event, and of Winnipeg's astonishingly enthusiastic response are far reaching: new companies were formed for the Fringe and some will probably continue and develop, increasing the availability of alternative theatre year-round.<sup>197</sup>

Per Bask, University of Winnipeg:

Before the Fringe we had a new variety of independent groups beginning to produce themselves. There was new activity in the theatre community with a lot of young companies emerging. When the Fringe arrived it naturally absorbed a lot of that energy.<sup>198</sup>

### **The Toronto Fringe - 1989:**

| # of Venues | Performing companies | Tickets sold | Revenue to artists | Festival Attendance | Budget    |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| 3           | 40                   | NA           | NA                 | 5000                | \$25,000. |

We went to the owner of the building who gave us an office space. We borrowed a typewriter. We didn't have a computer. It was really down and dirty. Gregory Nixon.<sup>199</sup>

I realized there were so many festivals in Toronto that, if we were going to receive any kind of support, we had to be distinctly different. In the end, it was the non-mandated/non-juried policy of the Fringe that made us special. Gregory Nixon.

The Toronto Fringe is un-carnival-like -- yet there *is* a release of social inhibitions peculiar to carnival. Ray Conlogue<sup>200</sup>

Gregory Nixon founded the Flexible Packaging Theatre Company in 1986 with Julian Richards and Cheryl Ray. For the first year and a half the company survived on what Torontonians in the independent small theatre community call an “Art Grant” – welfare. Nixon’s company was one of a handful of Toronto companies: Stones Theatre, Crow’s Theatre, and Ziggurat Theatre, who decided at an “ad hoc” meeting that it was “time to get a Fringe started.” Nixon describes his own frustrations at the time:

I was going to meeting after meeting of the small theatre caucus. At that time there were 70 members. The meetings always descended into a bleak ‘poor us’ atmosphere; “there are no venues, no audiences, no money.” All of these complaints were valid, but at this particular meeting it was suggested that; ‘the central problem is *our response* to the situation.’ We were all being reactive instead of proactive.

Producing a Fringe festival, they agreed, would be a pro-active solution; “it may not necessarily make money or careers, but it would give people the opportunity to ‘get out of a terrible rut.’”

They incorporated under the name “The Fringe of Toronto,” and instead of a board of directors they instituted an Arts Advisory Council made up of rotating members of the small theatre caucus of the Toronto Theatre Alliance. According to Nixon, he had the most experience with producing and grant applications – so he initiated the incorporation, wrote the first grant applications, and inevitably took on the full time role as producer.

### **The Influence of the Edmonton Fringe:**

Nixon is the only founding Fringe producer who did not communicate with Brain Paisley before producing a festival. He gave me three reasons why:

I was too arrogant. What could Edmonton teach Toronto about theatre? I thought the differences between the two cities were too great to allow a transfer of Edmonton's model to Toronto. I was simply too busy. I did not have an office for the first six months, never mind a staff, or a long distance budget -- there was no money for stamps!

The inaugural Toronto Fringe was different in a number of ways: the festival ran for 15 days with no day time shows, there was no parade, no opening party for the general public, and no Fringe club. Three venues accommodated 40 companies -- two of these spaces were bars: "the owners gave the space in return for the bar revenue," and venue 3 was the basement of a public library. All of the venues were in walking distance -- but it was a bit of a trek between Sneaky Dee's on Bathurst street to the "hub" of the Fringe in the Annex area (just a few blocks west of Honest Ed's and the Bathurst subway station). The most visible gathering spot was the large bakery and deli restaurant on the corner of Brunswick and Bloor streets, which serves beer and wine and has outside seating for about 100 people.

Nixon was enthusiastic about creating a big party for all the small independent artists in the city, but he thought it would be a too daunting a task to stimulate a carnival atmosphere in the streets:

If we can create a space where strangers just *interact* with each other -- *in Toronto*, that will be an accomplishment. Never mind festivity. This city discourages interaction. I think this is because the corporate dollar is so much more important than anything else. Vancouver has a beach culture, Edmonton has a festival culture. In Toronto we have a traffic culture. Nothing is more important than the flow of traffic. The sight of people standing in a Fringe line-up, I mean not doing anything but

standing there with each other -- *waiting* -- to buy a ticket -- looks like a festival!!

In an effort to stimulate some sense of festivity, Nixon paid a number of street performers \$500 in return for busking: "Everyday we put out these 'busk stops' and left it up to the performers to do whatever they wanted -- we had to pay them because it is impossible to 'pass-the-hat' in this area: too many panhandlers."

After the Fringe, Nixon realized that the 15 day run had been too long: "the momentum was lost, the audiences disappeared, and it felt like the last week-end dragged on forever." That summer, he travelled to Edmonton to attend the Fringe, talk with Paisley, and try to see how things worked:

It was difficult to talk with Brian because it was in the middle of the Fringe and he was busy. But, I chased him around asking questions anyway. I think he was angry with me for not consulting with him. I got the impression that Edmonton wanted to be the arbitrators of the Fringe circuit.

Nixon returned to Toronto with much the same feelings he had left with. He did not want to model Toronto's Fringe after Edmonton's:

I want Toronto's Fringe to be big, but I don't want it to be like Edmonton's. I have a different aesthetic. I don't go for the mimes and the clowns. I think the look and feel of a Fringe should reflect the aesthetic of its community. Toronto is more industrial and urban than Edmonton. That's the kind of look and feel that I want to capture for our festival: Urban, industrial.

### **Consultation with the Community:**

Toronto's independent small theatre community is huge. The Toronto Theatre Alliance has a membership of 130 producing companies; 74 of these belong to the small theatre caucus (1991).<sup>201</sup> However, as Paul Leonard, the Director of Projects and

Promotions for the TTA, explains, there are “dozens and dozens of other companies that exist and produce who are not TTA members, and many of these companies appear at the Fringe festival.”<sup>22</sup>

At first glance it appears curious, in light of the number of small theatres, that the Toronto Fringe began with a mandate to encourage people to start their own companies. Nixon clarified the intent for me:

When I say I want to encourage new companies I mean I want to encourage a *new wave* of theatre. People who don't sit around waiting for council grants or awards, but who get out there and get their audience for themselves. Entrepreneurship comes into what this community needs. In Toronto theatre people need to take the initiative into their own hands to create career building opportunities.<sup>23</sup>

#### **Unique Needs of the Community:**

In terms of the larger community, the potential Fringe audience, Nixon was concerned with what he describes as “a prevailing misconception about alternative theatre”:

We need to give this community a breath of fresh air. We need to relieve the vision of alternative theatre as dark and dusty. To get people into alternative theatre shows we need to promote it as popular, and fun -- for the broadest base of people.

This goal prompted Nixon to prioritize the aesthetic and technical aspects of potential venues. By year three, *all* of the Toronto venues were “real” theatres, with good sight-lines, relatively comfortable seats, reasonably equipped technical booths, lobby space -- and *air conditioning*. This is unique among the Fringes. The limited number of theatre spaces available and affordable in the Annex area, also influenced the decision to use only existing theatre spaces, and this has played an influence on the relatively slow growth of the Toronto Fringe. Toronto hosted 78 theatre companies in 6 venues in its

third year (1993), while Vancouver hosted 96 companies in 10 venues in its third year (1987). Often this kind of difference between two festivals is indicative of political choices as well as aesthetics. In Vancouver, a mandate to create a large constituency of local theatre artists who depend on, and accordingly support the Fringe, created a larger festival program. While Nixon wanted to accommodate as many companies as possible, he had other more immediate priorities. Equity among performing companies, and support for the small theatre venues in the community, were the most political of his priorities:

Yes, we want to accommodate as many companies as possible, but ultimately the Fringe is about equity, so that comes first. I believe totally in the democracy of the Fringe. It is an essential part of the festival. I can't put one company in a little pub with sixty people on uncomfortable wooden chairs and another in the Poor Alex theatre. That kind of situation is not what a Fringe should be; equity means everyone gets a fair shake. As well, we have the theatre spaces in the area. During the Fringe these spaces are normally in the dark; when we pay the extra cost to rent an already existing venue, we are supporting the theatre community. <sup>204</sup>

Because of its slow growth and resulting fierce competition for Fringe venues, Toronto's Fringe experienced a backlash with local artists. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

The issue of accessibility was also a major concern for Nixon:

The theatre needs to recognize the importance of access with its community. It is the most important thing today. Access meaning young people, cool people, old people, black people, white people, all kinds of people need to be able to come together. Theatre needs to recognize the complexity of our city.

Nixon felt that this was a central concern for the theatre community at large, and a problem that a Fringe festival would be able to address. Retrospectively, Nixon confirms this:

I've seen shows like *Dark Diaspora* spawn a whole new audience ( *Dark Diaspora* was produced on the Toronto Fringe in 1991 by the Nightwood Theatre Company). That's what making theatre accessible to everyone can do – spawn a whole *new* audience.

### **First Impressions:**

Paul Leonard:

The Fringe was really cheap, a circuit of theatre energy, excitement and liveliness as opposed to the mega-musicals. The Fringe just thumbed its nose at all the gloom and doom and said, hey we're putting on theatre, who cares.<sup>205</sup>

Kennedy Goodkey, co- founder and actor with The Juanabees, Victoria:

T.O. was strange; it was a Fringe without the festival. When there's no festival, there is no place to get out and hang with our audiences, no chance to talk about our show with people. It was very business like -- do your show and get lost kind of feeling. We didn't feel so much like we were a part of things, just a small insignificant part of everything. At the other Fringes, especially first ones, we felt like we were a significant part of the whole. In T.O, we felt like putting a warning in our program -- 'This is not culturally significant theatre, we don't care about the Canadian condition.'

Ray Conlogue, Theatre critic for the Globe and Mail , Toronto:

I remember thinking it was a very pale copy-cat of the Edmonton thing. I also got the feeling that some people felt because Edmonton was getting so much attention, Toronto ought to have a Fringe too. I also remember a kind of chauvinism at the first Fringe.<sup>206</sup>

Mira Friedlander, Freelance theatre critic, Toronto:

I loved it. I was so excited. I thought it was a kick in the ass, exactly what we needed.<sup>207</sup>

Robert Crew, Theatre Critic, the Toronto Star:

I liked the buzz, and the way you had to find your way around. I enjoyed the promotional angle of listening to the reactions of other people to find out what's hot. As a critic, I most enjoyed discovering shows and then seeing the buzz build around those shows.<sup>208</sup>

### The Saskatoon Fringe - 1990

| # of Venues | Performing companies | Tickets sold | Revenue to artists | Festival Attendance | Budget |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------|
| 5           | 31                   | 6987         | \$36,074.0         | 20,654              | 50,000 |

This Fringe belongs to the artists in *strange ways*. Tom Bentley-Fisher<sup>209</sup>.

This is a province which feels-short changed. Many people feel the need to demonstrate their pride in community, and in themselves -- as the people who have stayed. As well, Saskatoon has a strong volunteer community. But in the last few years, there has not been an event to excite these people. As for our theatre audiences, I think they are looking for the circumstances for something extraordinary to happen.

Tom Bentley-Fisher.<sup>210</sup>

In 1971, a group of University of Saskatoon theatre graduates founded 25th Street Theatre under the artistic direction of Andreas Tahn, with a mandate to produce new Canadian plays. They have, "always been on the brink of economic disaster."<sup>211</sup> Following a series of disturbing events, Tom Bentley-Fisher took on the role of Artistic Director.<sup>212</sup> Observing the growth of the Fringe circuit, and its obvious success, he decided it was an ideal means for 25th Street to re-focus its creative energy and work with local artists developing original material.

### **The Influence of the Edmonton Model:**

Bentley-Fisher travelled to the Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Edmonton Fringes before writing a proposal for a Fringe, and he attended the inaugural Producer's Conference in Vancouver, 1989. I met Bentley-Fisher at that conference and shared his enthusiasm and delight at being a "new-comer" in a group of committed, idealistic, creative and *fun* people. It was the philosophical side of how the Fringe worked that most excited both of us:

The producer's conference created the given circumstances for me to go ahead with the idea of hosting a Fringe. I realized the Fringe philosophy made so much sense to Saskatoon's theatre community. Our arts community desperately needed revitalizing. For this, the Fringe was perfect.<sup>213</sup>

Returning from that meeting, he decided the first priority for Saskatoon was to get the *whole* community excited about the event:

We involved as many people as possible, including our board members, in every aspect of organizing the festival. Initially, we focused on finding billets for the travelling artists; we made this a priority because it was an excellent way into the community. We also formed an association with the merchants in the area. I knew, from what everybody said at the conference, that if it was going to fly -- it was going to have to be fueled by this community's investment and commitment to the event.

Perhaps more than any other first Fringe, Saskatoon embraced the wacky "off the wall" -- "anything goes," potential of the event. Bentley-Fisher had an image of the circus coming to this small rural town where everyone would get excited -- and this is what he conveyed to the organizers and volunteers, the media, and the artists. Pat Lorje, a member of the board and a local politician, enjoyed describing how she introduced the media to the Fringe:

We took all the media on a school bus ride to show them where the Fringe would be. We made the whole thing very mysterious and a lot of fun. We drove downtown by the park where “Shakespeare on the River” is presented, we stopped the bus, made everyone get off, and we then announced that this was *not* the site of the upcoming Fringe, and called out ‘everybody back on the bus.’ Then we drove to another likely spot, stopped the bus, everyone got off the bus, and we announced, no, neither is this the Fringe site, ‘everybody back on the bus’. We drove them around for a couple of hours, doing this, and serving refreshments, until everyone was laughing and joking, then we took them to the site on Broadway.

### **Consultation with the Community:**

We knew the Fringe would not work here if we just plunked it into the middle of Broadway Street and said, ‘O.K. here it is,’ so we took the time to form a partnership with the Broadway Merchants. Tom Bentley-Fisher.

The inaugural Saskatoon Fringe was a joint effort between 25th Street Theatre and the On Broadway Association, an organization of 145 business and professional services within the Broadway improvement district. This alliance forged a strong relationship with the community and helped to create a remarkably supportive event for the local artists and the touring troupes. In 1991, Fudrukker’s restaurant sponsored an opening night dinner for *all* of the artists; they served steak, salad and hot baked potatoes in the beer garden (for most, \$20 a day is the maximum spending allowance, and for some even less – accordingly, a free meal “with all the trimmings” is a serious treat). All of the merchants on the Fringe site were enthusiastic about explaining how the Fringe “worked” and encouraging shoppers to buy a program and get involved. They were also extra-accommodating about posting, special prices and rates for artists, and general assistance of all sorts. Of course, the merchants were acting in their own interest, and overtly so; but rather than creating a “commercial vs. artistic,” atmosphere,

the Saskatoon festival, right from the beginning, had a distinctive and unruly “merchant’s fair/circus” environment.

Broadway Street was experiencing the same sort of rejuvenation and gentrification as the Old Strathcona district in Edmonton, and Market Square in Winnipeg. The street is separated from downtown Saskatoon by the Broadway Bridge, a beautiful old stone bridge crossing the Saskatoon river – with lamp posts big enough for posters. The surrounding neighborhood is, like Old Strathcona, an older residential area that is home to young families, artists, and professionals. The 5 venues were *all* “make-shift” in true Fringe fashion; one was a recently deserted H&R Block store front, 2 were school gymnasiums, the Unitarian Church was used, and finally a very small art gallery. Wooden risers were set up in the school yard, creating an outdoor performing space that was, fortunately, far too small for the crowds that gathered. The streets quickly filled up with people, that attracted more people. Nino’s Pizza Place on the corner of 10th street became the hub of the festival. ( Nino more than doubled his usual capacity by filling the parking lot with tables and chairs -- and serving beer in the bottle in buckets of ice, 6 at a time).

#### **Unique Needs of the Community:**

Saskatoon has a very small but closely knit theatre community. Very often the core of the Shakespeare company is also the core of the improv company. This is a very diverse and skilled acting community, especially strong in its ensemble techniques because these people have worked together for years. Henry Woolf.<sup>214</sup>

Contact with artists from outside the community and an opportunity to work independently on original projects were the prevailing needs of the theatre community:

One of the intentions of the Fringe is to provide interaction for the local artists with national and international works, to give them fresh impetus and create an event which will help them to grow. While the stimulation

for originality is much stronger in Saskatoon (because the artists are not measuring themselves against 50 companies that are in existence and producing), the opportunities for any kind of independent work [independent from the established structures for production] are much smaller.

The festival was also conceived of as a means for 25th Street Theatre to help develop the local talent and provide a larger, more committed audience base for its regular season:

Our greatest weakness is that in order to develop, the young artists have had to leave town. When I initially arrived at 25th I had to bring in actors from outside the community, because the talent pool here was too small. It was a vicious circle; local actors left town to develop their skills, and I looked outside of town to find actors. If the Fringe provides a way for locals to stay in town and develop, 25th Street will benefit.

### **First Impressions:**

Tom Bentley-Fisher:

The community loved it, everyone was excited – the restaurants ran out of food, we had people in the streets in Gorilla suits, great media – front page coverage everyday. But, we also had BIG technical problems, the support, the venues, the scheduling, none of it was good enough.

Diana Dent, Co-founder and Artistic Director, English Madhatters.

After Montreal and Toronto, Saskatoon was definitely the “friendliest Fringe.” Everyone had wonderful billets, but terrible venues !!! Great audiences, but in too many cases, poor ticket sales. It all evens out in Saskatoon because with the bad came such beautiful hospitality and energetic enthusiasm. <sup>215</sup>

Don Kerr, Playwright/ Director, Saskatoon:

Everybody walked slow and talked a lot. We took back the streets and felt like a community.<sup>216</sup>

Kennedy Goodkey, Co-founder and actor with The Juanabees.

Saskatoon is *the* party Fringe. The opening ceremonies are the best [ see chapter 6 for more details] The organizers are the friendliest and most helpful. But, the critics are kind of [sic] stupid. We do a show that attracts mostly 15 to 25 year olds [sic] - you know; “stupid yet poignant comedy” - if you’re young. And what did the critics say? They called us “juvenile – in a derogatory way. As if juveniles should not be in the theatre!!! Some critics just don’t get it.”<sup>217</sup>

### The Montreal Fringe - 1991

| # of Venues | # of companies | Tickets sold | Revenue to artists (aprox). | Festival Attendance | Budget   |
|-------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|----------|
| 5           | 49             | 5176         | \$31,341.00                 | 2500                | \$35,000 |

We launched the Fringe concept in November [1990]. We invited English Suitcase to play a week run at Players’ [McGill University studio space], and after the show we announced the Fringe, explained the concept and answered questions. By December, a handful of people offered their help and support, but not much really. By March, more and more people were becoming involved. Nick Morra.<sup>218</sup>

When the Fringe was incorporated in November 1990, it had not secured a penny in grants, sponsorship or donations. Kris Kieren.<sup>219</sup>

We know the barricades are there, and we are not going to bring them down overnight. But the Fringe is about taking risks. We have certainly taken the risk. Kris Kieren.<sup>220</sup>

Kris Kieren from Edmonton, and Nick Morra from Toronto, were students at McGill University when they toured with their production of *Funhouse*, (Eric Bogosian) to the Edmonton, Vancouver, and Saskatoon Fringes in 1990. When they

returned to Montreal, they agreed it was time for a Montreal Fringe. Kieren was 24, she had been the president of McGill Players while attending the university, Morra was 22, he was also a student. Together, they dropped out of school and began planning a Fringe. Kieren, a "Fringe baby," grew up in Edmonton and her earliest experience with theatre was when her mother took her to a Fringe production of *A Midsummer's Nights Dream – at midnight*. She was 12.

Kieren and Morra began by writing up a 4 point mandate to: 1) encourage a cultural exchange between francophone and anglophone artists and audiences, 2) encourage the development of local original works, 3) increase the profile of theatre in Montreal by providing opportunities for theatre companies to self-produce, and 4) create an environment conducive to imaginative, experimental theatre.

#### **The Influence of the Edmonton Model:**

Montreal presents a unique challenge for the Fringe model: creating a sense of community and ownership in a city with two separated theatre communities. Confronted with this difficulty, it is interesting to note the high level of commitment to the Edmonton model that influenced all of Kieren and Morra's production decisions. Because Kieren was "raised on the Edmonton Fringe," she firmly believed that the only way to make a Fringe work in Montreal was to be true to the Edmonton model:

While our initial intent was to help stimulate the anglo small theatre community, we also knew we had to solicit the franco-community, and this means crossing the barriers with the audiences as well as the artists. But, the Fringe philosophy *is* the Fringe, no matter what city or language one works in. I feel very strongly that you can not take away from that formula. It always comes down to a matter of educating people about how it works, just like any other city.

Creating a festive atmosphere was a top priority. For the Fringe site they chose St. Laurent Blvd. (between Sherbrooke street and Mount Royal), also called “The Main.” This is the dividing line between the east (francophone) and west (anglophone) sides of the downtown. St. Laurent is neither French nor English. It is a liminal zone in a divided city. It is a busy urban street in an older and inexpensive residential and commercial area – known as “the plateau” – with no parks or green spaces. Shows ran between noon and midnight. The venues were within comfortable walking distance; they were, as in Saskatoon, an eclectic collection of “make-shift” spaces. A small side street was closed to traffic and used for the outdoor stage. The beer tent was set-up in an adjacent parking lot; and was always full by 9:00 p.m. There was a real “party” atmosphere among the performing companies and the Montreal beer tent has always been the hub of the festival for both performers and audiences. The line-up of street performing companies in the schedule is impressive; twelve companies and individual buskers came from California, New York, Manitoba, Ottawa, Florida, Vancouver, and of course Quebec. Kieren attributes the willingness of these performers to come so far for an untested festival to their experiences on the Edmonton Fringe, and Judy Lawrence’s assistance (the Edmonton producer since 1990). However, many of the street performers found the “Old Montreal” area, a tourist spot south of the Fringe site, to be more profitable – they rarely appeared for their scheduled festival performances. While the inaugural Montreal Fringe was magically chaotic and celebratory, the event was small and often “got lost” in the day to day hustle of “The Main”.

#### **Consultation with the Community:**

While Kieren and Morra made the task of bringing in the franco-community a priority, their success in this area was limited for a number of reasons. Kieren found

that soliciting support or enthusiasm in the French community was extremely difficult, if not impossible.

We set up a 50/50 quota system and saved the francophone spots for three months before we gave up. It is a 'damned if you do and damned if you do not' situation with translating information that does not easily translate. The word "Fringe" loses its meaning when translated. The Fringe idea is just as new to the English community, but they have a greater need. We decided in the end to focus where the need is, and not worry so much about the French component this year. I have to presume the demand for what the Fringe offers is not there in the franco-community. I don't really know because it is so difficult to communicate.

In the end, 8 out of 49 producing companies were French or bilingual: Les Productions Le Pipeau Inc, Montréal; Le Théâtre du Coyote, Edmonton; Tightrope Productions, Montreal; La Troupe du Jour Inc., Saskatoon; Comédia de la Ria, Alma Quebec; Theatre St. Bruno Players, Bruno Quebec; and 2 street performance troupes: Le Théâtre Mécano, Montreal, and Les Filles Bougeantes, Montreal. It is interesting that half of these came from outside the city. There was little support from the French media.<sup>21</sup>

In Morra's view, they began with a disadvantage in terms of gathering community support because none of the organizers belonged to a theatre company:

Because we do not have a base of members, or a board, or any kind of support group behind us, when we began thinking about the idea our biggest question was -- 'was anybody going to support us'? If not, 'will we be able to go it alone?'

He describes the theatre community's support and enthusiasm as slow to come and weak when it arrived.

Other than the young and relatively transient residents of the plateau, it was difficult to know who the potential Fringe audience would be, or could be. Indeed, in 1991, the

Quebec Drama Association produced a report on the conditions of English language theatre in Montreal and their main conclusion was, “based on a per capita analysis of the market, there is a *potential* audience double the size of current anglophone theatre goers.”<sup>222</sup> With a publicity budget of a few hundred dollars, Kieren, who acted as publicist as well as co-producer, needed the support of the theatre critics and entertainment journalists to attract this “unattached” audience. The English media were enthusiastic initial supporters of the Fringe; however, there are only a handful of English critics in the city. The only daily English newspaper, the *Gazette*, has one part-time theatre critic, Pat Donnelly. She was excited by the idea of a Fringe and began writing informative articles in November 1990. In an early article she described the Fringe as,

... a freewheeling market of offbeat theatre, an anarchistic grab-bag that threatens to put artistic directors and theatre critics out of business. It is theatre that eliminates the middleman.<sup>223</sup>

### **Unique Needs in the Community:**

The Quebec Drama Federation has 31 member companies and of these 15 are classified as small theatre companies operating with an annual budget under \$50,000. The QDF’s 1991 report on the state of English theatre in Montreal found that,

1. There is a definite market potential for audience development.
2. If there is no effort to consolidate the English-language theatre in Quebec, artistic resources will move out of Quebec seeking greener pastures.
3. If government does not help a few companies to attain the “intermediary” level, English-language theatre in Quebec will slowly disappear.<sup>224</sup>

The problem with audience development arises principally from two sources: a) a lack of venues and b) the conservative nature of the existing English theatre-goers.<sup>225</sup>

Marriane Ackerman, co-founder and Artistic Director of Theatre 1774 confirms that her company has found an audience for new and experimental work, but --

Because we don't have theatres, we are constantly on the move from one venue to the next; and this means moving between venues in the English district to the French district. Getting our west side audiences to follow us to the east side of town, and vice versa, is difficult.<sup>226</sup>

The conservative nature of existing audiences is attributed to the absence of challenging work at the Centaur (Montreal's regional theatre, and the only theatre with a subscription audience since the mid-seventies), and the abundance of "outside" cultural influences. Michel Vias, president of the Theatre Critics association in Quebec, explained the nature of Montreal's English audience by pointing to what Ackerman has called "The Hotel Montreal" syndrome:

The English theatre has only one venue, the Centaur. Toronto and New York vacuum a lot of resources, they have a conservative public, and they have a number of playwrights from outside Quebec who come here to work. But they have no links with the community. You can live in English here and have the impression that English culture is very much alive, but it comes from outside Montreal. The English live in a village - - a huge village with easy access to touring companies and so on, but there is no rich cultural life, because this must come from within the community.<sup>227</sup>

The Montreal Fringe artists agree that their greatest need is audience development. Many also expressed concerns about the lack of cooperation within the small theatre community. Coralie Duchesne, founder and Artistic Director of Tightrope Productions, who works in both English and French, echoed these concerns in a conversation about the potential of the Montreal Fringe:

If it attracts a lot of young people, and if the Fringe groups do some really far-out work, this will start the necessary process of audience development. Young people will become willing to see more

challenging work. That is what the community really needs -- a new young audience willing to be challenged. And, the companies need to cooperate more. They do not help each other because they are so threatened, so insecure. <sup>28</sup>

Steve Galluccio, founder and Artistic Director of B-Trade Company gave his company a name that he says, "came about because I felt betrayed by the other companies in town." He also feels that developing a new audience is essential for English theatre, and he too has great faith in the potential of Fringe to facilitate this:

I think that by bringing a lot of diverse theatre together, in terms of content and style, at an inexpensive price, people will begin to connect with theatre again. Our audiences can only be as willing to experiment as we are. However, it is obvious that they are not willing to experiment in their traditional venue, the Centaur. <sup>29</sup>

### **First Impressions:**

Michel Vias, President for L'Association de Critique du Quebec, and on the board of editors for Jeu:

I heard only a couple of months ago that we would have a Fringe here. I've read the list of plays that will be presented, and 95% of them I have never heard of before. Most of them are English. The organizers are from the English community. At Jeu we are sending someone to cover it, a new collaborator who has never written for us. We had a discussion around the table, but none of our staff writers wanted to go.

<sup>30</sup>

### **Kennedy Goodkey (& friends)**

Kennedy: The Montreal Fringe was almost like our own community; the audiences were the actors *and* the volunteers.

Friend: It was tough for all of us, so we formed a real group, a community.

Friend: The Montreal aesthetic was like "Gidget goes to the ghetto"; the setting depressed me, it was bleak, and it didn't help that there was a garbage strike.

Kennedy: I liked that, it was urban, and being in a back street made it cool.

Friend: There's a lot of filth and dirt on the streets in Montreal, but the city just doesn't care, it was a mess, the venues were lousy, the office was chaotic.

Erika Courvoisier, Co-founder, Artistic Director for Smack Dab Productions, Montreal:

The Fringe is going to be really good for us. It will make people realize that there is theatre out there that is not necessarily mainstream, and they will be excited by this.<sup>21</sup>

### **Conclusions:**

Because a great part of producing a first Fringe involved consultation with the theatre community, the artists experienced a strong sense of ownership and commitment. At the inaugural Fringes, the performing artists made up a large percentage of the audience; they provided a substantial part of the budget with their application fees and they promoted themselves *and* the festivals before and during the event. Because the Fringe was able to depend upon self-producing artists, it did not need the typical structures of administration, facilities, and funding. One of the few things every Fringe has in common today is that each year far more artists apply to the festivals than can be accommodated.

## Part 2: The Early Traveling Groups:

We are flying by the seat of our pants. We pooled out resources and we had just enough money to rent a van for a month. We are hoping to earn enough to rent one for a second month. Hertz gave us a few hundred dollars. Total budget? I'd guess 4 grand with gas. We are billeted, we have friends, we may camp. Michael O'Brien<sup>232</sup>

The touring shows can do a complete overhaul between cities, and by the time they get here [Edmonton], they have most of the kinks worked out. It is the touring groups who really put pressure on us to live up to standards. Judy Lawrence.<sup>233</sup>

While there is competition for audiences – touring without subsidy, the groups cover their production and living expenses one \$8 ticket at a time – there is also a sense of community. Michael Wener.<sup>234</sup>

It is not a break. There is no money to be made. It is a chance to gain experience, to watch other people's work, to celebrate theatre for *theatre*. That's all – it is a chance to try something different and interesting. I make as much money in Edmonton, in one day, as I will working the entire 10-day Victoria festival. Wendy Peters.<sup>235</sup>

It's cheaper to fly to Canada and tour the Fringe circuit here than to attend the Edinburgh Festival, where venue fees run into thousands of dollars – *and*, it's much, *much* more fun. Jill Dowse.<sup>236</sup>

We try to grow every year. We did two of our own shows last year, so this year we thought we'd co-produce other shows. We could help them with their marketing, offer assistance with direction and design and combine resources – the vans, the smoke machines, the lighting gels. It all seemed like such a good idea at the time. Michael Shaldamose<sup>237</sup>

I am always developing new work while I am on tour. I open a show on the Edmonton Fringe, and the following year I take it on the circuit – and open a new show in Edmonton. This way I have feed-back from the Edmonton audiences and critics, so I know what is weakest or strongest, and I have a year with the show in my head – and my guts. And, I'm always inspired because I'm always working on developing a new show. Arnie MacPherson.<sup>238</sup>

While the inaugural Fringe producers consulted with Paisley – and ultimately used the Edmonton Fringe as a model for their own production strategies – it was up to the artists to adapt and take advantage of this unique opportunity to self-produce their work across the country. It is difficult to provide a precise description of the types of theatre

companies that make-up the Fringe touring groups because these change from year to year. As well, there are really 2 Fringe circuits: The “Winnipeg West” circuit and the Montreal to Victoria circuit. The Western Fringes (Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Vancouver and Victoria) have been more popular with travelling companies for a number of reasons. They are geographically closer together; the thirty hour drive between Toronto and Winnipeg discourages many Fringe companies based west of Toronto, as well as the international companies. And, the Western Fringes (excluding Vancouver) have consistently achieved higher ticket sales per production. There appears to be a correlation between audience numbers and the nature of host city. The large urban centres: Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver, have the lowest attendance per production, and accordingly present a greater financial risk for the travelling companies. Perhaps with the recent establishment of American Fringe festivals (also modeled after the Edmonton Fringe) in the Eastern States: Orlando in April and Minneapolis in June, the eastern part of the circuit might become more financially viable for the western Fringe companies. It is too early to know.

It is, nonetheless, possible to point to a handful of touring companies that in the early years, between 1991 and 1994, represented the core of Fringe travelling troupes. These consist of a number of Canadian and international companies, including street performers, that were consistently popular with both critics and audiences across the country, and which are of particular interest because they appear to have influenced the character of the Fringe circuit.<sup>29</sup> Taken together, the early touring companies may not have much in common in terms of genre or aesthetics, but they do share a certain style that aptly defines Fringe touring productions in general; it is bold, excessive *and* minimal, experimental and poor, and often times “in your face” theatre.

***Kevin Costner's Naked Butt or Empty Souls and Withered Dreams***

Neil Grahn, Joe Bird, Wes Borg, Kathleen Rootsart a.k.a. the “Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie” were the first Canadian Fringe company to tour the initial circuit: Edmonton, Vancouver, and Victoria – in 1987. They continued to tour the Western Fringes until 1995. Judy Lawrence, producer of the Edmonton Fringe since 1992, describes the Trolls as “Ambassadors of the Fringe.”<sup>240</sup> They have frequently opened their homes in Edmonton to numerous travelling artists. In August 1991, twelve of the Russian actors from Igroky Theatre, Moscow (*Animal Farm*), spent the night in Bird and Borg’s living room watching tanks roll down the streets of Moscow on the television – and making phone calls home. This is just one of many possible examples of the extent of social interaction that the Trolls have always had with travelling Fringe companies. They have also played a substantial role in the annual Edmonton closing ceremonies.<sup>241</sup> And, perhaps most significant, the Trolls began the tradition of Fringe co-productions when, in 1989, they co-created and toured with Sak theatre.<sup>242</sup>

Following in the footsteps of the Trolls, since the circuit began, touring Fringe companies have been remarkably fluid; companies from different countries have co-produced and travelled across the country together, and actors frequently cross-over between different companies – and often “split-off” to form their own companies.<sup>243</sup> For example, after meeting on the 1993 Fringe circuit, in the winter of 1994, One World Theatre from Seattle, with Kevin Hosier from English Suitcase (London England), and Leon Donnelly, originally from English Suitcase but at the time with Skid Theatre (Winnipeg), travelled to Moscow to co-create an original production with Theatre Igroky: *Gulliver's Travels or Funny Requiem for Jonathan Swift, esq.*<sup>244</sup> This kind of activity gives the Fringe travelling company an organic nature that prompts one to think of these theatres more as “acting troupes” than companies *per se*. The spin-off companies also help to explain the rapid growth in numbers of Fringe companies.

With their first applications to the Vancouver and Victoria festivals, the Trolls sent a press kit – *in a baggie*. It contains a photograph of the 4 person troupe standing knee-deep in a public fountain, dressed in causal clothes and looking back at the camera with serious expressions. Included in the baggie are a number of photocopied reviews Here are some samples that provide a first impression of their early work:

[M]ust rank as the funniest and most innovative comedy team in the country. ... Wacky, but clever poems ... and songs ...ingenious dialogues.<sup>245</sup>

With solid backgrounds in improvisation and theatresports, the Trolls use stand-up comedy, skits and musical satire in their irreverent send-ups of everything from religion and politics to domestic social issues.<sup>246</sup>

They're a cult, but it seems to me they merit it. ...They also have some political bite. ... one of the best pieces of pure fun ....<sup>247</sup>

Trolls sing the *I Hate Ontario* song and put Shakespeare to heavy metal. ...[They are] at their best when their material is derived from gently lampooning people and things close to home.<sup>248</sup>

The Trolls played an important role in helping to shape the atmosphere of artistic camaraderie and experimentation that the Fringe fosters. I discuss their later work in detail in chapter 7.

In 1991, the year Montreal joined the Fringe circuit, there were 7 touring companies that produced on every Fringe on the circuit. Two were British companies: Foresight Theatre from Wolverhampton England (*Pink Smoke in the Vatican*) and Sensible Footwear from London (*Close to the Bone*) – both are feminist companies, but with distinctly different styles. Daniel Nemiroff from Montreal (*Live Sex Show -- Llamas!*) Doug Curtis from Calgary (*Black Ice and Red Adidas*), the Way Off Broadway Group from Vancouver (*Twilight Zone*), Real Canadian Mounted Productions (*21 A and Adult Child/Dead Child*) and the Juanabees (*We Juanabee Bigger Than Jesus*) from Victoria,

were the national companies that toured the entire circuit in 1991. All of these people, except Daniel Nemiroff and Doug Curtis, continued to tour the entire circuit for a number of years. Interestingly, WOB, RCMP, and the Juanabees are the only Canadian companies to travel the *entire* circuit for at least 4 years – and all are co-graduates of the theatre department at the University of Victoria. Both Daniel Nemiroff and Doug Curtis returned to the Fringe, but never again did they attempt the long 4 month and 7 city tour across the country. .

## 1991

### *Pink Smoke in the Vatican*

The show opens with amplified sounds of smacking and gobbling as a woman in an improvised white bridal dress crams a giant cream pastry into her mouth. “It must be hard to take me seriously,” she says finally, quivering bits of white hanging off her face. “As Pope.” Liz Nicholls.<sup>29</sup>

... this riveting production is complex in both theme and design. Things are not served up easily. Bob Remington.<sup>20</sup>

Foresight has been a “sell-out” Fringe company since they brought *Hitler’s Women* to the 1989 Edmonton Fringe. Foresight specializes in company creations of original hard-hitting drama played out stylistically. “This is theatre that aggressively confronts its audience.”<sup>21</sup> A list of their productions reflects their mandate – “to venture through history shining light on women’s lives often hidden from history”<sup>22</sup>: *Helen* (1990), *Shoot the Women First* (1992), *Bloody Mary and the Virgin Queen* (1993), *Frankenstein’s Mother* (1994), *The Trout Sisters* (1996). Most of their work is 90 minutes long; it is tight, compact, and precise in its performance and scenography. Foresight create highly visual productions with the minimum of set and props; they rely on a unique performance style that incorporates both realistic dialogue and abstract movement.

### Sensible Footwear

...some of the funniest [feminist] filth you'll see at the Fringe. Bob Remington.<sup>253</sup>

Sensible Footwear is a 3 women troupe of stand-up "Comedic Feminist Terrorists."<sup>254</sup> Their style is hybrid; it combines traditional "stand-up" and a distinctly British flavour of comedy with a stylistic, almost choreographed performance art style. They are "fierce, funny and feminist, combining agitprop with sharp presentation and perfect comic timing."<sup>255</sup> Their work is, most decidedly, an example of "in your face theatre"; they sing songs about oral sex, ballads about war-mongering men, and perform a skit that includes a man who can "pull out the tampax with his teeth." They also do a wonderful feminist "send up" of the horror film genre. Their humour is both raunchy and intelligent. In contrast to Foresight, this company does not concern itself with theatricality; their shows are sparse, the costumes are casual and the lighting is simple and predictable – the company has been known to tape a list of skits and songs to the stage floor for easy reference. Sensible Footwear have been a "sell-out" Fringe company since their initial tour in 1990 with *Spit it Out*. They have also been popular at a number of Comedy and Folk festivals across the country. In 1994 the company immigrated to Canada, settled in Toronto, and left the Fringe.

### Live Sex - Llamas !

... "I can't believe the Fringe would tarnish itself with something so disgusting," fumed a male caller. He said he and his wife were so offended they left the show early. The caller aroused suspicion when he said he could be reached at the Patrica Hotel. The producers of Live Sex Show - Llamas [sic] had earlier sent the paper a letter saying they were staying at the Pat. 'Do you know how hard it is to get press' demanded the complainer, after being found out. Donnella Hoffman.<sup>256</sup>

*Live Sex - Llamas!* is an "interesting" piece of theatre that experiments with conventional boundaries by using a combination of genre: film, lecture, a live strip-tease show performed by a professional stripper, and the world's most obnoxious and

sleazy stand-up comic. At one point, a planted actor in the audience stands up and shoots the comic. The piece presents an interesting balance of content and form; in its own peculiar way it is one of the few attempts of what might be called “postmodern Fringe theatre.” The piece has a level of crude and naked authenticity about it that works to expose and manipulate the boundaries of its own different narratives. It exploits the bare Fringe stage with stark white lighting and characters who appear, like the stripper, to *really be* who they are. The atmosphere is sleazy and the theme is exploitation: the lecturer seduces his students, the film shows body mutilating erotica, the stripper and comic are both third rate and *real*. Curiously, (and perhaps this is a perverse example of postmodern irony) much like the form and content of the show, Nemiroff’s promotion tactics *and* the T-shirt and Poster selling booth that he sets up at each Fringe, are also experiments in exploitative sleaze – so says Nemiroff:

When I made the film for a course I was taking at university I was being totally exploitive -- you bet. I used all their expensive equipment to make a second rate art/porno film. When I come into town I go to the strip joints and find a stripper for the show -- I tell her I’m a producer. Then I phone the police and the local newspaper and anonymously complain about the sex scenes in my show. My T-shirts are over-priced and the kid that sells them is under-paid. But best of all, my title is totally gratuitous -- there are no live Llamas.<sup>257</sup>

Nemiroff is a unique character whose Fringe show was an equally unique experiment in crossing the boundary between the theatrical and the authentic; showmanship and exploitation. Nemiroff’s Fringe activities help to demonstrate the “anything goes” attitude that informs the festivals.

### *Black Ice and Red Adidas*

In these days of mega-entertainment and channel-hopping attention spans, there is something audacious and even fool-hardy in the act of appearing on stage with nothing more than a story. ... sitting behind a desk, stopping sporadically for a sip of water and even occasionally to glance at notes, relying on his drolly ironic tone and well-placed pauses

to establish a rapport with the audience ... his ability to hold the audience's attention for nearly an hour is achievement in itself. Vit Wagner.<sup>258</sup>

Doug Curtis' work offers an example of a common and popular Fringe style: the one person show. *Black Ice and Red Adidas* recounts the story of a young man who grew up in Calgary. Curtis, who is author and actor for the piece, sits at a desk and tells his tale in a Spalding Gray style. It is a gentle and endearing story told with measured simplicity. The production attracted audiences and good reviews across the country. No doubt, a part of the "charm" of this show was its regional character; Curtis provides vivid descriptions of bitter winds and long cold nights, of boyhood mischief, joy, disappointments and cabin fever on the prairie.

While the narrative of *Black Ice and Red Adidas* appears to be personal to the actor, this piece is a relatively "gentle" version of a more typical type of "one-person Fringe production": the autobiographical performance. "Kate the Great" a.k.a. Kate Hull from Edmonton and Shane MaCabe from Arizona each produced more typical Fringe autobiographical performances on the 1991 Winnipeg West circuit.

### *Cracked - Up*

I'm driven by the need to perform, and these festivals give me a chance to do that. Kate Hull.<sup>259</sup>

I saw *Cracked Up*, written and performed by Kate Hull, in Vancouver, in a venue that was "normally" a night club called 'The Lunatic Fringe'. In contrast to the Curtis piece, there is no doubt that the actor *is* the character; Hull informs "us" in her program, and in her opening scene, that, "this is a true story." It is, she tells us, "a humorous and shocking story of Kate the Great's triumphant journey through Canada's psychiatric system."<sup>260</sup> Using a string of skits, songs, clown routines and monologues, Hull performed her one-woman story of madness, institutionalization, escape, and recovery -- on a stage tucked in a corner and meant for a small band, in

front of an audience sitting on bar stools, sipping drinks and smoking cigarettes. The most poignant moments in the performance occurred when Hull “stepped out of her routine” and into the audience. For example, at one point a small tinkling sound was coming from the darkness, caused by a young woman stirring her drink. Hull played with the sound for a number of minutes. She let it irritate her and slowly distract her. Suddenly, she demanded “lights in the house,” walked threateningly toward the young woman, and stared at her until she stopped tinkling – looking for all the world like the mad woman she claimed to be. The make-shift nature of Fringe venues often provide unique opportunities for actors to make contact with the audience – and this can be particularly important for the authenticity of the autobiographical performance. In Hull’s case, she was willing and able to accentuate the truthfulness of her experience with madness by using the irritating and distracting elements of her particular venue environment.

### *No Place Like Home*

He has a benign and cherubic face until he looks up. Then his eyes glitter with intelligent intensity. This is the quality of a true clown, the outside hilarity, the ready laugh and comic faces upheld from inside by the passion of unmistakable tragedy. Jane Casson.<sup>261</sup>

Of course, not all auto-biographical productions use the venues in the same way. Many one-persons shows are remarkably loyal to the imaginary “fourth wall” convention – considering that there is only a single actor and the audience present. While Shane MaCabe’s play, *No Place Like Home*, is also a self-proclaimed “true story” in which the actor *is* the character, MaCabe uses the Fringe venue in a different way. At no time during the performance does he break through the fourth wall.

Nonetheless, *No Place Like Home* is the most moving example of a one-person Fringe play that crosses the boundary between life and art. On an almost bare stage, MaCabe plays out the story of his abused childhood. Using mime, gesture, expressions, and voice, this middle-aged rounding and balding man becomes the 3 year

old that he once was, locked in the closet, or the 7 year old tied up in the attic. He explains, “the impact of my show is that you are experiencing the abuse from the view of a child, and then I come back as an adult and show that it’s still in there, it affects you for the rest of your life.”<sup>262</sup>

In MaCabe’s performance the fourth wall remains firmly intact. He uses the intimacy of the Fringe venue to tear down the boundaries between his audience members:

This show is not just about what is happening on stage. It is about the men crying next to you. It is about the tissues coming out of purses. It is about the gasps, the silences, and all the reactions of the people around you. It melds us together.<sup>263</sup>

Shane MaCabe illustrated some of the more horrific scenes, so that it became an experience for the spectators, and it was this personal happening that made it so powerful.<sup>264</sup>

At the end of each performance, MaCabe leaves the theatre and stands at the front door shaking hands, or giving people a pat on the back, and sometimes hugging.<sup>265</sup> A number of Fringe critics questioned the art/life dichotomy that MaCabe managed to disrupt with his performance:

Is it a play, as opposed to, say, a motivational speech or a therapy session? Certainly the way the Vancouver audience lined-up to shake MaCabe’s hand suggested it might have been closer to a sermon. In truth it’s probably all of these.<sup>266</sup>

Despite the real-life drama I remained curiously detached, and I think the fault lies in the story’s presentation.... The show falls between a fully realized performance by an actor and straight forward revelations from a regular guy. ... Despite its theatrical flaws *No Place Like Home* remains an important and powerful witness, and an event which is very moving to large numbers of people.<sup>267</sup>

The Fringe circuit naturally attracts the one-person travelling production; and, it has also inspired a number of actors to write their own material based on personal experience. There are, however, numerous different categories of this genre; the one-person musical review, the recounting and recasting of an historical character, the “stand-up” comic routine, the lone clown or fool, the street juggler cum actor, the folk, jazz, and “rock n’ roll” singer, the dancer, the performance artist, and the poet have all appeared in numerous and diverse guises and plots, on the Fringe stage.

### *The Fuck Machine*

... this is not exactly a popular view of sexual politics but it is brutally honest and frequently funny. Great performances of a nasty but compelling work. Jo Ledingham.<sup>268</sup>

Wener and company show they have the talent to back up the hype.  
Chris Dafoe<sup>269</sup>

This is the kind of play I go looking for each and every year at the Fringe. The first performance that knocks you square in the face  
...Colin Alcarres.<sup>270</sup>

Perhaps more than any other Fringe company, the Way Off Broadway Group is a company whose work has been shaped by the Fringe (and, no doubt, the Fringe has been shaped by WOB).<sup>271</sup> In terms of content, originality, theatricality, and performance style, WOB has been dedicated to “perfecting” the sell-out touring Fringe hit. Theirs is an interesting history and worth recounting; indeed, one Fringe critic wrote a satirical outline for a Fringe script that chronicled the “Story of the Way Off Broadway Group.”<sup>272</sup>

The company was formed on the Fringe in 1988 when Michael Wener transferred his M.F.A. graduating production of *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* from the University of Victoria to the Vancouver and Victoria Fringes, and sold out every show. The following year, Mike Schaldemose, an actor and designer also from UVic’s theatre department, became Wener’s partner. They began working together with a simple

enough mandate: “to produce scripts with high entertainment value that are choice pieces for actors.”<sup>273</sup> They started modestly, producing well-known short plays for their first two years on the Fringe. In 1991 they extended their reach and produced an original adaptation *Twilight Zone*, and toured the entire circuit. With this work they began to increase their focus. While still thoroughly committed to entertainment value, they began to experiment with the technical limitations of the Fringe and the artistic challenges involved in moving a show from one unknown and sometimes make-shift venue to the next.

After four years on the Fringe, in 1992, WOB created their first cross-country hit show. They adapted the poetry of Charles Bukowski into an hour long dramatic play for two actors; *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions*. This production received, for the most part, glowing reviews from both critics and Fringe audiences. For the 1993 tour they produced two new original shows; *The Fuck Machine*; another adaptation of Bukowski, and *Young Hitler*, an adaptation from a film script, adapted from a novel, written by a friend, Carl Knutson. And once again they filled their venues to capacity across the country.

The titles of these plays are not gratuitous. The plays themselves are equally hard-hitting and disturbing. *The Fuck Machine* can be read as an ironic and disturbingly satiric exposé of the degradation of the patriarchy; and the title as a metaphor for the power of the patriarchy. In the final scene, the self-consuming destruction of power is played out when the anti-hero’s penis is severed by a piece of technology purported to give the best fuck in the world – the fuck machine.

Some of the critics agree with my reading of the play:

... there are shocks aplenty in this adaptation of Charles Bukowski’s material, including a couple of castrations, an incident of necrophilia and several rapes. ... the group plays Bukowski’s bourbon and semen-

soaked tales of drunks, whores and losers as *macho-heterosexual camp*. It works surprisingly well, revealing the dark humor of depressing situations with bracing energy.<sup>274</sup>

And some of the critics disagree:

... good acting can't make the *F\*\*\* Machine* anything other than what it is -- a disturbing, graphic, violent look at the worst humanity has to offer. The premise of the play has modern science switching the brain of Adolph Hitler with that of the president of the United States, at which point the president, trapped in Hitler's body, sinks into depravity in a place one could charitably call a boil on the buttocks of the world. What follows is pathological, scatological, and every other sordid-ogical you can think of. No stone of perversion is left unturned. Sure, this sort of stuff happens, but it begs the question, "So what?" Is there a point to leafing through the dictionary of depravity on stage?<sup>275</sup>

And some critics did not know what to think:

Some have called it [*Fuck Machine*] a gripping and socially accurate (if disturbing) study: thumbs up. Others have called it compost and implied that Wener et al should be bound by the thumbs in some public place until the urge to shock and appall is driven out of them by the first frost.<sup>276</sup>

Wener and Schaldemose have developed an extremely successful working relationship that they say was forged on the Fringe. When they create and structure their material they think about each element of Fringe performance in synthesis: design, acting, transitions, music, dialogue, audience and meaning. The result of this synthesis is a quality of work that is extremely tightly paced, highly theatrical, and often stylized. They are also always thinking about the limitations (and possible innovations) that are inherent to the Fringe production structure. The process of developing work within these limitations, and then touring that work across the country, have resulted in a distinctive theatrical style. It is bold and extreme, it is bare "black-box" theatre with

dramatic and original underscoring, a hissing fog machine and thin swaths of deep blues, electric purples, and eerie greens boldly illuminating bits of the dark – literally and metaphorically.

The travelling fringe artists, their production strategies, and the work they have created in the past decade, deserve further attention. Chapter 5 deals more with the nature of Fringe companies.

### **Conclusions:**

I suggested in the previous chapter that the festivity on the Edmonton Fringe was a unique experience for theatre-goers that stimulated discussion and debates, which, in turn, encouraged people to attend more plays and bring their friends. However, too many of the Fringes lack any real sense of festivity for this to explain the enthusiasm among Fringe audiences across the country. The ticket prices help to attract the large numbers of young people, as does the diversity of productions provide for a large audience appeal. More significant, I think, is that hand in hand with self-producing artists comes a type of theatre that is distinctly rooted in its community. Each year, on average, 60% to 80% of Fringe productions are original works. By virtue of being original they are typically (not that one can rightly typify a Fringe play) topical, and concerned with issues and experiences that are immediately relevant to large numbers of people.

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### **Journal Excerpts**

**30 May 1992, Victoria:** Phyllis has injured her leg. Rehearsals will be restricted – no weight for a week. Morningside Interview: 6:00 a.m. at the C.B.C. studio in the parliament buildings. Poster and Handbills designed – title: *Death in the Doll's House*.

**10 July Vancouver:** On our way -- in a van that over-heated before we reached the Victoria Ferry terminal and broke down on the road into Vancouver.

**12 July Saratoga:** Lyle had to replace our thermostat and shocks in Vancouver. Ian decided to bring his motorcycle -- so I guess we are a caravan -- of sorts.

**13 July Revelstoke:** Broken down again -- replaced the battery and something else. And this is the van my supervisor donated -- for 2 grand?!?

**19 July: Winnipeg.** We, all 5 of us, are billeted in a basement with one bedroom, a tiny kitchen and living area -- and one bathroom. There are only 3 beds, counting the couch. And, it is a 20 minute drive from the Fringe site. Good thing Ian brought his bike, I think; I hope.

**20 July:** tech rehearsal -- is that what that was?

**21 July:** Opening afternoon: I forget my Q-sheets and the tech could not find the copy I gave him yesterday. He didn't seem concerned. He said, "don't worry, we'll wing it," as he opened another beer. I said, "but, we have 46 Q's, not counting the sound. He put down his beer and said "why so many?"

**22 July:** We meet at 2 'o'clock and rehearse/re-work till 6 -- in the lobby of the Manitoba Theatre Centre. It's a big lobby and there are at least 10 other groups doing the same thing -- re-rehearse/work/arranging.

**23 July:** A review... not bad, not good, kinda smart ass. We rehearsed in the park today. Wener helped out -- he worked with Phylis on her pacing.

**26 July:** It's over, for us. Too tired -- dazed? --to write.

**27 July:** I got lost in the crowd tonight. After a hellish week of mishaps and endless unexpected problems, it is ecstasy to just follow the flow of people, disappearing into a mass of autonomy.

I linger back-stage of the out-door stage, and in a moment, my frustrations melt away. I am looking out over a sea of laughing, smiling faces, and feeling the sense of shared satisfaction that applauding can bring. "Loose Change" (a country/folk/ballad/ comedy/ a cappella/ 4-man singing troupe from Winnipeg) is performing. It is closing night, and for me the curtain is coming down on the most strenuous week of training I have experienced. There is something about this crowd of people --

sitting under the stars, eager to keep the moment happening, to keep the event going -- to remain suspended, together -- something that relieves me of private distress.

**29 July:** Before leaving town, I wander through the Fringe site. It is transformed. I suppose it has become what it was before the festival. Only the grass is more downtrodden and the garbage pails surrounding the park are over-full. There is a group of bedraggled and I suspect homeless people sitting under one of the remaining decorative awnings. They have found some Beer-tent chairs and are huddled together out of the rain. It's 8:00 a.m. They appear to be enjoying some unusual luxury. Is it the awning? The chairs? The surplus of empties that can be returned for cash? Or perhaps they are celebrating the return of their space.

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<sup>142</sup> Brain Paisley, qtd in Randy Smith, *Personal Notes Victoria : Intrepid Theatre Office* 1987.

<sup>143</sup> The Halifax Fringe is not a part of the circuit because it is held at the same time as the Edmonton Fringe. Other Fringes have emerged in smaller cities across the country: Kingston Ontario (1990), Prince George B.C. (1990), Manotick (1991- just outside Ottawa), Duncan B.C. (1992), and Kelowna B.C. (1993). As well, Orlando Florida (1992), and Minneapolis (1994), have both produced Fringe festivals modeled on the Canadian festivals. These "other" Fringes are not a part of my discussions for a number of reasons. One is practical; when I began my research there were only three festivals, as the circuit grew so too did the scope of research. Accordingly, I began to focus only on the festivals that were scheduled to be a part of the circuit. Today, this would include the American Fringes; some of the Eastern-based Fringe companies begin their tour in Orlando in April, and some of the circuiting companies play Minneapolis instead of Toronto.

<sup>144</sup> The growth of the festival began to level off in 1994 when approximately 500 productions were performed for a total audience of approximately 440,000 people.

<sup>145</sup> In 1991, the Vancouver festival began to surcharge the artists \$1.00 per ticket sold.

<sup>146</sup> The program for the inaugural Vancouver Fringe festival does not note the origins of the producing companies.

<sup>147</sup> The Three Dead Trolls from Edmonton, Sensible Footwear and Anna Barry from England, Way Off Broadway Group from Vancouver, and Threshold Theatre from Kingston Ontario.

<sup>148</sup> I say "at least" because like other inaugural Fringe programs, the Saskatoon program does not identify where the origins of the companies -- but I recognize the 12 that I mention.

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<sup>149</sup> Public funding came from : Federal Job Development Grants, Student Employment Grants, Section 25 Employment Grants, Municipal or Provincial Arts councils, the Federal Department of Communications Cultural Projects Grants, Canada Council Explorations Program, corporate sponsors and fundraising events.

<sup>150</sup> Standard practice requires 20% of a production budget for promotion.

<sup>151</sup> Jan Kaplan, "Festival's wide-open aesthetic sparks a hotbed of theatre sensations" Now [Toronto] 27 June 1991: 28.

<sup>152</sup> The inaugural Vancouver Fringe offered a box office split in return for venue rental : The venue received 10%, the Fringe received 10%, and the artists received 80 % of the box office.

<sup>153</sup> Canada Council: Explorations program -- \$6000. City of Vancouver \$1000. Application fees \$4000. Sponsorship in kind \$38,000. Sponsorship in kind includes numerous items and services: printing, promotion, equipment, facilities.

<sup>154</sup> Joanna Maratta, Interview, 1991.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> In 1985 the Edmonton Fringe was a 9 stage event with 97 companies and 31 thousand tickets purchased.

<sup>157</sup> Maratta, Interview.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Maratta, Interview, 1992. She explains that "this decision was based on two principles: "safety in numbers" and "accommodating our own constituency." That "constituency" was unique to Vancouver's theatre community; it consisted of a proportionally large number of performance artists. Indeed, the first Vancouver Fringe was called a "Theatre and Performance Art Festival".

<sup>160</sup> Moira Day, "The Edmonton Fringe Festival: Home on the Fringe," Canadian Theatre Review (CTR) 45 (1985).

<sup>161</sup> "Vancouver Fringe springs surprises," Globe and Mail [Toronto] 5 Sept 1987: A16.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Paisley, Interview, 1991,

<sup>164</sup> Maratta, interview, 1991.

<sup>165</sup> Qtd. in TheatreSpace, Five Years of the Fringe. A Retrospective, TheatreSpace Vancouver (1989).

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Intrepid began producing theatre events with a \$62,000 Federal Job Development project grant. In the fall of 1986 Intrepid produced an inaugural 'Veteran's Tour', travelling with two shows to the various veteran's groups in the region.

<sup>170</sup> Randy Smith, Personal Notes, March 1987: Intrepid Theatre Office Victoria.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Qtd. in Smith, Personal Notes.

<sup>173</sup> Qtd. in Edmonton Sun 16 Aug. 1985.

<sup>174</sup> Brian Paisley, qtd. in Smith, Personal Notes.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Smith Interview, 1989.

<sup>178</sup> Unfortunately, September is a windy month in Victoria and there were not many local street performers. While the first Fringe had a beer tent it was simply too cool to attract large groups of people, and the open outdoor stage likewise did not attract many performers.

<sup>179</sup> Wendy Peters, Interview, 1989.

<sup>180</sup> Michael Reid, "Festival is like a bohemian Expo '86," Times Colonist [Victoria] 28 Sept. 1987.

<sup>181</sup> Smith, Interview.

<sup>182</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>183</sup> Because the Winnipeg Fringe is produced by Manitoba Theatre Centre, with its established administrative structure, information on the inaugural budget is more precise and readily available. The Fringe received \$13,000 from the municipality of Winnipeg, \$100,000 from the Province of Manitoba, \$10,000 from the Department of Communications, \$3981 from the Federal Job Development funds, \$6,312.00 in corporate sponsorship. Revenues, including artists fees, program sales, etc. totaled \$34,021. These numbers were provided by Craig Walls, Winnipeg Fringe Producer 1994.

<sup>184</sup> Interview, 1991.

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<sup>185</sup> Colin Jackson, Interview, 1991.

<sup>186</sup> John Hirsh, qtd. in Manitoba Theatre Centre, 34th. Season Annual Report, (Manitoba Theatre Centre Winnipeg n.d.) Cover page. "The Manitoba Theatre Centre exists to celebrate the widest spectrum of theatre art, and to set the standards by which theatre is measured. Deeply rooted in the province of Manitoba, which gave it life and provides for its growth, MTC aspires to both reflect and inform the community it serves."

<sup>187</sup> Rick McNair, Interview, 1992.

<sup>188</sup> Larry Desrochers, Interview, 1991.

<sup>189</sup> McNair, Interview.

<sup>190</sup> Desrochers, Interview.

<sup>191</sup> It is worth noting that a Manitoba Arts grant was awarded for this study trip to Edmonton -- another indication of the advantages of the "MTC connection".

<sup>192</sup> Winnipeg Core Area Initiative (CAI), Selected Working Papers 1981 : 7. The development project began in 1985 and was initiated under the name "The Core Area Initiative": "...the centre of Winnipeg must have a unique, attractive and identifiable character to remain socially and economically vital. The accommodation of arts related facilities within the downtown... will provide an ambiance and vitality to the Core which at present is marginal at best."

<sup>193</sup> Desrochers, Interview. The following un-cited quotes are from the same interview.

<sup>194</sup> Winnipeg Fringe Program, 1990: 3. "The Fringe kicks off and kicks up with an all-you-can-eat Pancake Breakfast and Polka Party."

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Chris Johnson, Interview, 1991.

<sup>197</sup> Chris Johnson, "Turning and Turning in the Widening Fringe" Border Crossings

<sup>198</sup> Per Bask, Interview, 1991.

<sup>199</sup> Gregory Nixon, Interview, 1991. The following un-cited quotes are from the same interview.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> According to the Toronto Theatre Alliance, the classification for a small theatre is a not-for-profit company with a budget under \$250,000 (1991).

<sup>202</sup> Paul Leonard, Director of Projects and Promotion for the Toronto Theatre Alliance, Interview,

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1991. Toronto small theatres were also experiencing a funding crisis. Paul Leonard explained: “The way the industry operates has not been reflected by the way the granting agencies operate. The theory is that small companies will operate on a project-to-project grant basis for a couple of years, then once established they receive operating support. But, the number of companies is increasing much more quickly than the amount of money. Which, in fact, has been decreasing. So there is a bottleneck in which dozens and dozens of companies are stuck.”

<sup>203</sup> Nixon, Interview.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Paul Leonard, Interview, 1991.

<sup>206</sup> Ray Conlogue, Interview, 1991.

<sup>207</sup> Mira Friedlander, Interview, 1991.

<sup>208</sup> Robert Crew, Interview, 1991.

<sup>209</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Don Kerr, Oxford C. 573.

<sup>212</sup> In 1982 the entire board of directors resigned. From 1981 to 1983 the company worked with a collaboration of three directors: Layne Coleman, Linda Griffiths, and A.D. Tahn. A year later, Gordon McCall took over the position of artistic director -- only to resign within the year.

<sup>213</sup> Tom Bentley-Fisher, Interview, 1991. The following un-cited quotes are from the same interview

<sup>214</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>215</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>216</sup> Qtd in Cam Fuller, “For-the-people festival not theatre for the elite,” Star Phoenix [Saskatoon] 27 July 1991: A4.

<sup>217</sup> Interview, 1991

<sup>218</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>219</sup> Kris Kieren and Nick Morra, “1991 Annual Festival Report,” Eringe Montreal. Printed by Kris Kieren and Nick Morra 1991: n.p.

<sup>220</sup> Interview, Montreal, 1991. The following un-cited quotes come from the same interview.

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<sup>221</sup> In 1994, 10 out of 45 companies were francophone, and most of these were local groups.

<sup>222</sup> Quebec Drama Federation, Quebec Drama Federation Study on the Conditions and Prospects for the Development of English-Language Theatre in Quebec 1, Montreal, May 1991: iii..

<sup>223</sup> Qtd in "1991 Annual Festival Report", Fringe Montreal, n.d., n.p.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.* 73.

<sup>225</sup> "It is evident ... that the public at large is reasonably satisfied with the product being presented to them. However, it should be noted that many commented on the fact that French productions are more experimental, more innovative, better quality and more emotional and expressive. [Whereas English theatre is] too conventional, not enough variety, not enough of English theatre, and lack[ing in] quality. *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> Marriane Ackerman, Interview, 1991.

<sup>227</sup> Michel Vias, Interview, 1991.

<sup>228</sup> Coralie Duchesne, Interview, 1991.

<sup>229</sup> Steve Galuccio, Interview, 1991.

<sup>230</sup> Michel Vias, Interview.

<sup>231</sup> Erika Courvoisier, Interview, 1991.

<sup>232</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>233</sup> Interview, 1994.

<sup>234</sup> Qtd. in Chris Dafoe, Globe and Mail [Toronto] 20 Aug. 1994.

<sup>235</sup> Interview, Victoria, 1989.

<sup>236</sup> Qtd in Cam Fuller, "Bigger not better for Fringe," Star Phoenix [Saskatoon] 31 July 1992: A2.

<sup>237</sup> Interview, 1994..

<sup>238</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>239</sup> Beginning with the Street Troupes, these are Charlie Brown from San Francisco, the Checkerboard Guy from Vancouver, The Flaming Idiots from Texas, Flying' Bob Debris from Saskatoon, Mr. Magik from Seattle, Sak Theatre from Orlando Florida. The theatre companies: Anna Barry from London England, Real Canadian Mounted Productions from Victoria, English Suitcase from London England, The Way Off Broadway Group from Vancouver, Bob Bossin from Vancouver,

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Sensible Footwear from London England, Doug Curtis from Calgary, The Curtain Razors from Regina, Dark Underbelly Productions from Edmonton, Igroky theatre from Moscow, Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie from Edmonton, Kate Hull from Edmonton, Foresight Theatre from Wolverhampton, England, Atomic Improv from Edmonton, The Juanabees from Victoria, Mump and Smoot from Toronto, One World Theatre from Seattle, English Madhatters, from London England.

<sup>240</sup> Judy Lawrence, Interview 1992.

<sup>241</sup> Each year a number of artists from different companies and countries improvise a classic. For example, I witnessed the 1991 'improv' of *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, and in 1994, *The Wizard of Oz*. These events are held in the park after dark and attract at least 2000 people. The marvelous thing about these ceremonies is that so many people, artists and audience, are included in a remarkably spontaneous performance. The preparation time is minimal – typically about 5 days before closing night people will begin to gather in the Beer Tents to select and cast the closing show.

<sup>242</sup> In 1989 and 1990 they co-created and produced with Sak theatre, from Orlando Florida, (*The Big OL' Happy Sak/Troll Show* and *Redboy and The Tundra Gators*), and in 1991 they co-created and produced with English Suitcase, from London England (*Justified Sinner*).

<sup>243</sup> An excellent example of this is found in the growth of companies from Britain. English Suitcase toured the Western Fringe circuit from 1989 to 1994. The company has 2 permanent artistic directors: Kevin Hosier and Kevin Williamson. In 1989 they toured *Christie in Love* (by Howard Brenton) and *Dr. Faustus* with Leon Donnelly, also from London. Leon later went on to form a Fringe company with Ron Jenkins from Winnipeg, Skid Theatre (*Eureka* 1991). In 1990 English Suitcase toured with a production of *Billy Budd* (adapted from Herman Merville's novel) with Ben Duddley, also from London – the following year Duddley formed Incunabula theatre and toured the entire Fringe circuit with *Crystal Clear*. The two actors who starred in this production, Diana Dent and Mary Harvey, returned to Canada the following year, 1992, and toured the Winnipeg West circuit with their own company, English Madhatters (*Waiting for Othello*). Meanwhile, in 1991 English Suitcase toured with 4 actors playing *Macbeth*, with Deva Palmier cast as Lady Macbeth. And, once again, the following year she returned with a new company, English Greenfields, and produced *Happy Jack* (by John Godber, chronicler of the English working classes) with Bill Rodgers on the Western circuit. The following year, Rodgers returned with his own company's production of *Scrap* – a one-man show.

<sup>244</sup> Neither the trip to Moscow, the collaboration, nor the final production have received good reviews -- not from anyone involved. Kevin Hosier, director/actor with English Suitcase, described the experience as "by turns exhilarating and hellish. ... [we] ran into a hierarchical Russian system where the director is boss. We rowed a lot. We rowed a lot" [Qtd. in Cam Fuller, "Hopes High on Fringe being creative catalyst." *Star Phoenix* [Saskatoon] 31 July 1992 : A2. Leon Donnelly was badly

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beaten one night when he wandered into a "Mafia bar" -- and he describes spending a great deal of time "just standing in lines trying to get enough food for the day. [Interview with author, Victoria, 1993]. Colin Thomas, one of the most respected Fringe critics, was not impressed: "On paper, this collaboration among American, Russian, Canadian, and British companies must have looked promising. In the theatre, this turkey is big enough to feed us for many a holiday to come." Georgia Straight [Vancouver] 18 - 25 Sept. 1992 : 26.

<sup>245</sup> Rod Campbell, Edmonton Journal, 21 Aug. 1989: A7.

<sup>246</sup> Kathryn Fowler, Western Living Magazine, Edmonton, Jan. 1990.

<sup>247</sup> Roger Davies, C.B.C. radio, Edmonton, Thur. 18 Aug. 1988. Qtd in Three Dead Trolls Press Release, 1989.

<sup>248</sup> Neil Watson, Edmonton Sun 18 Jan. 1990.

<sup>249</sup> "Pink Smoke in the Vatican" Edmonton Journal: Fringe Journal 25 Aug. 1991: T3

<sup>250</sup> "Female themes riveting drama," Edmonton Journal 19 Aug. 1992 : E5. Re: Foresight Theatre's production of *Shoot the Women First*.

<sup>251</sup> Mark Horton, "The Edmonton Fringe Journal", supplementary to the Edmonton Journal 19 Aug. 1992: 2.

<sup>252</sup> Company member paraphrased but not identified in Kevin Prokosh, Winnipeg Free Press 19 July 1992: B17.

<sup>253</sup> "Riveting Drama," Edmonton Journal 19 Aug. 1992: E5. Re: Sensible Footwear.

<sup>254</sup> Sensible Footwear program notes, *Spit it Out*: "Victoria Fringe Schedule," Monday Magazine Sept. 1990.

<sup>255</sup> Katherine Way qtd in Sensible Footwear press release, 1990.

<sup>256</sup> "Fringe ads daring, innovative," Star Phoenix [Saskatoon] 2 Aug. 1991: 3.

<sup>257</sup> Daniel Nemiroff, Interview, 1991.

<sup>258</sup> "Black Ice a slippery but solid presentation," Toronto Star 2 July 1991: F7.

<sup>259</sup> Qtd. in Michael D. Reid, "They're angry. They're funny. They're women : Fringe festival circuit provides showcase for kinder, gentler sex," Times Colonist [Victoria] 29 Sept. 1991: A14.

<sup>260</sup> Qtd. in X Marks the Spot: The Edmonton Fringe Program. Chinook Theatre 17-25 Aug. 199: 90.

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<sup>261</sup> "Fringe play explores actor's battered childhood," Saskatoon Mirror 27 July 1990 : n.p.

<sup>262</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Jane Casson, "Views and Reviews," Saskatoon Mirror 10 Aug. 1990: n.p.

<sup>265</sup> MaCabe has often produced this piece for crisis centres, social workers, educators, and other groups that work with child abusers and the abused. He travels with pamphlets and explained to me that he would normally speak and address questions after a performance; but "unfortunately", the Fringe "turn-around" time does not allow this type of activity between shows.

<sup>266</sup> Colin Thompson, Georgia Straight [Vancouver] 14 Sept. 1990

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> "Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions" Georgia Straight [Vancouver] 18-25 Sept. 1992: 26.

<sup>269</sup> "Rex the Wonderfringe shows winning form," Globe & Mail [Toronto] 17 Aug. 1993: A11.

<sup>270</sup> "Erections Ejaculations, Exhibitions," Stage Magazine 8 Sept. - 2 Oct. 1992: 7.

<sup>271</sup> In 1994 Wener and Schaldemose presented a workshop on "How to produce for the Fringe" at the Victoria Fringe festival. They discussed stage and technical limitations: turn around time, variations in venues and technical crew across the circuit, and how to design and structure a production that uses these limitations to its advantage. For example, how to create an exciting lighting design that only needs 12 instruments and that can be re-designed for each venue.

<sup>272</sup> The "treatment" ends with : "Wener and Schaldemose are visited by the Ghost of Fringe Future, who introduces them to themselves as 45-year old men, unattached, still hanging out in buses and hotels and Beer Tents. ..." Bruce Grierson, MONDAY Magazine [Victoria] 2-8 Sept. 1993: 17.

<sup>273</sup> Michael Wener, Interview, 1989.

<sup>274</sup> Chris Dafoe, "All fringe, no frills ; festival keeps to the edge," Globe & Mail [Toronto] 18 Sept. 1993: C5 ( italics mine).

<sup>275</sup> Jeff Bell, Times Colonist [Victoria] 29 Aug. 1993: A7.

<sup>276</sup> Bruce Grierson, MONDAY Magazine [Victoria] 26 Aug. 1993: 18.

### **Chapter Four: The Fringe Production Model**

It's legend now, Edmonton, 1982. The Summerfest organizers are in a panic. They're long on funds and short on ideas for a summer theatre event to replace Northern Lights Theatre's *Shakespeare in the Park* series. As Paisley looks around Old Strathcona's vacant storefronts, it hits him: You could do theatre here. And over there. And across the street in that building. ... He rushes to his typewriter and hammers out a half-page proposal. The premise is simple: *We'll set up some spaces, hire some technicians, and invite everybody to put on a show.* He submits his proposal and Summerfest buys it. For 50 grand. Looking back Paisley remembers laughing when he told friends in the theatre community: "*We've got money!* I literally called people I knew in theatre and told them to tell their friends. The response was overwhelming. I expected 15 to 20 shows," said Paisley. "I got 45." Carl Shaben.<sup>277</sup>

"We've got money; we'll set up some spaces, hire some technicians, and invite everybody to put on a show" -- this aptly expresses the simplicity of the mechanics and philosophy behind the first Fringe production structure. Five years later, Paisley articulated more precise relationships between the production structure and the Fringe philosophy:

By not choosing the plays and tightly controlling the time and equipment available to the artists, the Fringe attempts to force theatre back to the *basics* of script, actors, imagination, innovation and sheer energy. ... to create an environment conducive to high-risk, experimental drama. ... to provide a once-in-the-year opportunity for performing artists to meet their audience without the usual inhibitions associated with the more *formal* theatre.<sup>278</sup>

The philosophical tenets of the Fringe phenomenon evolved with the festival. When Paisley decided to use the entire \$50,000 grant to equip 5 venues and invite 47 companies, he created the absolute minimum structure for production. All of the other responsibilities he gave to the artists. The limitation of resources and the amount of

responsibility given to the artists are the key aspects of the production structure that shaped and nurtured the beginnings of the Fringe philosophy. As the festivals grew, production strategies became more complex and administration increased – and so too did the relationship between the production structure, audience behaviour, and artistic choices; audience behaviour came to be incorporated into the philosophical tenets behind the development of the Fringe model and the art of Fringing. Fueled by the chaotic energy and activities of the numerous companies and audiences involved over the years, the Fringe model has evolved into its present shape.

Many of the more intriguing elements of the festival production strategies are conceptual. They aim at creating types of behaviour by stimulating risk-taking among artists and audience, and shaping an environment that invites spontaneity and chaos. In an effort to “order chaos,” I utilize a categorical approach to illustrate these less tangible aspects of Fringe production; I break the model down into a number of components concerned with practicalities and focus on describing the logistics of the Fringe model, and the relationships between the development of that model, the Fringe philosophy, and the development of Fringe theatre.

### **Financing the Festivals:**

It is worth remembering that in order for the Fringe to show a profit (albeit, probably a small one) the nine-day event needs artistically successful and popular shows, large numbers of thirsty audience members, no major news stories occurring other than the normal summer political debates, tolerant fire, health, safety, and liquor control board officials, and of course, warm sunny weather .... All easily controllable factors in a delicately balanced budget! Brian Paisley.<sup>279</sup>

Finances have always put the Fringe on precarious turf. Kristin Morra [sic] figures that the various levels of government have contributed only about \$42,000 to the festival over five years [1995]. This year, the Fringe is getting squat. Not one cent from any level of government. Kristin Morra is mystified. ... Morra is especially miffed because the Fringe has given back \$145,000 to the artists over the last four years. ... [and] “most important, we’ve never had a deficit. We’ve proved ourselves,” Morra says. Bill Brownstein.<sup>280</sup>

In the early 1980s, when the Fringe was relatively small and rooted in the local community, it inspired a great deal of supportive enthusiasm. Both labour and equipment were donated; technicians worked extremely long hours and did not request extra pay, staff worked for whatever salary was available, and venue owners charged a minimal rent, or donated space. As audience numbers doubled in the second year, and then doubled again and again in the third and fourth year, community support also increased.

While the unusual and unruly character of the Fringe can be a hindrance to acquiring traditional forms of government arts funding, there are other sources of public funding available:

Producing the Fringe puts Chinook Theatre in a rather select position among Canadian professional theatre organizations. Because of the variety of entertainment and artists attracted to the festival many government sources of sponsorship can be tapped which would not normally be open to most theatres running only a regular season of plays.<sup>281</sup>

These sources include summer employment grants, touring subsidies and assistance for individual artistic disciplines, provincial and municipal tourism grants, funding for urban renewal projects, and job development programs. The Department of Communications (DOC) has also been a substantial source of funding through the Cultural Initiatives Program. However, as Paisley has noted, DOC funding “must be calculated with some trepidation since year to year security for such assistance seems extremely difficult to guarantee.”

In 1987, Paisley suggested that corporate and private sponsors represented the greatest potential for increasing revenue for two reasons: “the broad demographics of the audience and the high local, regional, and national media profile of the Fringe.” Local breweries, printing companies and the media are typically mainstay corporate

sponsors for each of the Fringes. The festivals in Edmonton, Winnipeg, and Vancouver have attracted the largest corporate sponsors, including Air Canada and Pepsi. It is important to note that the Fringes are dependent on corporate funding for more than financial assistance; government granting agencies fund the Fringe with the understanding that they are *partners* in support. Corporate sponsorship is measured as community support, and accordingly government funding is contingent upon corporate sponsorship. The same principle works among the three levels of government granting agencies; each requires that funding be provided from all three.

Income generated by the Fringe has come in various forms over the years. The major source is the artists' application fees. In Edmonton, Montreal, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg, beer sales provide a substantial amount of revenue. As Paisley puts it, "beer is the fuel of the Fringe; the sale of beer accounts for 20 - 25% of the festival revenues." Advertising in the programs and the programs themselves are sources of income for most of the Fringes. Edmonton and Winnipeg charge a fee for food vendors and arts and craft sales on site. Victoria sells Fringe buttons for \$2.00, which are a required one time purchase prior to buying a theatre ticket. Vancouver charges a \$1.00 surcharge on every ticket, and most of the Fringes sell T-shirts, plastic beer mugs and coffee cups. A surcharge on advance tickets is a relatively new source of income for the Edmonton, Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Victoria Fringes.

At the annual Producer's conferences, sources of funding and income are invariably on the agenda. An overview of these discussions from the 1990 conference indicates the instability of most funding sources and the variability of funding and income across the Fringes:

**Victoria:** Randy Smith: We lost our Federal Job Development grant this year because it is designed to assist new projects and we are no longer considered a new project. This was unexpected, we expected \$50,000. We cut our staff from 9 to 5 and put together our first

presentation for fund-raising in the corporate and government sectors. We raised \$66,000 in sponsorship; that is up from \$41,000 last year. And, we introduced buttons for sale, \$2.00 each, as a required one time purchase for each audience member. We sold about 4500 of these. This is a good way to count audience numbers [the 1990 Victoria Fringe sold 10,500 tickets]. We are expecting to receive our charity status and begin receiving some casino moneys.

**Vancouver:** Joanna Maratta: Last year we had our first deficit: \$30,000. This year we consolidated. We eliminated the first 2 time slots of the day, so we start at 4 o'clock instead of noon. We dropped 2 venues and over 100 performances. We also introduced an advance ticket office with a surcharge of \$2.00 on each ticket. ... In Vancouver we can not sell the program because there is no tradition of selling programs here. They tried it at the film festival and people were very irate.

**Edmonton:** Judy Lawrence: We earned \$40,000 in program sales. We also sold buttons as part of a sponsorship in conjunction with Edmonton Transit. The temperatures were way down this year, and that means our beer sales were also down. We introduced mulled wine into the beer tents and this helped. Advance ticket sales were up 111% from 1989. We operate with the inversion of subscription theory and surcharge advance tickets. We have been talking about charging a fee to the "roaming buskers" as well, as much to keep track of them, and possibly limit their numbers. We had 1000 volunteers. Their worth in dollar value is greater than our entire budget.

**Saskatoon:** Tom Bentley-Fisher: We began with a partnership with the local merchant's association, and the Fringe was extremely successful for these people. The Pizza parlor set up in their parking lot apparently took in \$15,000 in profits during the festival. But now we have a problem, the merchants want more control; they want to see the Fringe grow as fast as possible. Unfortunately they have adopted an exploitive attitude. We are saying no – that might mean having to say no to the partnership we've formed, and the financial assistance.

**Winnipeg:** Larry Desrochers: We have the opposite problem from Saskatoon: it is very difficult to get local merchants to help or sponsor. They take the attitude; ‘why advertise if we don’t have to,’ the business is going to come their way during the Fringe anyway. Being a part of MTC works for and against us. The spaces they provide and the support administration would cost us \$44,000 dollars to replace. The Fringe is going to become a department of MTC’s theatre organization. The budget has been presented to the board, but now we will be part of the “global” budget, not separated. This way, MTC staff can work the Fringe budget into its whole budget, and as a result, “Fringe” deficits cannot happen.

**Toronto:** Gregory Nixon: This year we charged an application fee and returned 100% of the box-office to the artists. The city provides 90% of our funding and this presents us with a problem in terms of serving the local constituency. The demand in Toronto is so great that we have not been able to accommodate the national and international companies as much as we would like.<sup>282</sup>

In 1992 the Winnipeg Fringe lost a substantial amount of provincial funding: \$65,000. The situation appeared more serious than in past years; there was nevertheless a strong sense of confidence at the Producer’s conference. The mood was playful as people “threw around ideas” for increasing sponsorship and Fringe generated revenues. The following transcript provides an insight into the atmosphere at these conferences. The conversation should be understood as a “warm-up” for serious thinking about innovative ways to generate income via the festivals:

**Winnipeg,** Craig Walls: The basic reality is we can expect less money from our government sources. So, Winnipeg is going to sell popcorn on site.

**Toronto,** Greg Nixon: We could sell lemonade -- have lemonade stands at the venues with donation boxes.

Walls: What about a '300 chair' game of musical chairs, at a buck a chair?

Orlando, Terry Olson: I don't know if this would work in Canada, but in Orlando we sell drugs.<sup>283</sup>

### **Administering the Fringe:**

The administrative systems ... have often been created *in reaction to* needs and pressures, rather than by the more traditional professional arts method of calculated foresight and educated guess work.... Luck and fast policy adaptations to rapidly expanding situations and circumstances have been the norm since the festival's creation in 1982. Brain Paisley<sup>284</sup>

The present administrative structure of the Edmonton Fringe was created through an experimental process of crisis and innovation. Discovering how theatre can be produced with the absolute minimum of resources is the essential nature of the experiment; the limitation of resources has consistently created crises demanding innovative solutions.

For each inaugural Fringe the producer has made all of the key decisions related to every aspect of the festival. Paisley explains that, "in a small scale operation such omnipotent control is not only possible but, often desirable."<sup>285</sup> This allows the producer to act quickly and to be remarkably flexible. Paisley's notion of omnipotent control on the Edmonton Fringe presents an outstanding irony. There are so many people involved in the festival, and so much activity happening simultaneously, with so few administrative policies and personnel, that in fact, no one is in control. What the producer enjoys is the ability to respond to immediate demands without consensus or policy restrictions.

In 1987, Paisley conceded to necessity and created a more typical administrative body. The final practical shape of production decisions and procedures were assigned to a General Manager and Production Manager. Volunteers remain the core of the

Edmonton Fringe personnel; this is true of every Fringe. In Edmonton there are now over 1000 volunteers. Many of these people are veterans who schedule their annual holidays to work the Fringe. They are a spirited community with a great sense of pride in the Fringe.<sup>286</sup>

Today, each Fringe operates with at least a technical director and a production manager, and most of the festivals maintain year-round staff positions.<sup>287</sup> With the practicalities and structural policies in the hands of managers, the producers concentrate on scheduling and promoting the event and “maintaining the integrity of the Fringe both philosophically and practically.”<sup>288</sup>

### **Programming:**

Most theatre festivals operate under the thematic guidelines established by an Artistic Director, who then proceeds to choose productions that adhere to or somehow reflect this theme.... The Fringe producer is in a slightly different position. Since the Fringe is a festival and all artists must apply to be included, there can be no artistic selection of shows. “The Manual.”<sup>289</sup>

In one big, hot explosion; local practitioners are forced to grow. The Fringe is not just a bunch of plays, it's a Roman Forum -- a meeting place of ideas, styles and theatrical languages and dialects. The spectator, like the artist, can pick and choose, or plunge. Either way, you can hardly escape innovation. Gaetan Charlebois.<sup>290</sup>

For the artist, the application process requires a fee (between \$350 in Montreal and \$550 in Vancouver [1994]) and basic information about the company and production, such as a title for the show, running time, and contact numbers. For some companies choosing a title is the first step in the process of creating their material. In other cases, mailing off the application marks the beginnings of a new company, or a collection of seasoned professionals working together on a one-time Fringe project.

Scheduling, which includes assigning venues and performance times to the individual companies, is the only form of programming. However, as discussed, the

first-come first- served application process is not so “pure” as to exclude producers from “encouraging” particular artists to apply:

The producer can provide artistic credibility and leadership by encouraging specific artists to apply to take part in the Fringe. Obviously it is to every one’s benefit to attract the most exciting professional artists possible to the festival and it is the Producer’s responsibility, not to select particular shows, but to seek out and encourage such artists whenever and wherever he [she] can ... <sup>291</sup>

Encouraging artists to apply to the Fringe is one of the few areas in which a producer can implement artistic decisions. In the early years, this was the only means of attracting international and national companies:

At the beginning I didn’t think that the Fringe could or should live on its local energy alone. The international component was particularly important to me because we were far too insular. Our concern in the 1970s for creating and producing *Canadian* theatre had left us in a void.<sup>292</sup>

The quest for an international component of the Fringe has been achieved; international companies consistently represent at least 20% of Fringe productions at each festival.<sup>293</sup>

Today, Fringe artists are particularly sensitive about the producers demonstrating extra encouragement or special consideration for particular companies. The integrity of the policy became a sensitive issue with the growth of the festivals. As the circuit grew, and the numbers of artists applying also grew substantially, quotas became necessary for the application process.<sup>294</sup> The increasing problems with the demand for production spaces, and how each Fringe determined their quota, was first discussed among the producers at the 1991 conference. Nixon described people lining up outside his office in the morning. There were more than 400 requests for the 60 available places. The Edmonton and Winnipeg Fringes were experiencing the same

overwhelming rush for applications. All of the Fringes were receiving considerably more applications than they could accommodate.

Because the festivals are, ideally, “artists owned and generated,” the Fringe producers feel an unusual amount of pressure from the artists. At the 1992 conference Judy Lawrence described a situation in which the same person applied to the Fringe for a number of years, and was not once accepted. In his frustration he told Lawrence “he has evidence to prove that the first come first served policy is, as he said, ‘a set-up’.”<sup>25</sup> Nixon talked about receiving hate mail from people who were convinced that the Toronto Fringe “cheats”: people are so desperate for what the Fringe offers that the situation is getting very nasty.”<sup>26</sup> Maratta raised the issue of waiting lists. A discussion around the table reached the consensus that each Fringe needed to be “more public” and “informative” about how they determine quotas and waiting lists; as the general manager of the Vancouver Fringe put it, “the issue is not one of principle, but rather whether our policies are public or private.”<sup>27</sup>

In November 1992, the Toronto Fringe went public by hosting a Fringe forum concerned with the application process. The Arts Officer for Metro Cultural Affairs, Pat Bradley, acted as moderator and the Fringe staff sat as panelists. Nixon provided me with his notes from this forum:

The Fringe has presented 127 shows over 3 years: 20 from outside Toronto, and 5 international companies. As of November 1991 we have received 411 request for applications for the 1992 Fringe, 289 of these are metro-based. The demand far exceeds the festival’s capacity. Competition is stiff and expectations are high. Fringe organizers agree that a mix of local, national, and international productions enhance the event for everyone. Within this context it is essential that the application procedures be as fair, simple and precise as possible.

Organizers want to do everything possible to maintain the spirit of trust and cooperation upon which the festival relies. Question to the floor: How can the Fringe improve procedures this year?

1. A lottery system: A public event with a symbolic entrance fee to which applicants would bring their proposals; the draw would take place at the event.

- A lottery in which applicants are divided into categories by geographic regions, venue choice, genre of theatre. Then select a pre-determined number from each category.

2. Extra money/Extra Space:

- It was suggested that taking a small percentage of the box office would enable the Fringe to add venues and accommodate more companies.

3. Mandated versus Non-Mandated:

Questions raised:

Is it advisable to accept companies on the basis of artistic merit, critical success, and the type of theatre?

- How much should the Fringe be audience or “market driven”?

- Although many legitimate arguments were made for creating eligibility criteria, Fringe staff emphasized their essential mission -- to create a Festival that is non-mandated and free of curatorial constraints. They argued that, “Fringing” is a concept unto itself and the Fringe festival offers participants the rare opportunity to experiment with impunity. Audience members come to discover the unexpected; risk-taking is a part of their experience as well. The strength of the Fringe lies in the freedom it offers both performers and audience.<sup>298</sup>

This forum is a good an example of the Fringe staffs’ desires to maintain and nurture the “artists owned” philosophy. It is interesting that the artists suggested the Fringe take part of their box-office *and* argued that eligibility criteria were a fair solution

to the "supply and demand" problem. The non-juried, no criteria or category aspect of the Fringe is perhaps the only production principle that all the Fringe producers consistently protect.

In Vancouver the situation has been different. The local constituency of Fringe artists is content with the number and nature of venues. However, the quality of venues and questions of equity have created bad public relations with the touring companies. The discontent among touring artists arises, in part, because Vancouver's Fringe is the only one that charges the artists a dollar surcharge on *every* ticket. Accordingly, touring artists tend to expect more from this Fringe. In 1992 the touring companies engaged in a small protest with Maratta. One of the most popular companies, The Three Dead Trolls, canceled a sold out show in protest over the inappropriateness of their venue -- a hard rock band was playing at full volume on the floor above their stage.

The result of the Toronto forum was the instigation of a lottery "event." The artists bring their applications and a festive evening is made of announcing the "winners." The national and international applications are received in the mail, and are also drawn and announced that evening. The lottery became a much needed fund-raiser as well as a solution to the problem.<sup>299</sup>

To date only the Toronto Fringe has changed its application process. However, at the 1993 conference, Lawrence confided that while the idea of a lottery and people "winning" does not appeal to her, it might be the only solution to Edmonton's long line-up of locals waiting for applications. Edmonton is a cold city and people are sleeping outside the office when applications become available in December.

### **Scheduling:**

Theatre becomes accessible, inexpensive and fun. It is something that can happen anytime or anywhere and anyone can enjoy it. *The Manual*.<sup>300</sup>

As the “Sold Out” signs went up at the various venues, the people who hadn’t scored tickets quickly thumbed through their programs, then raced off to their second, third, fourth, or fifth choices. The topic, the title, the performers, director, writer — after a while nothing really mattered except getting a ticket. Mark Leiren-Young<sup>301</sup>

Most of the Fringes are now nine day events, straddling two weekends, with shows scheduled between noon and midnight. This extensive scheduling is efficient and economical. Once the facilities, the staff, and the venues are assembled the production structure is utilized to the maximum. More significantly, this schedule also provides a unique experience for the audiences:

The density and variety of the Fringe schedule, in terms of shows, styles, performance times and venues, is at first glance almost incomprehensible. But there is little doubt that it is this very complexity that ultimately provides a large part of the Fringe’s audience appeal. It is a challenge, with rewards; it is a puzzle with many possible solutions; it is a treasure hunt, with real and enjoyable theatre gold to be discovered.<sup>302</sup>

As the first Fringe in 1982 was drawing to an end, Paisley began to envision the possibility of stimulating a new kind of theatre audience: “an audience which would experiment *with* the artists; an audience as diverse as the performances and as committed to taking risks as the artists.”<sup>303</sup> The noon to midnight staggered scheduling, in which performance times for individual shows *change day by day*, began to accommodate this vision by creating what is known as the “spill-over audience”. Paisley explains this by recalling his tactics when the first musical company produced on the Fringe in 1984:

Everybody said, ‘*oh my god – Dames at Sea* at a Fringe Festival!?’ And to make it worse, not ‘just a musical – but a *student* production!’ ‘It’s supposed to be a new theatre Festival.’ But, the Fringe is *supposed* to be whatever it becomes. I took advantage of the situation to experiment with stimulating the ‘spill-over audience’. We scheduled it in one of the few Fringe venues that is a recognized theatre, The Walterdale. The combination of a well-known musical in a well-known theatre attracted an older audience. But, as is always the case with a popular show in a 150 seat venue, they could not all get tickets. So, here is a large group of people *on site*, anticipating going to a show, they look around and ask each other – ‘what the hell is going on here?’ They see a lot people enjoying themselves in the beer tents, so they stop for a refreshment. The energy level is infectious; eventually most of them say ‘we’re here now, let’s take a chance on a different show.’ This is how we create the spill-over audience. Because there is *always* a show about to begin somewhere, people are encouraged to take a risk and try something different. <sup>304</sup>

The scheduling strategies that stimulate audience spill-over not only increase ticket sales, but also diversify the audience for any one production: the philosophy of artistic accessibility and equity expands to include the audience.

Excluding the Edmonton and Winnipeg Fringes, each festival continues to experiment with its schedule, and especially the scheduling of early day-time shows. In their second year, the Toronto Fringe scheduled 10 days with four shows each evening. In year three they scheduled daytime shows. The Vancouver, Victoria and Saskatoon festivals all started with noon openings and then cut back to 4 o’clock on week days. In year three, Winnipeg decided to put extra effort into encouraging people to attend day time shows with a promotion campaign. The festival achieved overall 44% capacity for afternoon shows, an increase of 30%.<sup>305</sup>

Schedule and venue assignment are two of the many risk factors involved in producing on the Fringe. These variables can have a significant impact on the number

of tickets a company sells -- despite the "quality" or type of performance. In the manual Paisley outlined his criteria for assigning venues to companies:

Consideration is given to specific requests, to the type and style of each production, the size and shape of theatre which seems most appropriate to the play's intent, the nature of technical equipment and technician support required and a realistic assessment of the show's probable popularity and success.<sup>306</sup>

The last of these criteria would be looked at skeptically by Fringe artists today. Assigning venues according to "probable popularity," or *any* reasons other than technical requirements, is considered inequitable for new and unknown companies, and consequently undesirable. The principle of equity among the producing companies grew in importance as the Fringes presented an ever greater variety of productions and diversity of artists.

#### Venues:

Fringe venues have included school gymnasiums and community halls, store fronts and night clubs, empty commercial buildings, rehearsal spaces and new theatre studios, an old post office, a deserted mill, a transit storage barn, a church, an old vaudeville theatre, an underground parking garage, a city bus, and small and large theatres. While the character of Fringe venues is remarkably diverse, all of the festivals maintain two criteria for venues. To stimulate festivity and audience spill-over, the venues need to be within comfortable walking distance from each other. To maintain equity, they need to be comparable in technical and seating capacities. These two criteria are not always achieved.

The technical "set-up" of venues varies a great deal at each Fringe and across the circuit. They range from proscenium arch to in-the-round configurations. The minimum consists of an un-elevated playing area twelve feet by twelve feet, a seating

capacity of sixty, twelve lighting instruments, a single tape deck and one technician. At the other end of the scale, some venues are outfitted with a sophisticated lighting hang and sound system, a playing space as large as thirty feet by thirty feet with an elevated stage and sprung floor, a number of flats and risers, two technicians, and a seating capacity of 350.

Technical rehearsals are usually the first time a company sees its venue and meets its technician. Rehearsals are typically three hours in length, two or three days before opening. During this time, blocking is adapted according to the stage configuration, lighting cues are designed and plotted according to the available instruments and hang, sound levels are set, and if there is time, the technician sees a run of the show – all in 3 hours. The expertise and attitudes of the technicians are also significantly variable. There are stories about technicians “ducking out for a quick pee” while running a show, demanding bottles of scotch in return for their expertise, and drinking large quantities of beer while working.

Critics will often comment on the “bad” venues, sometimes warning audiences to stay away from the venues without air conditioning and poor sight lines. Stephen Godfrey is infamous for his criticisms of the production standards in Vancouver:

Audiences in a loud nightclub-theatre could witness a refrigerator that chose to hum during climaxes, threatening to turn dialogue into mime; chandeliers chattering loudly in another theatre because of a dance performance above; an intimate two-character play accompanied by a rock band downstairs; and a few suspenseful lighting and audio failures that tested -- or forged-- the ability of young actors to keep the illusion of theatre suspended above banal realities of the merely technical.<sup>307</sup>

As each Fringe grew, securing venues presented a double dilemma: spaces within walking distance were more difficult to find, and as the artists became more

experienced at self-production, their technical expectations increased. They begin to want to challenge themselves beyond what the Fringe offered technically. Typically this type of pressure resulted in the artists discovering innovative theatrical ways to overcome venue limitations, which would then influence artistic choices and audience reception. For example, a Winnipeg company instituted the “Bring Your Own Venue” arrangement in 1990: the Ice Squid Station Performing Company. They performed *Trial by Bus* on a city bus (an adaptation of a Kafka short story by Kyle McCulloch). The bus departed nightly at 8 o’clock for a 50 minute performance. Once the bus driver closed the doors and announced: “The court is now in session,” the bus travelled around the city occasionally stopping to pick up actors. The production was an outstanding success. Fringe myth has it that, in order to avoid the four hour line-ups, a number of local politicians attempted to put pressure on the Fringe Producer to get them tickets.

The BYOV concept provides another good example of how theatrical innovation occurs in response to a crisis. If it works, other artists and most producers quickly accept the new idea and adapt. In 1991 Winnipeg’s festival had three BYOV productions. The most popular of these was Skid Theatre’s *Eureka* (written by Ronnie Jenkins -- co-founder of Skid). The play, about three homeless men, was set in an underground garage across from the Market Square park. The garage reeked of urine and oil stains . The audience sat on thin cardboard spread out on the cement. The show opened with an old “chevy” revving its engines as it turned the corner and came screeching into the garage. Two headlights momentarily blinded the audience. The performance created an outstandingly visceral experience. “The relationship between what you see and where you are is fraught with tension. ... [Skid] exploit their strange non-theatre to the hilt.”<sup>308</sup> The play sold out two shows a day for the entire run of the festival. It went on to be developed at Tarragon Theatre in Toronto and then remounted at the 1992 Edmonton Fringe -- in a garage.

The initial BYOV arrangement allowed companies to schedule at prime times and present more than one show a day. This translated into a situation in which a great deal more money could *potentially* be earned. At the 1992 Producer's conference, Craig Walls (Winnipeg), raised the issue of financial equity: "Is this a situation in which one company is "feeding off the Fringe?"<sup>309</sup> Lawrence responded, "I think the site-specific venues are an excellent idea. Why not? If a company has the initiative, the ideas, the extra energy, and money, why shouldn't they sell more tickets?"<sup>310</sup> Lawrence also pointed out that, "BYOVs are not guaranteed sell-outs. Edmonton had one show in a BYOV that did not do well at all." She stressed, it *always* depends on the specific work.<sup>311</sup> Walls suggested that BYOV productions should be allowed only if the company is creating a *legitimate* "site specific work," like *Eureka*, and, that they be limited to one show per day. Of course, the problem of *who* determines legitimacy, and *how*, always arises because the application process does not require a script be submitted -- just a title.

As is often the case, no consensus was reached by the producers. Rather, this discussion led to the larger issue of discrepancy in the quality of venues. Each producer attempts to maintain an average of 100 to 150 seats per venue; however, there have been venues as large as 400 seats and as small as 40. While this creates an inequitable situation for the artists, there is a greater dilemma involved for the producers. They are, naturally, under pressure to schedule the "heavy hitters" in the biggest venues.<sup>312</sup> Scheduling the most popular companies in the largest venues is considered a *faux pas* for a number of reasons, one I have described: financial equity. Another has to do with attempting to change assumptions. Audiences assume that shows scheduled in the "best" theatres, the largest, most comfortable, and well known, are there because they are the "best" shows. If the Fringe fulfills this assumption, some of the producers argue, this will erode a central principle of Fringe production -- leaving the process of adjudication in the hands of the audience. Another aspect of the

audiences' experience, which the producers strive to nurture, is the excitement of discovering the unknown hit show created by the unheard-of company. The greater the challenge, the more inclined people are to seek out and accordingly to see more productions in their quest. By arbitrarily assigning venues, the producers provide few indications as to which companies are better known or more established, and in turn, they increase the challenge for the audience to be the "adjudicators".

### **The Box Office:**

The Fringe is a smorgasbord of original, unproven works, featuring wildly varying styles presented with no assurance whatsoever of either talent or professional skill. The fact that the audiences are prepared *to stand in line* to attend such theatre is a source of constant amazement, and some joy. . . The Manual.<sup>313</sup>

There is no substitute for the spontaneity, excitement, and the never-ending flow of energy that is created by the line ups. The Manual.<sup>314</sup>

In the early years, Fringe volunteers sold tickets from the sidewalk outside the venue one hour before the show began, and the accounting was done at the venue immediately after the show. The simplicity of this method was founded on both necessity and philosophy. Not only did this system require very little administration and no facilities, it also helped to extend the "equity" principle for audiences -- because tickets were available to everyone at the same time, place, and price and prices were kept as low as possible in order to make the shows accessible to as many people as possible.

Access to tickets was obviously limited by the "hour before each show" time frame. This creates line-ups, and line-ups are an integral part of how the Fringe production structure works. They are essential for artists to promote their shows, they encourage word of mouth, and they attract street performers and new audiences to the festivals. Line-ups also have an interesting influence on reception and production. While people are standing in line, artists are giving out hand-bills and talking about their shows, and

street musicians or performers are entertaining them. This kind of pre-show activity influences the mood of the audience: “the anticipation generated by the act of standing in line for 2 or 3 hours builds up a sense of occasion which climaxes with the performance.”<sup>315</sup> When the lights go up on a Fringe show the actors are confronted with an unusually lively and anticipatory audience.

In 1985, the third year of the festival, people in Edmonton began to request advance tickets. “People phoned and wrote letters saying things like; “my relatives are in town for the day, we *need* to have tickets in advance.”<sup>316</sup> But Paisley was reticent to provide them:

I did not like the idea of advance tickets because I had a uneasy feeling that they would create a level of normality. I worried that people would begin to feel like they could just book ahead, and then relax. One of the greatest dangers for the Fringe is if people begin to suspect they know how it works, then the spontaneity and anticipation is broken.<sup>317</sup>

While Paisley resisted the pressure to extend the availability of tickets, by 1990 the line-ups were simply too long and sometimes too desperate for comfort. Kids were renting their services and standing in line for two dollars an hour. In 1991, people lined-up for seven hours to buy tickets to Igroky’s production of *Animal Farm*. Three blocks away, the Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie ordered pizza for the people standing in the four hour line-up to buy tickets for their production of *Saskatchebuzz*, a play about the economy, politicians, and hemp in Saskatchewan. Eventually, advance tickets seemed to be the only reasonable response to the overwhelming demand for some shows.

Paisley’s reticence to implement advance tickets led him to examine the rationale of advance sales from an unusual perspective:

I realized that on the Fringe advance tickets would be a privilege, an extra service. Therefore, people would have to pay extra. It's the inverse of the subscription theory. Advance tickets solved a number of problems. The line-ups were *too* long, people would wait for 7 hours to buy a ticket!! During that time they could go to see two or three other less popular shows. So we relieved the line-up time, nurtured the spill-over strategy, *and* created a source of Fringe generated income. <sup>318</sup>

The advance ticket policies have changed over the years in a similar pattern across the Fringes. Initially tickets were made available for two weeks before the festival began; only 50% of each house was offered for pre-sales, and the central box-office closed when the festival opened. Today both Edmonton and Vancouver have central ticket offices where people can purchase tickets from early in the morning until late at night throughout the festival. Edmonton maintains the 50% of each house maximum pre-sales, while Vancouver sells the entire house. The 50% maximum principle helps to maintain line-ups, expectations, audience spill-over, and the influence of "word of mouth."

Vancouver's Fringe is unique in terms of its box office policies and, accordingly, in its economic relationship with Fringe artists. In 1991, the Vancouver Fringe received a \$40,000 sponsorship package which included the installation of a computerized box office. The simplicity of volunteers collecting money and then counting it out with the actors at the end of the show was replaced by a complex box office offering a number of different ways of purchasing tickets: over the phone with credit cards, in person, weekend passes, and "rush" tickets. Consequently, the line-ups in Vancouver are relatively non-existent. This Fringe also began collecting a dollar on every ticket sold, and two dollars on the advance tickets. With this surcharge on *every* ticket comes the most serious disintegration of the "artists takes all" philosophy. Artists are not allowed to poster or handbill at the central ticket office, this greatly diminishes audience and artist interaction, and increases the cost of promotion for the companies.

### Artists' Revenue:

Its been a black hole of money. Even in a good year, if we paid ourselves a modest salary, we wouldn't show a profit. It's a way of life more than anything. You're on the road, meeting people, doing your show. And on any given day, after your show, you have \$800 in your pocket. And I don't care how deep you are in the hole, on that day, I'm a happy guy. Michael Wener.<sup>319</sup>

Ideally, the Fringe producer sets a maximum ticket price and the artists receive 100% of their ticket revenue. According to Paisley this economic relationship is the "secret ingredient" to the success of the Fringe:

"Artists takes all" is the great exchange that makes it work year after year. Artists know what they get at the Fringe - they pays their fee, they calculate their costs and their possible gains, and they takes their chances [sic]. And they know, no matter how much they get, they get it all. This is risk without a service charge, gambling without a house percentage - and it works. If we were to eliminate this attractive aspect of the Fringe structure we would probably reduce our own risk-sharing credibility quite considerably.<sup>320</sup>

The low price of tickets not only makes theatre accessible to a larger audience, it also means that the potential income of a Fringe artists is seriously limited. In the manual Paisley has interesting things to say about the relationship between ticket prices and the type of work which is produced:

Only in a few exceptional cases (the sell-out hit one-person show in a large venue) do the ticket revenues actually pay a reasonably fair wage. In some ways *this is a deliberate tactic* to maintain the artistic thrust and the integrity of the event. If by allowing ticket prices to rise, revenues were able to increase considerably then a real danger exists that productions would be tailored to meet the simplest production standards and accrue the maximum ticket revenues .... The main reason to participate in the Fringe should never be the amount of money to be made.<sup>321</sup>

Paisley's notion that artistic integrity is interrelated with poverty is questionable. On the Fringe there is simply no potential to earn more than costs and reasonably fair wages: the venues are too small, the ticket price too low, and the run too short. Nonetheless, the sentiment among the artists is that the festival audiences will not accept anything but artistic integrity:

Any attempt to discover a Fringe formula play would be rejected by this audience. We have to constantly challenge our own techniques to continue with success -- because this audience is extremely demanding. Once we discover something which they think is great, we have to keep expanding it, keep experimenting, and keep playing with the audience. Theatre really is *alive* on the Fringe. <sup>322</sup>

By keeping ticket prices low the Fringe demands that the artists work with a remarkable economy. This means the successful Fringe companies exploit to the fullest their most inexpensive resources: acting, writing, designing, and their access to a large potential audience which the festival creates. Much like the Fringe production structure, the development of many Fringe companies has involved a process of limited resources demanding innovative solutions.

It is impossible to generalize about the budgets of Fringe companies. Some invest up to \$20,000 dollars, others manage on \$500. Wages are typically paid after expenses and depend on a box-office split between the members. The first Edmonton Fringe did not charge an application fee because Paisley assumed no one would apply if a fee was involved: "The possibilities for production were considered to be directly related to funding sources; artists had no tradition of producing themselves; of making cash investments in their work."<sup>323</sup> Today there is no question about the financial nature of Fringe companies; they are independent self-producing theatre artists. .

### Promotion:

Good public relations have been the cornerstone of the Fringe Theatre Event's spectacular success.... Now, the reputation of the Fringe has spread far beyond Edmonton and Alberta -- the festival is regarded, nationally and internationally, as a major force in the creation of new theatre *experiences* and a kind of proving ground for new and innovative methods of *promoting* the performing arts. Brian Paisley.<sup>324</sup>

A great deal of unusual spectacle and festivity on the Fringe began in response to the producer's limited publicity budgets; they needed to attract attention. Opening events and media preview parties ( although no shows are actually previewed) are annual traditions with a unique Fringe flavour. Saskatoon's Fringe has created the most ironic skill-testing competitions for their opening night events. At the 1991 opening ceremony I witnessed the human/media Velcro Throwing Contest. Each Fringe reviewer was dressed in a Velcro suit, with the aid of Fringe artists, who then lined them up and one by one catapulted them toward a Velcro wall on the side of a building. The winner was determined by the artistic quality of his or her flight through the air, and final landing position on the wall . It is now an opening night tradition in Saskatoon for Fringe critics to make physical fools of themselves and suffer public humiliation at the hands of the artists they are about to review.

The artists also promote their shows with extremely limited budgets. For a number of reasons they tend to target their audiences more than the media. Posting and "hand-billing" as well as large signboards with reviews and pictures are the main forms of promotion on site. Ticket line-ups and the beer tents are the most popular and effective places to pass out handbills. This is often done in a festive spirit, sometimes with actors in costume and street musicians on the side lines. Giving out hand-bills is one of the most profitable means of promotion because it creates an essential one-on-one contact for the audiences. Faced with so many productions, people are eager for the opportunity to ask questions. They frequently choose to see a show because they have talked with the artists involved: the social barriers between audience and artists have

been broken and people naturally feel more comfortable approaching the artists after the show. The close proximity of the beer tents and Fringe clubs greatly facilitate these discussions. Fringe artists tend to agree that the artistic benefits and social pleasure of getting to know their audiences' opinions and feelings, in the end, far outweigh the initial embarrassment of "shameless self-promotion" (as it is affectionately called).

At the early Fringes there was an unwritten rule among staff and volunteers: it was taboo for these people to recommend Fringe shows when asked. This "silence" helped to encourage audiences to discuss the quality of shows among themselves. "Word of mouth" or as it is sometimes called, "the buzz," became a Fringe tradition and the most important promotional tool for performing companies.<sup>325</sup>

In Toronto and Vancouver, where it has been more difficult to encourage people to gather, the producers have focused attention on educating the companies on how to create publicity in more traditional ways. Both of these Fringes offer "Fringe publicity seminars" focused on creating promotional material and press releases. These seminars are one example of the "training ground" aspect of the Fringe.

### **The Beer Tents and Fringe Clubs.**

The *extended lobbies* have become an integral part of the festival's tradition. Artists, audience members, critics, staff, and volunteers gather in these tents from noon until midnight every day of the Fringe, discussing plays, different points of view and possible future projects -- it is a lively, chaotic, *social* interaction unparalleled in the Canadian theatre community. The Manual.<sup>326</sup>

The spiritual centre of the Fringe is, as always, the beer tent on the Main. Bill Brownstein<sup>327</sup>

The Fringe did not begin with a concept of people gathering in beer tents and clubs discussing theatre. Rather, the need for a place to gather was created by the festive spirit and resulting large crowds of boisterous people. The first beer tent was

introduced in 1984, when the Fringe received permission to close 83rd Avenue to traffic:

In year one we had not even thought of the concept of beer gardens. We strung a few banners and ‘things’ began happening in the alley ways. In year two we began to have problems with crowds and people running across 83rd Avenue. It was dangerous. In year three we managed to have 83rd Avenue closed. The University games were happening at the same time, the city was busy and we managed to slip in a beer tent without anyone asking what we were up to. In year four the Liquor Control Board caught up with us. A couple of inspectors came on site and saw a 200 seat beer tent connected to a 150 seat theatre. They began controlling the tents, which were logistically O.K. as long as they were attached to a theatre [by a ribbon]. They were considered extended lobbies. First the tents could only be open for an hour before the show, then we moved the ticket booth to the beer tent and sold the programs in order to demonstrate these were theatre patrons. It worked out really well. We were able to keep the tents open from noon to midnight, and we dramatically increased program sales.<sup>328</sup>

The beer tents are now integral to the production structure and the Fringe philosophy. They provide an already present and potential audience for artists promoting their shows, a place for audiences to exchange their critical reviews, and they provide Fringe generated income.

The social phenomenon of the Edmonton beer tents is not something that can be administered and scheduled. In Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Montreal the festivals have successfully followed the pattern of the Edmonton Fringe -- introducing beer tents at their inaugural festivals and nurturing the social practice of gathering, drinking, and debate. In Vancouver, Victoria, and Toronto the Fringe clubs have become a gathering place for artists and reviewers, with few audience members attending. No doubt, one of the reasons for this is that these Fringes have indoor clubs, not beer tents.

### **The Streets & Outdoor Performers:**

Street entertainment is an integral part of the Fringe Theatre Event. Scheduling a number of shows in a number of indoor venues may create a *festival*, but providing for a continuous carnival atmosphere between theatres, in the parks and on the streets, creates a community *celebration*.. Brian Paisley<sup>329</sup> \_

If the Fringe is all about theatrical risk-taking, than outdoor Fringe is like guerrilla warfare and the performers are the foot soldiers. Paul Mark.<sup>330</sup>

The tradition of street performers on the Fringe began as a means to attract audiences. Initially, members of indoor performing companies went out into the streets to promote their shows. In 1984 local musicians began to entertain the line-ups on a pass-the-hat basis. The word quickly spread that Fringe line-ups were good outdoor audiences. In 1985 jugglers joined the musicians and Paisley decided to schedule an outdoor stage in the Gazebo park. In 1986 a number of vendors, artisans and restaurateurs asked permission to set up kiosks and booths. To accommodate this extra activity, a second outdoor site with a stage was developed. Sak Theatre, from Florida, performed at the 1987 Edmonton Fringe. According to Paisley, “they took the place by storm and changed the nature of the street performance on the Fringe; the quality got better and better after they arrived.”<sup>331</sup> By 1988 the Edmonton Fringe was well known in the world of professional street performers. By 1989 the streets had become an event on their own. Today Edmonton has three scheduled outdoor stages, and over a hundred “roaming” street performers. The scheduled street performers pay a fee and apply on a first-come first-served basis. Today, more apply then can be accommodated.

Street performers play a number of roles in the production structure. Setting up their playing spaces anywhere they please, they are unruly and entice their audiences to break the rules with them. They break down preconceived concepts of what is possible by performing the seemingly impossible. They take breath-stopping risks right in front

of our eyes, and then laugh at us for holding our breath. Opening our minds to unusual possibilities, they are a remarkable “warm-up act” for the Fringe theatre audience; and indeed, for the thousands of festival goers who do not purchase tickets to theatre productions – they *are* the show. Fringe festivals are rich material for anyone interested in the recent resurgence of street performers, fools, buffoons, and their ilk.

For the most part, street performance is much like the social phenomenon of the beer tents; it is not something that can be planned, administered, and scheduled. The Vancouver and Toronto Fringes are the least festive, in part because they have never been able to attract street activity. In the early years, Toronto tried to liven up the streets with “busk stops,” but the performers found that people were not willing to put money into the hats, perhaps because of the numbers of panhandlers in the area. Vancouver also made some attempts at attracting street performers, but the Fringe area is not conducive to this. There are no parks or green areas and the traffic is thick and noisy. The Victoria producer made attracting buskers a priority. For Smith, creating chaos was a priority, and by offering traveling expenses and remuneration, as well as a pass-the-hat arrangement, Smith was able to keep the streets alive during the festival. The Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Montreal Fringes have each managed a measure of Edmonton’s success with street performance. However, none of the Fringes attract the numbers and diversity of “roaming buskers” and professional street performers, as does the Edmonton festival.

At the 1991 Producer’s Conference, the subject of incorporating as a national association and trade-marking the Fringe name prompted the producers to identify the common points that define “a Fringe”. The list included non-jury selection, artistic freedom, minimal control, accessibility for audience, responsibility of artists, and finally the festive environment.

### Conclusions:

Artists should lead, not be led. The Fringe represents, perhaps for the first time in Canadian theatre, a large-scale attempt to give the stage back to the creative artists. The Manual.<sup>332</sup>

It is impossible not to be idealistic about the festival, or conversely it is impossible to be cynical. It just *is* inherently idealistic in its structure. It will not work if you assume the worst in people -- you have to assume the best. Judy Lawrence.<sup>333</sup>

The Fringe model places theatre production in a set of relationships that are significantly different from traditional and institutional theatre practices in Canada. The emphasis on accessibility and process have influenced the nature of artistic production *and* audience reception. The production structure modifies the influences of traditional evaluative practices for audiences, critics, and sponsors. Because production decisions are placed in the hands of the artists, and risk-taking is encouraged, an increasing number of writers and actors from “marginalized” groups are producing for a wide audience. The quality of performance, the good and the bad, is defined and mediated by the interaction of the participants. For the audiences, the Fringe presents both a plurality of unmediated choices and opportunities for debate and camaraderie, inside and outside the venues. By their “publicness”, the festivals contain moments of interaction that are not usually found in the production and reception of the theatre.

There is a congruence between the expectations of the Fringe audiences and the type of work produced on the Fringe, which has been both forged by the production structure, and has, in turn, influenced the development of that structure. The non-juried application process has created a festival circuit in which the one common denominator among the most popular Fringe productions is that they are typically original plays or performance pieces. New, untested work thrives on the Fringe. Artists whose work would normally be considered too political, or politically incorrect,

too short or too abstract, too personal or too provocative, or simply too ridiculous for production, can succeed on the Fringe *because* the production model encourages audiences to take a risk, to challenge themselves and try something different. In turn, the popular Fringe artists are those who push the hardest at conventional boundaries: theatrical and social. The Fringe offers actors, directors, and writers considerable autonomy and provides the security they need to take those risks. Not only are the financial investments minimal, the festival also acts as an umbrella. This autonomy combined with the overall predisposition to experiment has inspired some of the most provocative and political work in Canadian theatre.

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Journal Excerpt:

17 August 1991, Edmonton: Waiting in line to see *Funker Rauch*. Just saw *Three Postcards*: elaborate setting in a restaurant, furniture everywhere, a piano and player and plants with more plants -- and a waiter whose only role is serving "the girls" drinks. Three women meet for dinner, each is slightly neurotic. They chitter-chatter and sing songs and we slowly realize that the cause of their neurosis is their mutual friendship. The "oh so realistic" setting distracts me from the absurdity of the piece. Left me feeling tired; packaged as a fluffy little feel good musical -- yet my reading of the central meaning is women "like these" are neurotic and their relationships with each other are the cause of their neurosis. This is funny? Luckily, I managed to slip into the line-up for *Funker Rauch* because it is in the same venue. The line up is long, it's late and people are excited -- Paisley directed this piece, and Michael Burrell is performing. It never ceases to amaze me that people will line-up for so long to see a play beginning at 11:30 p.m. -- and this one is a two hour piece!! I am exhausted.

Later: 2:00 a.m. *Wow* -- a riveting two hour performance. A bare set with platforms, pre-show music; tribal drums -- subtle, slide projected images shuttered in a round spot of light -- scene changes created by

movement and lighting. The most startling aspect of the performance was actually *seeing* the differences between the conventions of *Postcards* and *Funker*. The back to back experience of seeing two plays in the same space – this is a significant Fringe experience. We are not just watching a play, but rather watching how the conventions of theatre work, how they influence our reception and our ways of making sense out of the story – how they influence the ways we make meaning. Unfortunately the beer tents are closed and I am now exhilarated.

²⁷⁷ Carol Shaben, The Canadian Voice 1. 4. (Blyth Ontario: Blyth Festival, 1991) 2 (Italics mine).

²⁷⁸ Brian Paisley, Fringe Theatre Event. A Guide for Production (Kukulkan Productions, Edmonton October 1987) 3. Herein noted as “Manual”.

²⁷⁹ Manual 36.

²⁸⁰ “Festival creators battle burnout to bring alternative theatre to Montreal,” Gazette [Montreal] 3 June 1995: D1.

²⁸¹ Manual 56. The following un-cited quotes are from the same source.

²⁸² Transcripts from the Annual Fringe Producer’s Conference, Vancouver 1991, recorded by author.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ Manual 33.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 34.

²⁸⁶ Judy Lawrence, Producers Conference, Vancouver, 1992.

²⁸⁷ The Montreal Fringe is co-produced; Kieren takes responsibility for publicity and Morra is responsible for general management. Between the two of them they share the other duties of producing. While Morra works year round on Fringe related business, the Montreal Fringe does not receive enough funding to pay him for this work. The Victoria, Vancouver, and Winnipeg Fringes maintain two full time positions year-round: producer and general manager. The Saskatoon Fringe relies on 25th Street Theatre staff in the winter months, and in Toronto the Fringe office closes for part of the winter.

²⁸⁸ Manual 34.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 8.

²⁹⁰ “The Path to Rome: Even as the annual Fringe festival grows, it also begins to focus,” Mirror

[Montreal] 9 June 1994 : 14.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Brain Paisley, Interview 1991.

²⁹³ Except in Toronto. This is explained below.

²⁹⁴ All of the Fringes, except Toronto's, utilize similar quotas: 30% international, 30% national, and 40% regional. In Toronto the quota system continues to change from year to year for reasons mentioned below.

²⁹⁵ Producer's Conference, Vancouver 1992.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Nixon's Notes from the Fringe Forum 25 Nov. 1991.

²⁹⁹ The kinks in this new process took a couple of years to work out and accordingly many of the touring artists were not able to "get into" Toronto's Fringe. The quota system was askew and as a result only 1 national and 2 international companies were accepted in 1993. The quota for the national and international applications was determined as a percentage based on the total number of these applications, not as a percentage of the festival. In 1994 the system was changed to ensure that a higher percentage of national and international artists are drawn. In 1994 almost all of the international and national touring companies played Toronto, however during the two year "gap in the circuit" which Toronto created with its lottery system, Minneapolis launched a Fringe and some of the touring companies produced there instead.

³⁰⁰ Manual 2.

³⁰¹ "Summer Crowds Swell Fringe Bacchanalia," Georgia Straight [Vancouver] Sept. 1989.

³⁰² Ibid. 21.

³⁰³ Paisley, Interview 1991.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Winnipeg Fringe Festival, End of Year Report 1990, Manitoba Theatre Centre 1990.

³⁰⁶ Manual 23.

³⁰⁷ Globe and Mail [Toronto] 22 Sept.. 1987.

³⁰⁸ Liz Nicholls, "Scary, spectacular Eureka ! squeals into service bay," Edmonton Journal 19 Aug.

1992: E5.

³⁰⁹ Craig Walls, Annual Producer's Conference, 1992 .

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Manual 45.

³¹⁴ Manual 70

³¹⁵ Martin Esslin, conversation at the 1988 Edmonton Fringe.

³¹⁶ Paisley, Telephone interview 1992.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Interview, 1994.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Manual 70 (Italics mine).

³²² Kevin Williamson, Artistic Director, English Suitcase Theatre Company, Interview 1990.

³²³ Interview 1991.

³²⁴ Manual 50 (italics mine).

³²⁵ A Winnipeg survey found that 46.9% of respondents had heard of the Fringe from friends. Institute of Urban Studies, Introduction, Winnipeg Fringe Festival Survey Report Univ of Winnipeg, 1988: iv.

³²⁶ Manual 42.

³²⁷ "Festival creators battle burnout to bring alternative theatre to Montreal," Gazette[Montreal] 3 June 1995: D 7.

³²⁸ Interview 1992.

³²⁹ Manual 15.

³³⁰ "Foot soldiers of the Fringe, Street performers relish low-tech form of theatre," Edmonton Journal 20 Aug. 1992: C1.

³³¹ Paisley, Telephone Interview 1992.

³³² Manual. 2.

³³³ Interview 1991.

Chapter Five: The Art of the Fringe

The Fringe is the only theatre in the country where artists have control over their work. We are only responsible to ourselves, our work, our visions. Robert Astle, Small.³³⁴

Over 450 theatre companies produce on the Fringe each year. A number of these companies return year after year and work either their local festival, the entire Fringe circuit, or the “Winnipeg west” circuit. Some companies disappear, never to be heard of again. Others work the circuit for a few years and then move onto different opportunities. Most of the “established” Fringe companies continue to self-produce during the winters.³³⁵ Some companies are created by writers who want to see their work on stage, or directors who bring together a company of actors for a particular project, or, conversely, a collection of actors working together -- with or without a director. On average over 60% of Fringe companies create original work. Many companies are dedicated to a collaborative process, or ensemble techniques, and just as many others to improvisation on stage. Some works continue to be produced, and some die a painful death on the Fringe stage.

It is impossible to generalize about Fringe theatre because it encompasses an eclectic collection of performance genres and narrative styles. There is, however, a common quality that distinguishes a “typical” Fringe artist. Fringe artists think of the festivals as events that they “use.” This includes “using” the audience. In many ways this reflects a unique element of the production structure -- it creates a *potential* audience for an eclectic collection of artists.

The last chapters explored how the production structure and the “eventfulness” of the festivals influence audience expectation, selection, and reception. In this chapter I look at how the production structure and audience expectation influence the work and

the careers of Fringe artists. In every interview I conducted, there is always, as one Fringe artist put it -- “the face of the audience.” According to Fringe artists, this audience behaves differently, and this difference is intrinsically valuable to their creative process -- and careers.

This audience is *GREAT* for the creative process *.

Audience response, *that* is the trademark of the Canadian Fringe. The facts that people come and talk after the shows, and the amount of audience response in the streets are two of the most outstanding features of these festivals. Kevin Williamson.³³⁶

Fringe audiences are extremely personable. They really are interested in watching us develop. If I could make one statement about the Fringe it would be to try to explain how much this audience has given me. As a young person I am learning so much. It has not been easy, but the opportunity has been amazing. It is so vital to someone like myself. Andrea House.³³⁷

The Fringe audience is really keyed up. They have lined-up for hours to see your work, and some have been looking forward to your new play since last year. They give an immediate response. And, they are very generous. Stewart Lemoine.³³⁸

The value of theatre becoming important, a source of excitement, joy, quite often indignation, anger and disgust to thousands of people for whom it was previously unimportant, is more significant than individual production values. Chris Johnson.³³⁹

The Fringe provides an audience that offers us an incredible amount of freedom. We can experiment, improvise, make mistakes. I am free to let people *know* that I am improvising -- that I am working *with them*. The Fringe audience *knows* they are a part of the process. Karen Hines,³⁴⁰

This audience determines the experience of the show; the warmth that they offer creates a special energy for the actor. There is also a sense of urgency and immediacy when they enter the venue that creates a direct energy between them and me -- there is no theatre, no institution between us. It is the individual artists that the Fringe audience is committed to and genuinely cares about. Sanders Whiting³⁴¹

It's important to understand that the empowerment of the actor on the Fringe is about more than making our own opportunities by producing ourselves. It is also about how we work with our audiences. Acting on the Fringe has crystallized into an experience of knowing my audiences. I am thinking and feeling and making decisions about what *they* want. This is the dynamic that comes from empowering the actor. This is, I think, why the Fringe audiences are not going into the other theatres --

this dynamic and energy is not there because actors are working for a contract, not an audience. Sanders Whiting.³⁴²

The Fringe audience is often accused of being less critical or over-generous. But this is a mistake. They are different because they have come here to have a special kind of experience with the artists and the show they are attending – they are not here to compare us to Chekov or Mamet, or anyone else. Michael O'Brien.³⁴³

Producing [a career] on the Fringe

I wanted to gain some *real* experience. I wanted to be inspired again. The initial idea was like a fantasy dream; can I really do this? There have been moments when I've thought 'I am living in a dream – being able to take my work across Canada.' It is fantastic. I have learned a lot of things, gained great experiences, but mostly it has inspired me. Andrew Binks.³⁴⁴

We can take risks that we would never take in any other situation because everything is provided for so little cost: You have a theatre, technicians, and box office. For the money, the deal is amazing. In Toronto this would cost three thousand a week. At that price who can afford to take risks? And, the audience are so excited. In a regular theatre I would be afraid to experiment with the audience because if you blow it, word travels so fast in this town. Karen Hines.³⁴⁵

Why do I produce on the Fringe? The opportunity to honestly discuss in detail what other artists think about my work, and vice versa; all the feed-back and all the interaction between artists, all the nights of conversation about theatre, about what it means to us and how and why we strive to make meanings – this coming together with other artists has turned out to be the reason I am working on the Fringe. Wendy Peters.³⁴⁶

Mump and Smoot, a.k.a. Mike Kennard and John Turner a.k.a. clowns of horror, produced on the Toronto West circuit 3 times: *In Something – with Wog* 1989, *Caged – with Wog* 1991, *Inferno* 1993. Their Fringe fame was immediate; critics compared their work with Samuel Beckett and Antonin Artaud, and “word of mouth” preceded their arrival at each Fringe. In 1993 the Saskatoon Fringe used their promotion photograph for its Fringe poster. Mump and Smoot are one of a handful of touring Fringe companies that have received Canada Council funding via the Explorations Program. They say that producing on the Fringe earned them popular and critical respect for their unique clowning techniques:

The Fringe got us out there and into the public eye. This is where we got our reviews and our reputation. The whole process of developing an audience and critical attention for our work was considerably speeded up because of the Fringe.³⁴⁷

David Chantler started his now international touring and teaching company, Trickster, in 1979 in Calgary. He produced on the early Edmonton Fringe before touring and teaching in New Zealand, Australia, Singapore, and Mexico. In 1986, the company received a grant from Alberta Foundation for the Performing Arts and sent Chantler and his performance partner, Sheryl Simmons, to study at Denmark's Nordisk Teater-laboratorium (this is the home of theatre anthropologist Eugenio Barba's Odin Theatre).³⁴⁸ They returned to the Canadian Fringe circuit in 1990 with a new production that they developed specifically for the Fringe: *Journey into Ecstasy*:

What the Fringe does for companies like ourselves [Trickster] and Mump and Smoot, is provide the *possibility* for success. After two years of critical success on the Fringe, combined with sold-out houses, a company can graduate out of the Fringe.³⁴⁹

While Chantler describes the Fringe as a "stepping stone," there are a number of Fringe artists who would disagree. Michael Wener, founder and director for Way Off Broadway, has remained "faithful" to the Fringe circuit since 1988:

We are a Fringe company. This is where we began, and this is where we *want* to be. We have great audiences and great reviews. We travel the country, meeting other artists from all over the world. And, we see some of the most exciting theatre. *Why* would we want to work any place else? Right now, there is no more exciting place to be creating theatre.³⁵⁰

Shoot the Women First

It's really hard to do a show about porn and not show any. Gwendolyn,

³⁵¹

Themes are hard to come by in the anarchy of the Fringe of Toronto Festival, but I tripped over one Wednesday night after seeing *Diamonds are Forever, A Girls Best Friend*, followed immediately by *Blonde* The Theme is women, the tone is tongue-in-cheek ... A James Bond spoof substitutes women for men and lets them behave as badly as guys, and in *Blonde*, viewers discover that blondes don't just happen, they are an organization. Ray Conlogue.³⁵²

After 15 shows in three days, I'm beginning to wonder -- am I at the Fringe or trapped in one of those sci-fi movies about a lone male on a planet run by women. Bob Remington.³⁵³

Help ! There's a male show at the Fringe that's trapped inside female bodies. Lloyd Dykk.³⁵⁴

The Tit Show is not a flashy affair. ... If the show were called *Radical Feminists Explain Their Breast*, a cast member explained, men wouldn't show up. Paul Watson.³⁵⁵

Fringe Festival fraught with females. Hazel Madley.³⁵⁶

Smith [Victoria's inaugural Fringe producer] was at a loss to explain why so many women's shows have been opening on the Fringe circuit, he said maybe it's a development whose time has come [?]. Michael D. Reid³⁵⁷

The Fringes have always been "home" to a large number of woman's theatre groups and feminist companies, because, a) feminist theatre is popular on the Fringe, and b) "the first-come-first-served produce your own work" Fringe philosophy has naturally attracted women artists. When the relative numbers are considered (see chapter one), the Fringe evidently provides a much needed production opportunity for women writers, directors, and especially actors.

I went to look for plays for women -- not *because* I am a feminist, but because I am an out of work actress. A lot of us are here, like myself, because we cannot find enough work *because* there are so few plays with good parts for women being produced. On the Fringe we can create our own opportunities.³⁵⁸

Because the festivals are popular, they provide an opportunity for developing a larger audience for feminist work and, certainly, a more eclectic audience than what can be expected at the different "Women's" festivals across the country.

We had an objective when we decided to produce on the Fringe: we wanted to get feminist cultural works out to a broader community. We play for the Women in View Festival, but for this piece we really wanted a more diverse audience. ³⁵⁹

In 1989, Gwendolyn -- “stripper, hooker, film-maker, standup comic, prostitute’s rights activist, multi-media performance artist”³⁶⁰ -- startled critics and audiences when she produced her ex-centric feminist politics on the Toronto Fringe: *Merchants of Love: A Sex Workers Experience in Therapy*. She describes herself, not as a feminist, but rather ,

... as a political whore who is looking for allies within the feminist community. I’m like most feminists: I’m part of a special interest group.

In *Merchants*, Gwendolyn frankly portrays herself and her story of “spirituality and unprofitable encounters with therapists, who can’t understand why -- ‘anyone would rent out their body?’ -- (‘I got hungry’, she explains) -- in a multi-media performance that incorporates “confessional stand-up comedy with home movies.” After a successful Fringe run, and much media coverage (she charmed the critics), she traveled with *Merchants* to the avant-garde arts festival in Newcastle-upon-Tyne: *Edge 90*. In 1991, Gwendolyn returned to the Toronto Fringe with a piece that “tackled a new batch of sticky topics”: *Hardcore* . Another “provocative and sexually explicit collage of stand-up comedy, slides, and film.”³⁶¹ She attacked the anti-pornography movement, and police harassment of prostitutes. Explaining that she is “pro-pornography”, she likes making her living as a pornographer, but she does not “necessarily like the mainstream pornography that’s out there.” For her, the Fringe creates an opportunity to “create and produce her “*own different imagery*.”

The Fringe, Gwendolyn explained to Toronto critic Vit Wagner, is the perfect venue for her to accomplish a number of goals:

She credits the favorable publicity received by *Merchants of Love* with her ability to gain funding for the Newcastle trip and also for her participation in *Five Feminist Minutes* [a documentary by the National film Board’s feminist Studio D, that included her short film *Prowling by Night*]. It also enabled her to qualify for a grant to stage *Hardcore*. [and] it played an important role in getting funding for a video about the

'Prostitutes Safe Sex Project' – an outreach program run by the Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes (CORP) with whom Gwendolyn is actively involved.

Notably, the critics labeled her work “unpolished” and “unfinished”, “rough” and “marred” – yet, they wrote supportive reviews:

Somehow, though, she is never less than compelling. She says the most extraordinary things and – most important – consistently challenges the audience to rethink deep-rooted assumptions about prostitution, pornography, and the sex trade in general.³⁶²

The International Component

On average, international theatre troupes and street performers present at least 20% of each festival (the largest percentage of street performers come from the United States). Since 1991, there has been at least 6, and in some years, up to 14 British touring companies on the Fringe circuit. The first to arrive, at the Edmonton Fringe in 1984, was Anna Barry. She was persuaded by Paisley to “take a risk”, and come to the Edmonton Fringe instead of the Edinburgh. She returned to tour the Edmonton West circuit most years since then. Her productions have all been one-women shows, and they are always sell-outs. Paisley credits Barry with “teaching the local artists how to get out there and promote their shows; she arrived with great posters, a sandwich board with reviews and photos, and she was really aggressive with her press kits, attracting all sorts of media.”³⁶³

Like Barry, most of the early British touring groups had previously produced on the Edinburgh Fringe. Kevin Williamson, of English Suitcase, explained that they, too, were invited by Paisley and that, “by then (1989), the Edinburgh Fringe had become too expensive, and the risks too great.”³⁶⁴ However, Williamson stressed that “*today* the international companies come for other reasons”:

It is impossible to ignore the excitement and creativity that is coming out of these festivals. The profile, popularity, and reputation are enough to entice anyone. In the same way that it was impossible to ignore Edinburgh, the Canadian Fringe now has an amazing international reputation among small theatre companies – and, especially street performers.

The Drama Village company from Nigeria and Igroky Theatre from Moscow have both “used” the Fringe as a refuge. The director of Drama Village, Awam Amkpa, explained why they first came to the Canadian festivals in 1990,

First, we wanted to bring a performance by black South Africans to a wider public. Here we can earn money to fund projects back home. And we believe that by making contacts and creating a reputation, we will create an effective lobbying group to protect us from being incarcerated again. We have been jailed for performing this theatre back home. Awam Amkpa, Director; *The Drama Village Company*, Nigeria.

They toured the Winnipeg west circuit with *Woza Albert*, “a fantasy of two ex-political detainees wondering what would happen if Christ chose South Africa for his return.”³⁶⁵ And in 1992, they returned with *Ajasco*, “A humorous satire on Africa’s history” Told and sung by “three dancers embark[ing] on a journey to God.”³⁶⁶

In July 1991, Theatre Igroky arrived at the Saskatoon airport – all 23 members, including a financier and 2 street vendors who sold Russian clothes, dolls, and other assorted paraphernalia. They produced an adaptation of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, which was unique: 12 Russians danced and sang their way through a highly visual, both whimsically comic and darkly tragic, interpretation of Orwell’s tale. Most of the actors could not speak English socially, but they spoke it on stage. Pink Floyd (*Off the Wall*) and Russian folk music were intertwined throughout the action. A demonstration for PERASTROKA on stage, transformed into a lively and competitive Folk dance; young women from the audience were enticed up onto the stage by Vitalij

and Raul; young men were lured to the stage by Larisa and Tatiana; they joined the dancers. Tempo and mood changed swiftly. Large rolls of clear plastic unrolled in a dance awash in red lighting, creating an image of bloody slaughter. This show was hugely popular with “everyone”. Some people waited in line for up to 8 hours. On the evening of the attempted Soviet coup in August 1991, their performance was remarkably poignant; people did not want to leave the venue. They waited outside. Later that night, the Russians sat in the beer tent with their audience, drinking vodka and singing the saddest of Russian ballads. Dozens of people crowded around until the small hours of the morning. It was a remarkable experience. As they travelled across the circuit, the Russians came to symbolize something special; “everyone” wanted to meet them, to feed them, and inevitably, to drink vodka with them. They also sang and danced in the streets, passing around a hat afterwards. At the end of the tour, 4 of them “missed” the flight home and sought refugee status in Vancouver.

Film deals & the Fringe environment.

In 1988, a film agent in Los Angeles convinced Shane MaCabe, from Arizona, to bring his one-man show to the Edmonton Fringe; a Vancouver film company was interested in buying the rights, and willing to fly to Edmonton to see the production. MaCabe did not make a film deal, but he did return to the Canadian Fringe. He found that the character of audiences, and the intimate nature of Fringe venues, combined to create an ideal environment for his play, *No Place Like Home*:

It is important that this piece be played in a small, intimate house. The audience needs to experience what is going on around them. I came back to the Fringe because this is the perfect venue. Mine is the only show, so far, that has returned for a second year — and I still sold-out every house, I might even bring it back next year.³⁶⁷

... it is like going to look at the Mona Lisa and having her reach out of the picture frame and slug you.³⁶⁸

MaCabe's show ... is just too personal -- and indeed, too harrowing -- to be normally salable as a theatre evening ³⁶⁹

Acting on the Fringe

Actors have become a cog in the theatre machine. We are expected to sit and wait, to spend our time auditioning for nothing; and we are expected to accept the fact that once we are cast, we will have little or no influence on the project. Arnie MacPherson. ³⁷⁰,

Arnie MacPherson has been acting on the Edmonton Fringe for a decade; has had a "typical" Fringe acting career. Between 1983 and 1988, he was cast by numerous local Fringe companies. He established a reputation as a strong Fringe performer and, in 1989, he founded his "one-man" company, Dark Underbelly Productions, and produced, directed and starred in a couple of "one man shows"³⁷¹. In 1992, he wrote his first play, *Iron John* a, produced and performed it with his wife, Debbie Patterson:

... [an] exuberant and eclectic musical comedy ... A terrific exploration of frustrated dreams and desires in a banal, multi-national corporate worlda non-stop musical comedy extravaganza that's refreshing, entertaining, and uplifting³⁷²

This procession, from acting, to producing, to writing, is a common experience for actors who begin their careers on the Fringe.

Writing on the Fringe:

Urjo Kareda, Artistic Director of Tarragon theatre and a former critic at the Toronto Star, worries that some promising young writers have grown so enamored of the party that they are reluctant to leave. "I don't think there's an incentive to develop as a writer," says Kareda. "Fringes have become an end in themselves. Everything is a success and, all of a sudden, you're a playwright. Fringes can divert people who would grow as writers in a more directed environment. *Real* writers will push their way forward, I suppose. But I worry that good writers will end up *just* working from one fringe festival to the next." Chris Daffoe³⁷³

I write for an ensemble of actors (there are 10 long-time regular members of Teatro). Every script becomes a collaborative project, which eventually includes the Fringe audience. The Fringe offers me the opportunity to write for a large cast ensemble. This is what is at the

heart of my plays. The work does not have to go through the usual new play process; which is having to receive the approval of a director who says the play is good enough for a workshop, in which directorial decisions shape the final script. On the Fringe, I go through that process with the company and the audience, they decide if it is good enough or not, and they shape my final decisions about a script. Stewart Lemoine.³⁷⁴

I have a body of work now, because the Fringe exists and allowed me the opportunity to work. However, as the years pass, I grow somewhat frustrated at the limitations of producing Fringe plays. I want to write a play that demands a full set, a cast of ten, and lighting effects that can be accomplished in more than an hour's tech time. I want to be paid without being funny. Ken Brown³⁷⁵

... since we came into existence at the Edmonton Fringe in 1982 ... I have rarely written a role without knowing who the actor playing was going to be. I think this is a great help in creating plays populated by specific and idiosyncratic characters. In this situation it is possible to create a role that plays on an actor's best-known strengths, or that challenges him to do something unexpected. Of course, it helps that I also direct my own work and therefore *always* able to explain *exactly* what the author had in mind. Stewart Lemoine.³⁷⁶

I lived in Edmonton most of my life and began writing plays right out of high school. I moved to Toronto after 25th Street produced my first play. I did not like the T.O. scene. I began to believe theatre had really lost touch with itself, with what it should and could be. I left Toronto with the decision that if I was going to continue working for the theatre, it had to be on my own terms, in my own way. When I arrived back in Edmonton here was the Fringe, the perfect chance to do it my way. Brad Fraser.³⁷⁷

Now we've gone on to create playwrights like Brad Fraser who does very provocative theatre about individual human concerns. They're the complete opposite of the kind of populist hoopla and social commentary that was there before. Twenty years ago, the energy in this regional cultural field was very much tied into a region-wide view of the identity of the farmer, the Wheat Pools and the War of Riel. It was sort of a unifying theme among people. Fringe festivals, multi-channel television and other world phenomena have unraveled that fabric. Michael Springate³⁷⁸

Workshopping on the Fringe has remarkable advantages over the usual process. First, I have total freedom. Second, I am working with a cast of my choice. And third, I don't have to worry about money. The costs will be covered through ticket sales. Most important is the that success or failure is within my control. I make the choices, the changes, and I decide if the work is succeeding, or failing. One of the most important things that the Fringe offers is that people are allowed to fail. Without this opportunity we can not take the risks necessary to develop exciting and relevant work. Brad Fraser.³⁷⁹

I can try out new and crazy ideas that come from my generation, not the generation of artistic directors. I have a fair chance here, I am equal to everyone else, this has been the most valuable experience for me as a writer. Michael O'Brien.³⁸⁰

When in 1985, in the last moments of *Life After Hockey*, when an imaginary puck dropped into an imaginary Russian goal and the Fringe audience stood and cheered, it was an extraordinary moment in my life and career. I had written a little occasional piece for the 1985 festival, and in the first performance, the audience made it clear that it had communicated to them very directly. Ken Brown,³⁸¹

While the Fringe has always attracted new writers, not all of them are there because the festivals offer an opportunity to experiment. Some of the new work presents nothing unexpected. For many, the Fringe is simply the *only* opportunity to see their work in front of an audience. In 1988, Frank Holden, from Newfoundland, produced and performed in his 90 minute one-man historical drama across the circuit, *Judge Prowse Presiding*. He had sent his script to 20 theatres across the country, and received no response. In the end he "had to settle" for the Fringe. While this is not an unusual Fringe tale, Holden is unique in two respects: shipping his production ahead on the Gray Hound bus, he bicycled from Edmonton to Victoria, and, he is not "the least bit interested in theatre that involves the audience." "That," he says, "is a gratuitous playing with the fourth wall."³⁸²

The Last Word: Criticism -- on the Fringe ?

As a critic on the Fringe, what I am looking for is the exploration of new directions. But, Fringe criticism is unusual in terms of my general theatre reviews. My engagement with the Fringe influences my reviews. I am more excited by the experiment than the finishedness [sic] or ultimate product. I become involved in the process of *my* reactions. The pleasure of assessment takes over from the assessment. Colin Thomas.³⁸³

The Fringes are a structure, a market place, an event -- it is not an alternative to the mainstream. Unfortunately Vancouver and Toronto Fringe set themselves up as "in opposition", they have taken the "Fringe" part too literally. Chris Dafoe.³⁸⁴

The first Fringe show I saw was *Gwendolyn*, it was rough, it was raw, and it was really exciting. Her honesty was compelling. Vi Wagner.³⁸⁵

The non-juried application process really pays off: the Fringe is the only place where we see truly experimental theatre. Colin Thomas.³⁸⁶

You cannot judge Fringe shows on the same level -- you have to be honest to your emotional response. I think the Fringe is as close as theatre comes to making critics irrelevant. The Fringe completely undermines the hierarchy of theatre. Colin Thomas.³⁸⁷

One of the wonderful things about a Fringe is that it breaks down preconceived notions of how you make those [critical] choices and where you get your information. Mira Friedlander.³⁸⁸

You have to take the risks in order to be a part of it -- and that means that automatically people are exposed in a way that they would not normally be. To me, that is exploration. Mira Friedlander.³⁸⁹

The structure of the Fringe destroys the ability of the critics to impose themselves because there is too much to see in too short a time. Ray Conlogue.³⁹⁰

In the Fringe, there is an implicit sort of atomizing thing that goes on with the variety of shows, and hence the variety of visions by people with a fairly anarchic expression of personal belief. There is a paradoxical aspect of fragmentation co-existing with a certain unity. Ray Conlogue.³⁹¹

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### Journal Excerpts

**20 April 1994, Victoria:** They are tattered, bedraggled Goddess' -- frantically mending/sewing/weaving - *Spinning* the tale  
The Goddess in the ghetto -- the muse becomes the rustic gypsy, the trivial street entertainer.

Possible titles:

-*Bitches Brew : A recipe for the destruction of the patriarchy.*

- *Goddess Inferno*

-*Raped Ravaged Revenged*

**27 April Vancouver:** We have a title: *The Happy Cunt, a true story.*  
And, we are *in* 6 out of 7 festivals.

There is no show yet, but the fantasies are great.

**17 June Montreal:** Opened to a sell-out house. The show was a mess, but it had a frenetic and exhilarating energy that both spooked and delighted the house. I wonder how we will re-capture that excitement?

**21 June:** Montreal box office: \$3500.00 Each night, for 4 nights, we had a good strong growing show, then suddenly, one night, we had a nothing but a big mess. Scared the hell out of me.

**10 July, Toronto:** Sold out our first house. The show was stiff, but strong. Good responses from the house and the “techies”. The critics were both kind and cruel. Our posters and handbills have been censored in Fringe club. Here, people keep stealing the ones we post around town – we are told they are “collectors” items – so, we’re selling them at the venue.

**12 July:** Money is a pain in the ass. Thirty hours to Winnipeg, 30 hours to work. We are ready to go to a new level. I want us to stagger off the edge – and fly.

**14 July: Winnipeg:** Sitting on a cold stone step sipping coffee, it is *very* early. I am billeted in a big old house with seven kids, and no garden furniture? I think I’ll take one of the vans and go camp.

**22 July:** We are censored. We met with Craig first thing. We went along with it, like nice little girls – we are afraid of rocking boats.

**26 July:** It’s been an “interesting” Fringe. First, the fire alarm goes off 15 minutes into our *noon* opening. It’s raining outside, we are evacuated, the critic leaves *and* writes a cruel review. We had to “pick-up” from where we left off – soaking wet. Next day we arrive at the venue and they have taken away our fog machine. Then, they take away our candles. Good-bye scenography. Diana went biserk. Deb went into automatic pilot. There is a delicacy to our triangle relationship, which is beautiful in its fragility, terrifying in its complexity.

**27 July:** We sure pissed off somebody. All those catastrophes – it was like a bolt of lightening. From here on in, we refuse to be censored. Nothing good came out of being nice girls. We’ll be punished just as much for being itty bitty feminists. Thank the goddess the new moon is rising for Saskatoon. There is a sequence to the stories: the play begins to influence my terminology, my politics, my friendships, and...my faith, or spirituality? The engagement changes, “as one learns what the work says.”

**29 July, Saskatoon:** 10 hours on the road. I drove a lot, cried a few tears. Deb remains true and steady, proficient and predictable. Diana leaps and hops and flies and falls from one spot to the next. We open

9:00 p.m. Saturday night -- *yahoo*. Today we poster and media blitz. Put Mizz Dent on the "tele" with her charming British accent -- and Deb and I hit the road with our posters.

Deb told me last night that she has always believed a show can only grow, but now she is wondering if a show can disintegrate? What a terrifying thought. Winnipeg was hard.

We've generated a lot of bad reviews, but we sell good houses. *Who* do we play for? Those people who bark and moo, who hoot and whistle, who tell us how much the play means to them. We are *not* going back into rehearsals. We are working on stage, we are working "to be there now" *with* the house -- to let every rustle, giggle, and cough in the house become a part of the world of HAG and NAG.

**20 July:** Someone followed Deb and I around town while we were putting up posters yesterday. They ripped down all our posters. There have been complaints. The police are involved. A board member for 25th St. resigned!! -- over our right to poster!!! The paper quoted him: "The controversy surrounding this play ... is, in my view, an abuse of artistic freedom." Tom refused to censor us. Telephone calls from Edmonton and Victoria. Judy is with us, paving a path; Randy is fighting for us.

We are heading for the 13th venue on the 13th Fringe.

**12 Aug Edmonton:** The moon will be full on opening night, and we are in tune. The show is beginning to fly, audience response is dynamic, it's a love it or hate it success, people are passionate.

**14 Aug:** We opened on the 13th, at the 13th hour, in the 13th venue, and when I went to set up, there were 13 people standing in line waiting for the ticket sellers. HMMMM.

**15 Aug:** There are grumblings around the site; gossip, chitter chatter "what's the matter?" Madhatters have the pulled a coupe with a *bad* show -- *bad* reviews, *bad* structure, *bad bad* girls. Attracting so much attention to themselves!! Tch Tch. Chitter chatter, what's the matter? -- Gossip on the site. The media goes for it, gorges it, condemns it, and pretends it us -- not them.

**1 Sept Vancouver:** Edmonton was a gas, hot, hot, hot -- the show took off, I finally fell in love with it. The stories: the meetings with 'the

community leaders', police and lawyers, and the viciousness of the media -- ouch, it was hot hot hot.

1 Nov, Victoria: As I organize the material remains of the "Happy Cunt" project: newspaper reviews, photographs, posters, handbills, and this journal, into a box with a lid, I feel both immense relief and nagging doubts. I am relieved that we succeeded; we played to sold-out houses and moved at least 3 or 4 hundred people across the country to their feet. We stimulated debates and made his-story: the Globe and Mail printed the word "cunt" for the first time, according to Chris Dafoe, and, I'm told, a C.B.C. Radio reviewer said the word on the air waves. We stood up to the media. At least, I *think* we did. It is this doubt that nags at me. It got pretty nasty at times. Some people were *really* mad at us. I was accosted in the streets by strangers, harassed by detectives, threatened by a venue owner, and, I am sorry to say, manipulated by the media. But, at the same time, there was that group of women in Montreal who stayed after the show to shake our hands, congratulate, and encourage us -- not one of them was under 60, I'm sure. *They* knew what we were doing, they were inspired, and that gave us courage. It tuned out we needed it.

The lingering anger I feel comes from my frustration with these material remains. The historical evidence, that I am packing away in a box with a lid, would lead any "reasonable" person to think that *The Happy Cunt*, was not "good" theatre.

On opening night in Vancouver, we had an (almost) full-house standing ovation; and this was the critical response in the Georgia Straight:

This show tempts one to say it sets feminism back 20 years, but that would be inaccurate. It only sets feminism back ten years, because 20 years ago the movement had more important things to do than indulge itself in this kind of wretched excess. ... The program carries a warning of "Language offensive to the dum dums of daddydum." The only thing I found offensive was that through its sensationalistic title and utterly spurious billing as comedy, this dreck is drawing audiences away from far more deserving performances. (Bob Macdonald) ....

And so on, for another 5 column inches.

Deb wrote a response that was published:

I am pleased as punch to be goaded into replying to Mr. (Old) MacDonald's review of my play. ... We were honoured to receive a standing ovation on our opening night in appreciation of the "dreck". Mr. MacDonald did show keen insight when he stated that my character, HAG, appeared to have "gone off her medication." Indeed, my passions have not been potted by Prozac or the pedestrian prattle of the popes of patriarchy. This cow would also like to address the bull who charged her with setting feminism back 10 years with her "wretched excess". Staggering on the edge of a doomed world, women today are *wretched* ("deeply afflicted, dejected, or distressed"). When farmers call us quack, we quack back!

But it *was* good theatre. It inspired people, they told us so; it moved people, they laughed and hooted and barked -- and laughed some more. One guy in Toronto saw the show 3 times, he told us it "changed" his entire understanding of women, and, he bought us all several beers. Too bad that does not count for anything, critically and historically.

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<sup>334</sup> Interview 1991.

<sup>335</sup> For example, *Way Off Broadway*, Group and Full Figured Theatre from Vancouver, Real Mounted Productions and the Juanabees from Victoria, *The Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie*, Teatro de la Quincidia, and *Atomic Improv* from Edmonton, Theatre X and Awasikan Theatre from Winnipeg, the Out of Toon Players from Saskatoon, *Curtain Razors* from Regina, Doug Curtis and *One Yellow Rabbit* from Calgary, *Mump and Smoot*, Karen Hines, and James O'Riely from Toronto, Eliza Berry, and *Strange Fish Productions* from Montreal, Foresight Theatre, *Sensible Footwear*, *English Suitcase*, Jonathan K, *English Madhatters*, and Petra Massy from England.

<sup>336</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>337</sup> Interview, 1991. *An Orchard Among the Dandelions* was produced when House was 19. It received good reviews and attracted a full house the day I attended. Edmonton Fringe, 1991.

<sup>338</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>339</sup> "The Meaning of Life on the Fringe," *Border Crossings* Sept. 1990.

<sup>340</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>341</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>343</sup> Interview, 1991.
- <sup>344</sup> Interview, 1991.
- <sup>345</sup> Interview, 1992.
- <sup>346</sup> Interview, 1991.
- <sup>347</sup> John Turner, Interview 1993.
- <sup>348</sup> Press package for Trickster, 1990.
- <sup>349</sup> David Chantler, Interview, 1990.
- <sup>350</sup> Michael Wener, Interview, 1992.
- <sup>351</sup> Qtd in Vit Wagner, "Portrait of an artists working the fringes," Toronto Star 29 June 1990: E3.
- <sup>352</sup> "The theme is women, the tone is tongue-in-cheek," Globe and Mail [Toronto] 5 July 1991: C2.
- <sup>353</sup> "Female themes riveting drama," Edmonton Journal 19 Aug. 1992: E5.
- <sup>354</sup> Lloyd Dykk, "A new meaning for Men Inside," Vancouver Sun 1990.
- <sup>355</sup> "Explaining Breast," Edmonton Sun, 17 Aug. 1992: 24.
- <sup>356</sup> Kinesis Sept. 1988 : 19.
- <sup>357</sup> "They're angry. They're funny. They're women," Times Colonist [Victoria] 29 Sept. 1991: A14.
- <sup>358</sup> Caroline Fenz, qtd in Bruce Willems-Braun, "Fringe Festivals, Cultural Politics, nd the Negotiation of Subjectivity," MA. thesis, Department of Geography, Univ of British Columbia 1991.
- <sup>359</sup> Ibid. Sandy Shreve and Helen Potrebenco with the Euphioniously Feminist and Non-Performing Quintet, Vancouver A 1982 study on women working in Canadian theatre concluded that women represent 13% of working directors and playwrights. On the Fringe this number averages between 35% and 45%, and has reached 60%.
- <sup>360</sup> Vit Wagner, "Portrait of an artist working the fringes," Toronto Star, 29 June 1990: E3. The following un-cited quotes are from the same article.
- <sup>361</sup> Vit Wagner, "Three gems that helped Fringe draw largest crowds ever" Toronto Star 8 July :1990 : C6.

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Paisley, Interview 1992.

<sup>364</sup> Williamson, Interview 1990. The following un-cited quotes are from the same interview.

<sup>365</sup> Drama Village program notes, The Fringe That Roared: Edmonton Fringe Schedule 1990: 35.

<sup>366</sup> Drama Village program notes, The Fringe also Rises: Edmonton Fringe Schedule 1992: 83.

<sup>367</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Ray Conlogue, "Taking in the Fringe Phenomenon," Globe and Mail [Toronto] 23 Aug. 1989:

n.p.

<sup>370</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>371</sup> *Drinking In America* by Eric Bogosian, *The Redthroats* by David Cale, and *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*.

<sup>372</sup> Kevin Prokosh, "Fringe Festival turns in eclectic concoction of plays," Winnipeg Free Press 19 July 1992: B17.

<sup>373</sup> "Get down, dress down, Fringe's in Town," Globe and Mail [Toronto] 29 June 1991: n.p.

<sup>374</sup> Interview, 1992.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> Interview, 1992.

<sup>377</sup> Interview, 1992.

<sup>378</sup> Qtd. in Sarah Yates, "Western Regionalism and the Prairie Theatre Exchange." CTR 81 (1994) : 90.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

<sup>380</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>381</sup> Personal correspondence with author, Nov. 1993. *Life After Hockey*, a one-man show, went on to have a long theatrical and film life. Brown toured with it across Canada twice and to Europe once. At least nine different actors have played the character "Rink Rat Brown". It has been produced in French and German. In total, the play has been performed over 500 times. It was produced as a film in 1989 (directed by Tom Radford) and garnered nearly all the major awards at the 1990 Alberta Motion Picture Industry Awards: best picture, best screenplay, best direction, best cinematography, and best actor.

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<sup>382</sup> Frank Holden, Interview, 1989.

<sup>383</sup> Interview, 1992.

<sup>384</sup> Chris Dafoe, Interview 1991.

<sup>385</sup> Interview, 1991

<sup>386</sup> Colin Thomas, Interview, 1992.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

<sup>388</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Interview, 1991.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

## **PART II: The Fringe Phenomenon**

### **Preface:**

#### **Understanding Culture as Process**

Culture is an on-going process of creation, establishment, crisis and innovation. People create social meanings and symbolic representations for those meanings, traditions and rituals are established which uphold and entrench these meanings; moments of crisis occur when old meanings no longer work to maintain social harmony; crisis evokes innovation and inspires the creation of new social meanings. It is in this sense that social reality can be understood as a cultural construction. Theatre artists try, most often, to capture the critical and innovative moments of this process, the moments when people experience a crisis or interruption in normal every day life. Once captured and re-presented, the process of human relations and symbolic meanings can be explored and understood in new and different ways.

§§§

It was an unusually warm midnight in downtown Victoria. Outside, the streets were full of people celebrating Friday night. Inside the theatre, it was hot and despite the hour, the seats were full. I scanned my video-camera over the audience, then focused on the stage. It was bare with a single platform. I'd seen these two young actors many times on the university stages, and I knew the writer, also a theatre student. Throughout the performance, the occasional hoots and laughter of a drunken party drifted in off the street.

The story was simple, almost naive. Two people who had been friends in grade school, meet at university. They are nice young people from nice families, so they go on a first date. She goes with him because she's polite, and she necks with him

because she does not feel “right” about saying no. He rapes her while they are necking; swiftly and silently. Afterwards, in the glow of two single lights, they tell their stories. Her innocence is gone; her world falls apart. He discovers his manhood; his world unfolds before him. He completes his final monologue with a loud and satisfied laugh; my mind snaps back to my work. I pan the camera across the audience, looking for their response through the viewfinder. Accidentally, I catch the quiet young playwright’s face. I wonder, is the play based in her reality?

As I exit the theatre, I see four young men in crisp white sailor suits huddled around three extremely young prostitutes. I take my camera case off my shoulder and perch on it, watching the scene. One of the young girls stands balanced on the edge of the curb. The street light casts a glow on her face. I’m sure she is younger than my teenage daughter. One of the sailors laughs. I pick up my camera and walk to the next performance, thinking about my daughter ... .

The play on that warm Friday evening was about a private and unspoken experience between two young people. The climax of the performance, the swift silent rape, was a critical moment in the process of their lives; it was a moment filled with potential to shape their futures. The scene on the street was a social drama about a public experience between a group of sailors, three teenage prostitutes, and everyone on the streets interested in observing – or avoiding – the transaction. As I sat perched on my camera case, I experienced a fleeting, but nonetheless profound response to a theatrical performance that was not, in itself, particularly provocative. For a moment, I *saw* the social construction of adolescent prostitution – the public buying and selling of a young girl’s sexuality as people mundanely wait for green lights and hunt for parking spots. I saw it as “normal” – and, as a natural extension of the silent and uneventful theatrical rape I had just witnessed.

The loud and drunken laughter of the sailors drifting off the streets into the theatre, the final satisfied laugh of the young man on stage, the glow of the street light on the young prostitute's face, the crisp virginal whiteness of the sailors' uniforms, the flow of Friday night pedestrians and traffic, the downtown atmosphere, the time of night, the unusual warmth of the evening, all this flowed together and crystallized into a moment of acute awareness -- a moment when I saw something about society that is normally invisible. I felt the *social* mechanisms and boundaries that both allow *and* persuade me to believe that the selling and buying of a young girl's body is rightly a "normal" public event, inevitable, historical, and sometimes romantic.

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To perceive day to day reality as a social construction enables the mind to think about creating possibilities for change. It is only when we recognize the socially and culturally constructed structures of society, that we are able to recognize the potential to change those structures. It was not a "great" performance of an outstanding script that provoked this perception. Rather, it was the framework in which I experienced the performance; the Fringe Festival.

"Part Two" is primarily concerned with exploring and understanding the social and aesthetic experiences that this framework (the production model) invites, stimulates, and creates. In order to do this, I conceptualize the Fringe as a process, as a "cultural performance." This involves "letting go" of the boundaries and categories that separate theatre and event, performance and reception -- art and life.

## Chapter Six:

### **Culture on the Fringe: Clowns and Festivity**

We have to go into the subjunctive world of monsters, demons, and clowns, of cruelty and poetry, in order to make sense of our daily lives, earning our daily bread. And when we enter whatever theatre our lives allow us, we have already learned how strange and multi-layered everyday life is, how extraordinary the ordinary. We then no longer need in Auden's terms the "endless safety" of ideologies but prize the "needless risk" of acting and interacting. Victor Turner.<sup>392</sup>

We've seen apocalyptic clowns and cataleptic actors. We've seen spoofs and satires, revues and fantasias and dramas. We've seen the Canuck and the Classic rub shoulders. We've seen the Bard with his hair down and his dander up. We've laughed at death, and cried at the punch line. We've seen one woman "explore her inner labyrinth" and the outer limits. We've heard the mime speak, and seen the dancer lie down with the diva in the beer tent. We have heard "alas, poor Yorick," and have seen the word multi-media held up like a talisman. We've seen SAK in the folly, and folly in the sack. The X-rated, and X-cited. We've stayed up late. In short, we've been bingeing... . Liz Nicholls<sup>393</sup>

At the core of this chapter is an analysis of the parallels between festivity and clowning as cultural performances. "Cultural performance" is a term Victor Turner used to develop his concept of the plural and reflexive functions of frameworks such as festivals. The term emphasizes the processes and inter-relatedness of cultural events, be they theatre, ritual, carnival, or festival. Probing the analogies between festivity and clowning as cultural performances has three central purposes. One is a discussion of the socio-cultural processes of festival, what they are and how they work. Another is a critique of the work of Mump and Smoot the "clowns of horror," as performance and as part of the festivities. The final objective is to discuss the Fringe festivals as "festivals," and, in the process, substantiate parallels between theories concerned with the socio-cultural processes of festivity and observations of the Fringe festivals. The overall objective of this chapter is to reach toward an understanding of performance as culture in process on the Fringe.

Turner's work provides direction for recognizing culture in process.<sup>394</sup> His observations of cultural performance across cultures (from ritual to festival, carnival, and theatre, in tribal and industrialized societies) are intently focused on how people(s) change. Liminality is a key theoretical concept in Turner's work. The concept comes from Arnold van Gennep's work on *rites of passage*; and is used to indicate the transitional phase of ritual ('limen' means 'threshold' in Latin). During the liminal phase "ritual subjects pass through a period of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo."<sup>395</sup> Liminality is a state of suspended social or quotidian reality. It is a "betwixt and between" state of being in which people are provoked to "think hard about the elements and basic building blocks of symbolic complexes they had hitherto taken for granted."<sup>396</sup> Turner understands the significance of ritual liminality as a state in which individuals or groups transcend social and cultural imperatives so that they may be able to perceive, scrutinize, and even reject, the value and meaning of those imperatives. He extends this concept to examine the social dynamics of cultural performances in general and across cultures from the tribal to the post-industrial, from the primitive to the postmodern.

Liminality *par excellence*, says Turner, occurs at those times and places when "the analysis of culture into factors and their free or ludic recombination in any and every possible pattern, however weird, is made possible."<sup>397</sup> Turner's fascination with the liminal was founded in a desire to understand experience – the *alive* experience of symbols in action, of the abstract in reality. The concept of liminality, as a realm of possibility where symbolic meaning is open and ambiguous, provokes a conceptualization of "culture in action" that informs all of this chapter.

### **Festivity on the Fringe**

... We bid adieu to *X. Marks The Fringe*, the record-breaking 10th anniversary edition of the wacky little festival that grew. It's your last chance to sample (nibble, sup or glut yourself...) from the menu of

theatrical offerings at the nine-day rites that mark the changing of the seasons (bang!) in these parts. Liz Nicholls<sup>398</sup>

The Edmonton Fringe began as a low budget experimental theatre event and became an annual celebration of performance, which is truly a popular festival. What prompted a theatre event that might well have become an elite occasion, or just as easily disappeared for lack of funds, to become instead, a popular festival? The sense of festivity began with the artists celebrating the freedom to create whatever they chose, the opportunity to self-produce, and the occasion of meeting each other. The potential for a popular festival began to grow when *One Yellow Rabbit* left their venue and went into the streets to attract an audience. When the first beer tent opened in 1985, and traffic was re-routed to accommodate the crowds, the festivities, without a doubt, began in earnest. When the clowns and street performers, the buffoons and the jugglers began to arrive in significant numbers in late 1980s, the festivities became more complex, provocative, and performative.

On the Fringe, the clowns, buffoons, and fools are not only the most popular of performers, they also offer excellent examples for a criticism concerned with theatre and festivity as culture in action. It is no surprise that the Fringe festivals attract a large number of clowns and actors experimenting with clowning techniques. Festivals, carnivals, and public celebrations are where we expect to find clowns. What is unusual is the extent of festivity and the topsy-turvy world of clowns and their ilk that surrounds the production of plays.

Fringe critics and theatre reviewers readily and inevitably comment on the carnival atmosphere of the Fringe. Some critics decry the abundance of frivolity and foolishness, and others applaud and celebrate this unruly aspect of the festivals. Frequently, critics set up a tension between the frivolity of clowns and comedy inside the theatres, the tom-foolery outside the theatres, and, the more “serious-minded”

productions. Many have perceived the former two as somehow distracting “due” attention from the latter. In an early article on the 1986 Edmonton Fringe, Robert Wallace discusses the Fringe with evident disdain for the festivities. He describes a market fair atmosphere where “actors hawk their shows like peddlers on parade. ...[to a] party crowd whose taste dictate popularity at the Fringe.” He sets up a tension between the “high” and the “low” by “discovering” an élite inner circle of artists on the Fringe, along with “another more serious audience” who appreciate this “fringe within the Fringe.” In Wallace’s mind, productions such as Judith Thompson’s *The Crackwalker*, Sam Shepherd’s *The Unseen Hand*, and David Mamet’s *The Woods*, are evidence of this inner circle. And, the “hawking actors” and “party goers” are indicative of “hit-makers” capitalizing on a “stampede mentality”.<sup>399</sup>

Whatever the evaluation, articles on the Fringe invariably include a description of the festivities. The metaphors that critics use to describe this phenomenon are interesting and diverse. For example, Chris Dafoe describes the festivity on the Edmonton Fringe with a title for a horror film: “*The Festival Thing That Ate the Theatre*.”<sup>400</sup> Chris Johnson evokes an ancient festive image when he writes about the Winnipeg Fringe; “the original Dionysian spirit is coming back to life ... the event thrives, the carnival goes on.”<sup>401</sup> Mira Friedlander uses a contemporary image, she describes the circuit as a “four month non-stop celebration”<sup>402</sup> Jon Kaplan’s description gives the festivities an organic quality; “the Fringe transforms Toronto’s summer wasteland into a concentrated hotbed of activity.”<sup>403</sup> The Fringe has also been called, “Mac-Theatre,” a “theatre industry,” and a “ghetto.” The incongruity of the metaphors that critics employ suggests there is little common sense of what festivity is as a contemporary cultural phenomenon.

Ironically, apprehending the tension between frivolity and seriousness, the market place and the inner circle, the popular and the distinguished, is one way to begin

examining the socio-cultural process of festivity. Festivals embrace both the high and low, the popular and the official in the same occasion. This is one of their defining features. However, in festivity the normal order of things is inverted or subverted; the low may be exalted, the high debased, civic authority might submit to the populous, or in traditional terms; the fool wears the king's crown. Wallace's disdain for the popular and respect for the distinguished on the Fringe is a reflection of a lack of a sense of *theatre* as a festive event.

### Festivity:

The socio-cultural process is chaotic; it is fraught with the tensions between chaos and order. Sally Moore observes that, "socio-cultural elements are in continual flux and transformation, and so are people."<sup>404</sup> However, "there is always a strain towards order and harmony, a logos within the variability, an intent to transform human variability from mere chaos and disconnection into significant process": every rule implies unruliness, every law, unlawfulness.<sup>405</sup> This is a paradox of the human condition and of culture. In festivity this paradox is enacted. The symbols of social-order: memberships of status, wealth, and social etiquette, are un-ordered and re-arranged. In the process of festivity the invisible boundaries of these memberships are made visible; they are often ridiculed and always exposed as arbitrary and "man-made." There are two types of festivals: official and popular.<sup>406</sup> In official festivals the paradox of culture is resolved and order is celebrated; in popular festivals the paradox is revealed and chaos is celebrated.

Festival is a social phenomenon encountered in virtually all human cultures, it is a complex cultural performance related to and including carnival, celebration and ceremony.<sup>407</sup> Festivals have historically and cross culturally been times when people conjure up cultural chaos. According to Frank Manning, "they un-make their world to see how they make sense of their world".<sup>408</sup> Popular festivals are a time and space of

social experimentation; people collectively experiment with social meanings by virtue of “playing outside” of the “norms” that govern social behaviour.<sup>409</sup> While frivolity, laughter, and general unruliness are integral parts of festive behaviour, participants are nonetheless engaging in a serious pursuit of cultural knowledge.

Theories about the social functions and cultural consequences of festivity vary. The traditional “safety valve theory” argues that festivity is “safe”, that it never changes anything, but rather relieves mounting social pressures for change. Contrasting this theory is Turner’s argument that festivity is a *liminoid* performance that acts as a catalyst for significant social change. The safety-valve theory is essentially a top-down perspective; it assumes “rulers” possess the capacity to permit, oppress, and manipulate festivity. Turner’s is a “bottom(s)-up” perspective; it assumes festivity evokes the capacity to evaluate, criticize, and manipulate social imperatives. “Bottoms-up” is also a metaphor for festivity, a common salute to drinking with friends, and, of course, Bottom is the name of one of Shakespeare’s clowns. For a Clown or a Fool, this coincidence of metaphors would be proof enough of the truth in Turner’s thinking.

While there is debate about the social consequences of contemporary festivity, anthropologists do agree on common defining points of festivals: they create their own energy; they are cyclical, appearing and disappearing annually, creating their own boundaries and transforming the every-day, work-a-day space of their host communities. A festive event is as much a social-cultural process as it is a produced event with performances, artisans, food and liquor. Most significantly, people behave differently when they are festive. They break rules and do away with social categories. They laugh at socially taboo jokes. They over indulge: eating, drinking, talking and embracing with strangers. They wear distinctive hats, disguise themselves with painted faces, make new friends, and stay up late into the night for a number of days.

In Turner's discussions on festivals and carnivals he emphasizes their meta-structural character. He says that to make a carnival, "is equivalent to making a chaos, where everything is confused and nobody knows where anything is: 'What means what' becomes an open possibility."<sup>40</sup>

In our first interview, Randy Smith, producer of the inaugural Victoria Fringe, described his underlying production strategy as "trying to create chaos and then *trying* to control it." Smith provided an example of this strategy in action: he asked The Flaming Idiots (a troupe of jugglers from Texas who incorporate social satire and fire into their unbelievable tumbling and juggling feats) to perform at a busy downtown cross road that borders the Fringe area and the MacPherson Playhouse -- during the theatre's intermission. When the Idiots began juggling flaming torches in the middle of the intersection three things happened simultaneously: a large crowd of Fringe participants gathered in the street surrounding the Idiots, a group of "suited-up" theatre goers crowded out into the sidewalk to watch, and the police arrived. What I witnessed from across the street was a moment of incongruity that was hilarious for both Fringe participants and MacPherson patrons; the MacPherson patrons were watching Fringe patrons watch the Idiots with the police controlling the surrounding traffic -- "what meant what" was definitely open to possibility.

The paradox of Smith's production strategy, "controlled chaos," provides an excellent metaphor for thinking about festivity. Festivals encompass order and disorder, within the festive event and between the celebrations and the everyday world.<sup>41</sup> The parallels between festivity and clowning that I want to highlight begin with this paradox. Festivity is a space and time of "betwixt and between" the categories and symbolic boundaries of ordinary social life; it involves a process of crossing-over what are normally invisible boundaries of social behaviour. In this process, those boundaries are exposed, they are made visible. The clown's persona is likewise

paradoxical and to much the same effect; “clowning is paradoxical in that it involves a simultaneous subversion and transcendence of itself.”<sup>412</sup> “The clown exists to evoke that which must be suppressed”<sup>413</sup> – in other words, to make visible the invisible.

### Clowns and Festivity

The Shaman is the prototype of the poet, the priest, and the actor. The poet’s function is to give utterance to that which others cannot say. The priest’s function is to mediate with the supernatural, between [wo]man and not [wo]man. The actor’s function is to express, through his body, a second virtual reality and to make that imagined reality manifest. The vatic utterances give birth to poetry, the spirit medium function of the shaman develops into the craft of the clown. He is the sacred actor, the holy fool. Anthony Frost.<sup>414</sup>

The clown’s performance is a parabasis and a parataxis that disrupts and interrupts customary frames and expected logic and syntax and creates a reflexive and ironic dialogue, an open space of questioning. Barbara A. Babcock.<sup>415</sup>

The clown is “constituted internally through paradoxes of self-reference.” Don Handelman.<sup>416</sup>

Perhaps best of all Turner loved the clowns. Edith Turner.<sup>417</sup>

Clowns combine contradictory features in their composition: the playful and the serious, temptation and danger, frivolity and gravity, jest and earnestness. They are terrified when there is nothing to be afraid of, and foolishly content when there is everything to fear. At the Lecoq school of mime and performance in Paris, students go through a series of mask exercises in an effort to discover their own internal contradictions. They learn to play the ultra intellectual under the mask of the idiot, youth under the mask of age, humility under the mask of pride.<sup>418</sup> In short, they discover inconsistency of character. The last step in this training is the discovery of one’s clown.

The individual’s clown is the repressed self, repressed because its expression would entail socially unacceptable behaviour.<sup>419</sup>

The repressed self is of course linked to social standards and boundaries of behaviour. In this way clowns are intrinsically linked to the society of their time. But, they are also outsiders to society. The play of forces between the clown and society, and *within* the internal composition of the clown, parallel the social forces that are at play in festivity.

In order to examine the parallels between festivity and clowning as cultural performances there are three central elements of festivity that I wish to discuss in relation to the performances of Mump and Smoot. These are reflexivity, the carnivalesque, and ritual. Each of these is a socio-cultural phenomenon. Reflexivity refers to the moments when people become aware of how *they make sense* of symbols. The carnivalesque in festivity is concerned primarily with the body, and in particular with the body out-of-control, or “beyond this world.” By looking at the ritual aspects of both the festivals and Mump and Smoot’s performances, I explore the concept of liminality, which is so central to Turner’s anthropology of performance, and, accordingly, this understanding of cultural performance.

### **Mump and Smoot: Clowns of Horror**

This is savage, brilliant theatre that taps into our most unresolved guilt and fears. Evil’s command over innocence, tyranny, betrayal – the big themes of tragedy – are reduced to elemental essence and played out in comic crayon colours <sup>420</sup>

They are the embodiment of Antoin Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty,” layered with the subtler, existentialistic overtones of a Samuel Beckett. <sup>421</sup>

Mump and Smoot combine the slapstick costumes and precise dance-like movements of clowning with horror-movie camp and symbolist drama. David Berreby. <sup>422</sup>

... in a Dantesque underworld. There’s cannibalism, violence, and religious angst – and you’ll scream with laughter and wonder about yourself. Liz Nicholls. <sup>423</sup>

Mump and Smoot are not the Marx Brothers. They are not the Ritz Brothers. They are not even the Three Stooges. Indeed what they are is

conceivably the most convincing rationale for the 49th Parallel since the War of 1812. Clive Barnes.<sup>424</sup>

Michael Kennard and John Turner – Mump and Smoot, met at a Second City workshop in Toronto in 1987.<sup>425</sup> They studied clowning with Richard Pochinko at the Toronto Resource Centre; this is when they created their clown characters. Kennard and Turner attribute Pochinko with having the greatest influence on their development as clowns. Debbie Tidy joined the team as Wog in 1989. After the 1991 Fringe, Tidy left the trio. In 1990, with their director, Karen Hines (*Pochsy's Lips*), they attended Jacques Lecoq's school in Paris. They have performed for Second City and at the Factory Studio Lab in Toronto, the Comedy Festival in Vancouver, at numerous universities, and, in the summer of 1991, they produced *Caged ...with Wog* at the Greenwich Village's Astor Place Theatre in New York.

Mump and Smoot with Wog achieved instant Fringe success when they toured with their first Fringe production in 1989: *Mump and Smoot in Something ...with Wog*. The self-styled "Clowns of Horror" struck a chord with critics and audiences across the Fringe circuit. In 1990, when they returned to produce *Mump and Smoot in Caged...with Wog*, daily newspapers and weekly publications featured their photograph above articles about the Fringes. They appeared on the cover of Canadian Theatre Review in 1991. The Saskatoon Fringe used their photo for their Festival poster in 1992: 1992 was the year that they returned to the circuit for their third and (so far) final tour, with *Mump and Smoot in Ferno* – without Wog. The image of these clowns – Mump and Smoot awash in eerie lighting, their mouths' agape with a fearful wonder and their eyes wide with a defiant mischief – aptly captures a sense of the Fringe. There is an impression of the paradox of these events in this image; like Mump and Smoot's performances, it captures the strange combination of the darker, risky feeling of the festivals coupled with the rambunctious and the frivolous.

By all appearances Mump and Smoot are of different worlds. Mump is gentlemanly; he wears a jacket with tails and red cummerbund, his colours are mellow and calm, his tights are lustrous and close fitting. He is elegantly “suited-up”. Smoot is child-like; his shorts are rust-red, ragged, and big enough to hide in, he wears a torn black t-shirt, his colours are earthy and fiery. Mump has a dark green skull cap with a single horn in the centre, like a unicorn’s. Smoot’s cap is red with two stubby little horns, like a devil’s. Mump’s face is painted white and yellow, with fine green lines defining his mouth and eyes. His make-up accentuates his expressions of calm and stability. Sometimes he appears remarkably vacant. Smoot’s face is painted red and yellow. His make-up accentuates the extremes of his inner contrasts; his eyes are red with sorrow one moment and with rage the next; terror and joy are constantly juxtaposed in his expressions.

Barbara Drennan describes Mump as “a systems clown” and Smoot as a “chaos clown”.<sup>426</sup> The systems clown, she explains “displays self-control, assimilation into society, law, justice, duty, logic: yet he is an impostor.” For Drennan, Mump exposes a social reality of dissembling. “He tells us we all pose at belonging. We all wear disguises and dissemble because society demands it of us.” In contrast, Smoot is “free of law and order; he operates blind to the strictures of reality... he is an outcast, or victim, and not assimilated into society.” He reminds us of the “artificial orderliness that holds together all bureaucracies, institutions and social systems.”

Drennan’s description nicely captures the duality of order in Mump and chaos in Smoot. Yet, her discussion is limited. Mump evidently assumes the high status posture of authority and order, in his costume and his actions. He frequently defines Smoot’s boundaries, encouraging and discouraging Smoot according to his own standards. Smoot is clearly chaotic in his behaviour; at times he can barely contain himself. He is constantly overwhelmed by possibilities. However, in the world of the

play, Smoot is no simple victim to Mump. Their relationship is transformative and complex. Chaos and order are not so neatly dichotomized between them, or within them.

### **Mump and Smoot In Something With Wog**

Open Space Gallery, Victoria, 4 October 1989, 7:00 p.m.: The buzz of a full house is filled with anticipation. The lights go down, the music fades; we wait for our first encounter with Mump and Smoot. The clowns of horror who have excited critics and audiences across the country are finally in Victoria. The lights come up briefly; the stage is bare. Wog stands in an eerie glow holding a placard: "*Mump and Smoot*, she flips the card -- *In Something*." She has the black costume and white face of a mime, but her presence is menacing and foreboding. She casts her glance around us as the light fades into black. From the darkness of the far corner of the room, behind us, we hear a crash, a whine, a scream, then a reassuring mumble. We begin to giggle.

Little inarticulate voices in the dark keep us giggling. Are they lost? Are they looking for something? Mump shines his flashlight on a small piece of paper. A map? Ah, they *are* looking for something. Smoot follows close behind Mump, who, intent on his map, reverently places one foot in front of the other. We are silent for a moment. But, Smoot's steadfast determination to mirror Mump's every move, so precisely, makes us giggle again. They both stop dead and stare at us. All their previous intent vanishes as they shift their attentions to us. Because we can not stop laughing, we cross-over and become the fools; we are too stupid to recognize the seriousness of their endeavor. It is the presence of such serious intent directed toward nothing apparent that makes us laugh. But, we are still in the dark.

First, they examine us and delight in our presence, then they scold us for interrupting. They proceed, in the dark, with their map. Then, Smoot finds a rock, the

lights come up, and Wog appears from a box the size of a coffin turned on its end. She hisses, Smoot stabs her with a plunger, she falls back into her box. The opening ends with Smoot proudly admiring the rock.

*In Something* contains three skits that are framed by the opening scene in which Mump and Smoot find the rock, and an ending scene in which they find a “*really big rock*.” Each skit is literally and figuratively “set-up” and introduced by Wog. She strikes and re-sets during black transitions, and re-appears in the light with a placard for each skit: *The Café*, *The Wake*, and *The Doctor*. Other than the occasional well-directed words, these placards are the only language in the show. Wog communicates with singularly steady and menacing glances, hisses, and movement. Mump and Smoot communicate with multiple levels of intonation, facial expressions, and movement; they are both verbose in their gibberish.

The three scenarios unfold with an abundance of uproariously funny physical “schtick.” In the *Café*, a sense of elegance is created with classical music. As they dine on spaghetti and wine, there is a bounty of physical comedy created by Smoot’s attempts to maintain appropriate behaviour in context with his surroundings, *and* under the critical eye of Mump. In *The Wake*, Smoot and Mump visit their dear dead friend (a stuffed corpse laid out on the coffin box). Smoot carelessly dismembers their dead friend’s arm from his body. Mump, after thoroughly admonishing Smoot, then inadvertently decapitates the corpse. The physical schtick reaches absurd heights when, by the accident of one simple gesture, the arm becomes a bat, and the head a ball. In *The Doctor*, Mump gives Smoot a routine examination and in the process Smoot’s bodily parts are invariably compressed, extracted, dismembered, and re-membered -- with a staple gun.

Wog’s role in each skit becomes increasingly perplexing. She is omnipotent with powers of resurrection and mind control. In *The Café*, she is a figure on the perimeters

of the action; the waitress who appears and re-appears according to her own unpredictable “waitress logic”. In *The Wake*, Mump and Smoot try to resurrect their dead friend with a ritual designed to evoke the powers of a deity they name Umo. But, the ritual goes wrong. Instead of *Umo*, Wog appears as a serpent that explodes out of the belly of their dead friend. In *The Doctor*, Wog takes possession of Mump’s mind and forces him to dissect Smoot. Wog’s disposition remains the same throughout: silent glares and restraining hisses, sometimes directed towards us. She is an enigma.

The rock that Smoot found in the opening scene, like Wog, re-appears in each skit. In *The Café*, Smoot is overjoyed with the of pleasure of giving a gift to Mump, the rock. The skit ends with Wog finding the rock (after Mump and Smoot have left the scene) and glaring knowingly at us as the lights go down. In *The Wake*, Smoot places a rock beside their dead friend’s corpse. In the doctor’s office, when under the control of Wog, Mump dissects Smoot; he removes a rock from Smoot’s stomach and passes it to Wog. At this moment there are always people in the audience who spontaneously whisper, “Ah!, The rock!” – as if something has suddenly “fallen into place”. Mump and Smoot stop dead in their tracks, turn in unison to the “whispers in the dark” and say, *with words* – “Oh that’s smart!” This is always the most elated moment in the performance; the audience erupts into great roars of laughter. It is a remarkable experience of juxtaposition.

### **Reflexivity:**

When people in the audience whisper, “ah, the rock,” they have quite suddenly grasped an understanding of the rock as being significant of something else; we *see* it as a symbol. The comic and chaotic world of Mump and Smoot abruptly appears to contain some type of symbolic order, which is governed by the rock, Wog, and most interestingly, by our capacity to make sense of this *without* language. The absence of language marks any symbolic meanings we might create for the rock as ambiguous,

and open-ended; this prompts an awareness that symbolic meaning is of our *own* making. Numerous possibilities are imagined and juxtaposed; are Mump and Smoot unknowingly gathering the rocks for Wog? Is she the over-arching order they cannot dodge? Or perhaps the rock is symbolic of Mump and Smoot's potential capacity to elude Wog? Or, is it *our* ability to comprehend the rock as a symbol, as the "missing important thing", is this what the rock symbolizes?

Turner stresses that for a cultural performance to be truly reflexive, "violence has to be done to commonsense ways of classifying the world and society."<sup>47</sup> Mump and Smoot disrupt our "commonsense" of language with their gibberish. We joyfully create our own meanings to understand their gibberish, for almost an hour, when suddenly we apprehend a whole other level of meaning via the rock. The unexpected oscillation or movement of meaning, of how we were making sense of things, provoked an awareness of *how* we make sense. This was an experience of reflexivity; we were conscious of ourselves as the makers of symbolic meaning. This points to one of the affinities between Mump and Smoot and festival as cultural performances. There is an increased potential for reflexivity that both festivity and clowns evoke.

Clowns exist in a haphazard world; they are not purely actors and performers. They have the same ambiguous relationship with the theatre as they do with society. Their audiences are always present; every rustle, sneeze, whisper, giggle and laugh in the house directs their attention and intentions. This relationship is reciprocal. Their audiences experience the same ambiguous boundary between play and reality. We are never completely inside or outside Mump and Smoot's world. The same type of reciprocal relationship also exists in festival; to be present at a festival is to be a participant. Frequently, on the Fringe festivals, the relationship between the quotidian and the festive is also reciprocal. It is in these occasions that the Fringe *festival* becomes most evidently performative, and potentially a reflexive domain.

For an example of performative reflexivity on the Fringe we can return to the beginning of this discussion. When the patrons of the MacPherson Playhouse watched the Fringe participants watching the Flaming Idiots, with the police “watching over” the surrounding situation, performative reflexivity on the Fringe was in action. In keeping with Turner’s definition, the event was contrived; performers were commissioned and timing and staging was manipulated to bring together the various groups. The event was designed to create a performative relationship between the quotidian and the festival by creating an “interruption” in the theatre-going evening of the MacPherson patrons, and an experience of unruliness among the Fringe participants. Paradoxically, the experience of unruliness was evoked, in part, by the arrival of the police. An arrival that marked the occasion as in “need of control,” or potentially “out-of control,” and provided an already reflexive performance with an added layer of significance.

An occasion which Turner would describe as “topsy-turvey” was created: the police re-routing downtown traffic for a motley troupe of jugglers, the playhouse audience in intermission becoming an audience for the Fringe, Fringe-goers becoming actors in a street performance, and indeed, jugglers appearing “unannounced” in a busy downtown intersection. In such a situation people are provoked to think about the social conventions that hold things in their normal order. Reflexive awareness points to the co-existence of so many other possibilities for interpretation. In this description, a number of social relationships and boundaries are exposed and accordingly open to interpretation: the social boundaries between the two audiences, between the police and the two separate crowds, the jugglers, and the demands of traffic, as well as the boundary between the festival and the city.

For the Fringe participants this exposé was enthralling, there was high level of excitement and laughter; people cheered and applauded frequently. Randy Smith was literally glowing with a sense of accomplishment. Barbara Myerhoff talks about the

pleasures involved in plural reflexivity, she says when we are made self-aware, “conscious of consciousness,” at once actor and audience, we are able “to watch ourselves and *enjoy knowing that we know*.”<sup>428</sup>

### The Carnavalesque:

There is a profusion of darkly comic pieces on the roster. Fear — of disease, of sex, of lack of sex, of solitude, of men, of women, of madness, of depression, of the end of the world — has always translated well into comedy, as the apocalyptic clowns Mump and Smoot demonstrate so originally. Liz Nicholls.<sup>429</sup>

There are carnivalesque elements in the world of Mump and Smoot, which also relate to festivity and to specific carnivalesque activities on the Fringe. These are bodily dis-memberment, death, and resurrection. In the case of festivals, these carnivalesque elements need to be understood not in terms of the *individual* body, but rather, with the *social* body. The carnivalesque manifests itself in popular festivity as the social-body beyond control, and sometimes out of control.<sup>430</sup>

Turner characteristically marks distinctions between genre of cultural performance through etymology. In one instance, to define the parameters of Carnival he points to folk etymology connecting carnival with the medieval Latin phrase “carnevale”: “flesh farewell”.<sup>431</sup> It is this association with the body and flesh that I find carnivalesque in Mump and Smoot. Scenes of dismemberment and resurrection of the body are the foci of both their physical “schtick” and their overall predicaments. Physically overcome with grief, they inadvertently tear apart and decapitate their dead friend. They chant to evoke Umo; a serpent that is Wog burst out the corpse’s stomach. All in play, in a game called “doctor,” Smoot is crunched-up, stretched-out, dismembered, and remembered. With his mind under the control of Wog, Mump is forced to dissect Smoot’s stomach — to get out the rock. This excessive sense of the body is also experienced in the audience on a number of different levels. The two we are most

immediately aware of are sudden physical sensations: the little shudders and recoils we make when something “makes our flesh crawl” – and our uncontrollable laughter.

Why do we laugh so hard when Smoot’s leg goes flying through the air? Even now, as I think about being in that audience, I giggle at the memory. In a discussion of the carnivalesque in popular culture, John Fiske offers an explanation of the pleasures of carnival dismembering. Pointing to Foucault, he centres the body as the physical site of social control, of discipline and punishment. Escaping, or “dodging discipline” and social control, says Fiske, “produces an ecstatic sense of freedom”:

The orgasmic pleasure of the body out of control is a pleasure of evasion, of escape from the self-control/social control ...<sup>42</sup> The body may appear to be where we are most individual, it is also the material form of the body politic. ..., the body is where the social is most convincingly represented as the individual and where politics can best disguise itself as human nature.<sup>43</sup>

The carnivalesque pleasure in the body, in disguising, endangering, dismembering, and defying the boundary between life and death, is, in this analogy, the pleasure of tearing apart *and* tearing free from the body social.

Looking at the Fringe with an eye for the carnivalesque elements accentuates not only the cultural performative aspect of the festivities, it also provokes an awareness of the power relations enacted in those performances. An example of the carnivalesque that demonstrates this politic takes place in Saskatoon at the annual opening ceremonies. Every year the local critics agree to be physically abused, laughed at, and judged in a competition designed by the Fringe. In chapter three I described the 1991 “human Velcro throwing contest”, in which the local critics are dressed in Velcro and catapulted against a Velcro wall. At the 1992 opening, the critics engaged in a “human bowling balls contest”. The critics were well greased and then pulled, pushed, and rolled along an equally well-greased piece of yellow plastic until they collided with a set

of pins – or slipped off the stage. The “Jello Olympics” in 1994 was a real test of physical endurance. The competition included races and other similar events. There was so much jello involved that the critics were helplessly slipping and sliding like puppets with a drunken master. As we laughed and hooted, they appeared to be in real danger of cracking their skulls on the pavement. The judges of these events (who are often members of 25th Street Theatre’s board and important Fringe sponsors) use artistic criteria concerned with form and flight in order to determine the “winning” critic. These occasions are wonderfully paradoxical and haphazard. They include an obvious reversal of status; in a symbolic sense, the un-crowning of the critic is enacted. And, they *are* physically dangerous – there are no safety nets.

The body out of control on these occasions is the “critic’s body”. In this instance it is the authority of criticism that is being carnivalized. Carnival is, writes Fiske, “a representation of the social at the level of materiality on which all are equal, which suspends hierarchical rank and privilege.”<sup>434</sup> This travesty of the critic’s body symbolically transforms the abstract authority of criticism into “flesh and matter.”

Why do the Saskatoon critics not only agree, but appear to enjoy. engaging in a physically bizarre, potentially dangerous, and obvious parody of themselves as judges? Criticism on the Fringe has always been contested, by the producers, the artists and the audiences. The Fringe does not accommodate the authority of criticism. On the simplest level, there are too many plays, produced by too many different types of artists, and the audiences are too diverse, to accommodate a consensus on quality, value, or significance. By allowing themselves to be initiated into the festivities in such a carnivalesque fashion, the Saskatoon critics are legitimating their presence on the Fringe.<sup>435</sup>

### Ritual:

Ritual must be orderly because it frequently interrupts or manages or accompanies various forms of disorder, ranging from the ordinary rough and tumble confusion of everyday life, through the disorder of choice, and the multiplicities of inconsistencies in ideologies and in social arrangements. It veils the ultimate disorder, the non-order, which is the unconceptualized, unformed chaos underlying culture. Sally Moore.<sup>436</sup>

The rituals which Mump and Smoot enact provide for a final insight into parallels between clowning and festival as cultural performances. Rituals are essential in the world of Mump and Smoot. Whenever they experience a crisis, or they are themselves attempting to disrupt the order of things, they perform a ritual. Paradoxically, their rituals tend to highlight and revel in what is most often concealed and controlled by the rules of ritual: the indeterminacy that “lurks in the cracks.” Consequently, it seems, their rituals most often result in schisms and chaos rather than resolution and order; they almost always end their shows by running – *screaming* – out of the theatre and into the streets.

Rituals are not necessarily archaic, tribal, or rigid; rather, they can be dynamic post-industrial cultural performances with transformative powers. Turner thinks of ritual as “essentially *performance, enactment*, not primarily as rules and rubrics.” The rules, he explains, “frame the ritual process, but the ritual process transcends its frame.”<sup>437</sup> Sally Moore agrees, she observes ritual is, “the declaration of form against indeterminacy,” and “therefore indeterminacy is always present in the background of any analysis of ritual.”<sup>438</sup> The rules of rituals; the forms and patterns of rituals, the repeated gestures and chants that make us think “this is a ritual,” are rigid and repetitive in their structure *because they frame and contain indeterminacy and anti-structure:*

Rituals have a tripartite process in which to situate the framing of indeterminacy. The first phase involves either a breach or a crisis in the normal order of things, then there is a threshold phase, and finally there is a phase of resolution and reintegration of

order -- or "irreparable schism" (Turner's terminology). It is in the mid-way phase of a ritual, the threshold or liminal stage, in which indeterminacy is operative.

Indeterminacy is, says Turner, "all that which is not yet settled and known. It is all that may be, might be, could be, perhaps even should be."<sup>49</sup> It is, "the *possibility* of becoming."

*The Wake* skit provides an excellent example for understanding the parallels between clowning and ritual. As a scene, it is a performance of a ritual, the *rite of passage* from life to death. And, Mump and Smoot perform a ritual "within the ritual." In keeping with the structure of ritual, at the top of the *Wake* scene things are not in their proper order; Mump is out of control -- not Smoot. Smoot, ever hopeful, tries to resurrect their friend by evoking the powers of Umo, through ritual. They chant and gesture, then wait expectantly. Smoot, in his heightened state of anticipation, pulls off the arm of the corpse. In horror, he screams, and rushes to retrieve the limb, as Mump watches in stunned disbelief. As Smoot is trying desperately to re-member the limb, it takes on a life of its own. He begins to play with it, shaking hands with a hand. Overwhelmed with delight, he offers to shake hands, with a hand, with the audience. We laugh with Smoot, and then we laugh at the sight of Mump behind Smoot's back, who is still starrng in utter disbelief. Smoot senses the shift in our laughter. He frantically and reverently replaces the arm, under the stern gaze of Mump. But, too late, they have crossed-over the threshold. No sooner has Smoot re-membered the arm, when Mump accidentally dis-members the head. The *Wake* transforms into a baseball game between Mump and Smoot. They end up standing over the corpse in a ridiculous argument over "the rules" of the game.

This is typical of Mump and Smoot's rituals. In the liminal phase, as they await the results of their chanting and gestures, Smoot's uncontainable anticipation inevitably prompts the unexpected to happen. It is Smoot's intoxication with the infinity of

*possibility* that ultimately unleashes the liminal. Notably, when Smoot shakes hands with “the dis-memebered” hand, with the audience, their dear dead friend has, indeed, momentarily come back to life.

Rituals are essential in Mump and Smoot’s reality *because* clowns exist in a haphazard world. They are reverent about trying to control and contain the chaos; performing rituals within rituals, in the process of their rituals they unleash a liminal phenomenon, which in the end, they can only escape by running out of the theatre.

Rituals are cultural performances, which have at their core, in their liminal phase, the capacity for significant social change and the regeneration of culture. This is so, in part, because through the form and formality of ritual we celebrate the culturally *determinate*: the named, the explained, the regulated. At the same time, the purpose of ritual is to contain what cannot be explained. In order to do this, what cannot be explained must be made manifest — exposed and experienced.

The occasion of the Flaming Idiots in Victoria was a performance that exposed layers of social boundaries and manipulated the symbols that maintain those boundaries. The competition among critics in Saskatoon (which is perhaps an initiation) is a performance in which the symbols of critical authority, judgment, and artistic criteria are carnivalized. In each example what comes to the fore is an awareness of the manipulation of symbolic status’ *in action*. These occasions can be considered as ritual performances, if we understand ritual by what it contains.

Ritual relates to the Fringe festivals in a central way. Ritual and festival both contain the liminal, the moments and experiences of “betwixt and between” when symbolic meanings are open, ambiguous, and variable.

Mump and Smoot are aptly named “The Clowns of Horror”. They strike such a deep and resounding chord with audiences, because they expose us to ourselves. As Barbara Babcock so eloquently puts it;

Underlying all rituals is an ultimate danger, lurking beneath the smallest and the largest of them, the more banal and the most ambitious – [is] the possibility that we will encounter ourselves making up our conceptions of the world, society, our very selves. We may slip into that fatal perspective of recognizing culture as our construct, arbitrary, conventional, invented by mortals.<sup>440</sup>

This is the horror that Mump and Smoot indulge. When they run right out of the theatre, to escape what they have unleashed, interestingly, there is nothing left for us to do – but laugh?

#### Conclusions:

This issue was conceived a year ago with the intention of mapping some of the new voices and expressions currently redefining the ways we approach performance and theatrical form. Taken together, the articles included here indicate a widespread dissatisfaction with traditional notions of textuality and audience. The recurring emphasis on clowning, on Fringe performance and Postmodernism reveals a sophisticated inquiry into the nature and meaning of performance itself. But as I began collating these articles, I found myself constantly running between my desk and my television to catch the news, and the more I did so the more I began to wonder why the theatre we celebrate in this issue seems so far removed from the historical events that call its very future into question. These articles prove that the theatre is resilient; it survives because of the extraordinary passion of its artists. *But how well is our theatre responding to its times?* Alan Filewod.<sup>441</sup>

Festivals and clowning are both cultural performances that have experienced a recent renaissance. This kind of performance is richly textured with the social, the cultural, and the political at an intuitive and symbolic level; it is primarily concerned with process, possibility, and indeterminacy; and in this way, it is deeply responsive to “the times”.

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Journal Excerpt:

18 Aug 1992, Edmonton -- Passing time in the sun waiting to interview Karen Hines AKA Pochsy.

The first time I saw *Pochsy's Lips* it was a blazing hot August afternoon in Edmonton. Fortunately, the line-up was in the shade and I had a clear view of a street performer who had perked my curiosity the year before. I called him 'the neo-apocalyptic shaman'. He sat posed and composed as in the figure of Rodin's 'The Thinker', holding a school globe on his lap. His hair was orange and spiked, his pants were black leather, his boots were black with chains, and he was pierced and tattooed. He sat motionless gazing at his globe, oblivious of the crowds flowing pass him; and blind to the people who stopped to stare at him -- much as he stared at his globe -- in silent contemplation surrounded by the buzz of festivity. As I waited, I was anticipating the moment when he would rise and walk slowly over to a small tree, planted in an equally small patch of ground surrounded by cement, and break into an enchantingly demonic grin, hug the tree in rhapsody for several moments, then return to his contemplative pose and globe. All week, I was fascinated by the looks on people's faces as they watched him, and the way the flow of the crowds changed to let him by as he walked toward the tree. This, and the oxymoron I used to describe him "neo-apocalyptic", and "enchantingly demonic," were still on my mind when the lights came up on Pochsy.

ΩΩΩ

Pochsy stands wrapped in a white gauze blanket in a pool of cool blue light. Her head is bandaged, her face is white and her eyes are blackened. She has a cupid's smile and blood-red lips. She stares at us coolly and coyly for a few moments before she speaks;

We live in scary times.
 Advances we have made in Science, Medicine and
 Environmental Awareness, seem not to be keeping pace with
 the technological advances we have made.
 We are constantly bombarded by ominous information,
 regarding ever accelerating environmental poisoning, a
 continuing apocalyptic threat, and mysterious and
 uncontrollable diseases.

All indicators point to the distinct possibility that we are a
species bent on self-extinction.
No one is safe
And, there is no escape.

A melodramatic piano riff comes up under the last two sentences,
Pochsy hesitates for a moment, flutters her eyes, and the piano riff slips
into Broadway cabaret as Pochsy breaks into song:

Everything's falling apart
But... everyone's falling in love.

Pochsy slips a hand out of the gauze wrap, with a flick of her wrist the
beat picks up and the audience cracks-up with snorts, chuckles and
giggles as she sings;

It looks like the end of the world is near
But....., it's not over for you and I.

Pochsy twirls out of her gauze, she's all pink in a satin baby doll nightie
and ankle socks with frills on the rim. She hops onto her IV. stand,
rides it across the stage, and continues to sing;

What's that gloomy cloud above your head?
Fluffy toxic cloud of misery.

ΩΩΩ

In contrast to Mump and Smoot, Pochsy has full command of language
and song. Her contradictions are as fluid as Mump and Smoot's, but
different in nature. Her transgressions are created as much by her story-
telling and singing, her *use* of language, and cinematic images, and
popular culture, as they are by her internal paradoxes -- and, of course,
our unpredictable interruptions. As I reflected on the differences
between Pochsy and Mump and Smoot, I began to think of Pochsy in
grammatical terms, as an oxymoron. So much so, that I looked up the
word: it is formed by the Greek *oxús* (sharp) and *mòrós* (foolish) to
create *oxúmòros*, translating into "pointedly foolish", and defined as "a

rhetorical figure in which contradictory terms are conjoined." Ah, here she is.

³⁹² From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play (New York: PAJ Pub. 1982): 122.

³⁹³ "Here's weekend pick of the crop," "The Fringe Journal" Supplement to the Edmonton Journal 21 Aug. 1992: C5.

³⁹⁴ See Ritual to Theatre, The Anthropology of Performance (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), Rite Drama, Festival, Spectacle ed. J MacAloon (Philadelphia: Institute for The Study of Human Issues 1982).

³⁹⁵ Turner, Ritual to Theatre 24.

³⁹⁶ Sally Moore, Secular Ritual, ed. Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff. (Assen: Van Gorcum 1977) 36.

³⁹⁷ Turner, Ritual to Theatre. 28.

³⁹⁸ "Curtain Falls on the 10th Edition of Fringe: Good weather or bad, the festival continues to attract record crowds," Edmonton Journal 25 Aug. 1991: B5.

³⁹⁹ "Fringe Binge," Canadian Theatre Review (CTR) 49 Winter (1986) 117 - 120.

⁴⁰⁰ "Are street acts pushing theatre crowd to the fringe?" Globe and Mail [Toronto] 26 Aug. 1991: A10.

⁴⁰¹ "The Meaning of Life on the Fringe," Border Crossings Sept. 1990.

⁴⁰² "Fringe that mends the fabric," Toronto Star 3 July. 1991: B5.

⁴⁰³ Now [Toronto] 27-31 June 1991: 28

⁴⁰⁴ Qtd. in Turner, Anthropology 76.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Official festivals are often civic in nature. They are generously funded by governments, sponsored by large corporations and civic bodies, and involve a large administrative and organizational body. They tend to celebrate production and accomplishments of a commercial or civic nature. Examples are: world expositions such as "Expo 67" or the Olympic games. In the case of performance festivals, official festivals of this nature typically present "established" artists or their works. Popular festivals are typically generated from a community; they tend to be grass-root events sponsored by local communities, small businesses or individual promoters; they involve much less administration and organization than official festivals, and they tend to celebrate performance more than production or

products. Examples are: 'Woodstock' '67, the Toronto May Day celebrations, and the Montreal "Lands End" party.

⁴⁰⁷ See, Alessandro Falassi, Introduction, Time Out of Time 1st. ed. (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico P.,1987): 1.

⁴⁰⁸ Introduction, Celebration

⁴⁰⁹ Popular festivals are also most popular among those who are marginal to both political power and the cultural mainstream. Manning, Introduction, Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performances Bowling Green: Univ of Bowling Green Popular p, 1983.

⁴¹⁰Turner, Anthropology 132.

⁴¹¹ Manning, Celebration 21.

⁴¹² Turner, "Liminality and the Performative Genres," Rite. Drama. Festival. Spectacle: Rehearsals toward a Theory of Cultural Performance, (Philadelphia : ISHI, 1984): 16.

⁴¹³ Don Handelman, Models and Mirrors: towards an anthropology of public events, (Cambridge :Cambridge Univ P, 1990): 236.

⁴¹⁴ Improvisation in Drama, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education 1990): 7.

⁴¹⁵ "Arrange me in dis-order: fragments and reflections on ritual clowning," Secular Ritual (1977) 107.

⁴¹⁶ 242.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. 168.

⁴¹⁸ Mira Felnre, Apostles of Silence. The Modern French Mime, (Rutherford N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ P: London: Associated Univ P, 1985) 162.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. 165.

⁴²⁰ Qtd in CTR 67 (1991): 31.

⁴²¹ bid.

⁴²² New York Law Journal, 7 June 1991.

⁴²³"Here's weekend pick of the crop," Edmonton Journal 21 Aug. 1992: C5.

⁴²⁴ New York Post, 30 May 1991.

⁴²⁵ They created their first show together, Jump the Gun, in 1988.

⁴²⁶ CTR 67 1991: 35. The following un-cited quotes come from the same essay.

⁴²⁷ Turner, Rite, Drama 25. "The pervasive quality of cultural performances rests on the principle that mainstream society generates its opposite, that we are in fact concerned in cultural performances with a topsy-turvy, inverted, to some extent sacred (in the sense of "set apart", hedged around with taboo and mystery) domain of human actions. For such a domain to be truly reflexive...."

⁴²⁸ Turner, Celebration 75. (Italics mine).

⁴²⁹ "The Fringe Also Rises looks bigger, darker, desperate," Edmonton Journal, 14 Aug. 1992: C2.

⁴³⁰ Fiske, Turner, Bakhtin and others discuss carnival in association with revolts and revolutions.

⁴³¹ Turner, Rite, Drama 123.

⁴³² Fiske, Understanding Popular Culture, (Boston : Unwin P, 1989) 50-51.

⁴³³ *Ibid.* 70.

⁴³⁴ To degrade official discourse by associating it with the imagery of eating, drinking, copulation, defecation and pregnancy is symbolically to transform what was abstract into 'flesh and matter'. Anthony Gash, "Carnival and the Poetics of Reversal," New Directions In Theatre, ed. Julian Hilton (New York : St. Martin's P., 1993) 91.

⁴³⁵ It is important to note that the audiences and the artists equally enjoy this "lowering" of the critics. It is not just the critics' authority to judge the work of artists which is at issue, their authority as mediators between artists and audience is also a contentious issue. Evidence of this is the fact that most of the Fringes have audience reviews in one form or another with which the audience speaks directly to each other and to the artists. In Montreal they have the "buzz of the Beer tent"; people write their reviews on slips of paper available in the Beer tent, which are then posted on the walls of the tent each morning. By the end of the festival the tent is literally covered in audience reviews. The Winnipeg Fringe has *The Jenny Review*, an independent publication, that collects and prints audience reviews and is distributed free of charge in the Beer tent and at the venues. In Edmonton, C.B.C. sponsors a booth in which audience reviews are collected, organized alphabetically, and made available for scrutiny at the booth. And, the daily newspapers also collect and publish audience reviews. The Vancouver and Victoria Fringes publish a daily review sheet written by numerous volunteers.

⁴³⁶ The Reversible World : Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society (Ithaca : Cornell Univ. P, 1978.) 17.

⁴³⁷ Turner, Anthropology 79.

⁴³⁸ Moore, 17.

⁴³⁹ Turner, *Anthropology* 77.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 18.

⁴⁴¹ "New Theatre/ New Crisis," *CTR* 67 (1991): 3.

Chapter Seven:

Popular Culture on the Fringe

The rejection of the 'populist' view that theatre might appeal to a diverse 'market' is also a rejection of the view that it has a significant political function. If only a privileged minority enjoys the theatre, than it has no conceivable purpose in the reconciliation of differences or even in the ideological mobilization of common people, to say nothing of its possibilities for critical representation and dissent. Michael Bristol⁴⁴² .

... in order to maintain a minimum of artistic autonomy and dignity, let us remind ourselves, and the society in which we operate, that theatre is not free and theatre is not for all - only the exceptional ! Mima Vulovic.⁴⁴³

In the previous chapter I looked at the irreverent and transgressive qualities of the Fringe Festivals in context with theories about festivity. Festival, as an anthropological concept, provides the means to look at the Fringe as culture in process *in general*. This chapter takes a more particular perspective and tries to understand the Fringe as *popular* culture in process. This perspective is important for two central reasons. One is to enrich the anthropological accounts of festivity, which are relatively apolitical: they tend to smooth over social differences and focus on cultural consensus. Theories about "the popular" focus on the politics of culture and provide for an understanding of the Fringe that accounts for some of the more puzzling and controversial elements of these festivals. One of these is the overtly offensive and undisciplined character of some Fringe productions. Another is the disruptive public behaviour that is sometimes inspired by Fringe artists and the festivities. The Fringe also contains a number of direct challenges to the status quo of Canadian theatre: to the established ways of funding, producing, creating, promoting, reviewing and attending theatre. With a focus on these qualities, this chapter explores how the production structure has influenced the elaboration of a popular "Fringe culture."

Introduction: Art -- or Not ?

The Fringe production model began as an experiment with the conventions and standards of theatre production. The festivals were founded on a rejection of what was a fundamental principle of theatre production in Canada: the selection process based on the criteria of artistic excellence. The Fringes are popular because large numbers of people find pleasure in the results of this experiment. One of those results is a style of theatre production that is in itself overtly transgressional; it is theatre that formally and thematically resists, evades, exposes, and plays tricks with the boundaries of theatrical convention and social standards. This is the most popular style of theatre on the Fringe -- but, to echo the Trolls, is it art?

You see, the real problem is we don't know if we are art, or not.⁴⁴⁴

When the Three Dead Trolls question if they are "art, or not," they are ironically commenting on the same question raised by some theatre critics: is Fringe theatre 'theatre', or not? Most "learned" questions about the Fringe are contained in editorial comments, comments which by their nature are fleeting and surface, yet provocative and persuasive. When Alan Filewod was editor of CTR (1989- 1995), he often used his editorial page to question the Fringe from both of the above perspectives:

Is the Fringe, theatre -- or a paratheatrical event?

Is it a theatrical phenomenon -- or an industry?

The Fringe may be exciting, but is it theatre that responds to our times?

Is it a competitive market place where actors compete for the most laughs?⁴⁴⁵

In an article for American Theatre Review, 1989, Filewod describes the Fringe as "the most innovative and far-reaching development in recent Canadian theatre."⁴⁴⁶ He claims that the Edmonton Fringe audience constitutes, "the largest crowds of theatre-goers in Canadian history." The Fringe is, he says, "Canada's biggest theatrical

party.” In the same article, following a description of the production structure, the diversity of performances, and the outstanding popularity of the festivals, Filewod explains that there is a “flip side to this success”:

The success of the Fringe formula may have something to do with the tradition of populist activism that is the Canadian West’s most cherished myth. ... It is no accident that the Fringe idea took root in the most conservative region of Canada, because its success is the success of the entrepreneurial spirit at a time when theatres are under increasing pressure from funding agencies to increase commercial revenue. Most established Canadian theatres have their origins in the lavish government funding of the 1960’s and 70’s. Today, with seed funds much more difficult to obtain, young artists launching their own groups head for the Fringe festivals. *The bid for popular success results in a sometimes alarming preponderance of comedy, satire, and parody, and a dearth of serious experimentation.* That in turn can have a ripple effect on the future of theatre.⁴⁴⁷

Filewod’s analysis connects the success of the Fringe with populism, populism with conservatism, and conservatism with entrepreneurialism. He insinuates a connection between these ‘isms’ and the “alarming” popularity of comedy, satire, and parody on the Fringe. In turn, the bid for popularity, he argues, results in an absence of serious experimentation. Curiously, Filewod defines the popular on the Fringe by contrasting theatrical genres in context with a socio-political milieu, yet he nonetheless concludes by dismissing the notion that cultural politics are a part of what makes the Fringe so popular:

Still, on a warm summer night, swapping jokes with strangers in a lineup and calculating the time you’ll need to hit the beer tent and still score a ticket for that dark-horse success you’ve heard about, *cultural politics seem very remote.*⁴⁴⁸

Much of the excitement, pleasure and popularity of this festival, which Filewod acknowledges, results from the cultural politics of the Fringe. Essentially, the cultural politics of the Fringe evolved from the experimental character of the festivals. One of the most outstanding results of this experiment has been its affect on the audience. Those large crowds of people “swapping jokes” with each other and “stampeding to the hits”.⁴⁹ I think it is an uncertainty about “the popular” in “the theatre” that is at the root of all of the above questions about the production politics and aesthetic status of theatre on the Fringe.

“The Popular” in “The Theatre”:

Filewod, who has researched and examined popular theatre in Canada from a number of perspectives in a number of articles and commentaries, suggests that popular theatre “refers not to a genre or form in itself, but to the application of theatre as a tool of social or political development.”⁴⁵⁰ In Filewod’s historiography, the popular theatres of the 1970’s represented “the political left wing of the professional theatre,” and shared a “committed populism with the concurrent belief that performance should take place among the people, in the community centres, union halls, and schools”⁴⁵¹ In the 1980’s, popular theatre takes the shape of a movement inscribed by the formation of the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance (CPTA).⁴⁵² With the inception of this group, the term popular theatre not only enters wider usage, but also becomes an effective “instrument” for defining the commonalty among “politically engaged” groups by, “relocating the defining criteria for political theatre to the active collaboration with a community in the process of struggle.”⁴⁵³ Throughout the 1980’s, the CPTA experienced a “reorientation” as popular theatre became “a tool used with increasing effectiveness by activist organizers, including women’s groups, Native Peoples, the handicapped, anti-nuclear campaigners, and Third World solidarity committees.”⁴⁵⁴

Common among these groups is a dramaturgy which “relies on simple narrative and realistic scenes, designed to be accessible.”⁴⁵⁵

Why is it that Filewod, whose definitions of popular theatre rely on a symbiosis between the popular and the political, does not see politics at an event as popular as the Fringe festivals? In other words, why does the symbiotic relationship between the popular and the political breakdown on the Fringe?

One of the problems with trying to “fit” the Fringe festivals into these defining criteria for popular theatre is that the tension or boundaries between the high and the low, the intellectual and the accessible, are considerably fragmented on the Fringe. As well, resistance, struggle, and opposition are not so easily isolated by the politics of the Fringe audience(s). There is feminist, black, gay, lesbian, Jewish, refugee, sex worker, handicapped, and so many other types of theatre companies producing on the Fringe – but, can the social politics of the Fringe audience be reduced to common issues or a “unified” community “in the process of struggle”?

The symbiosis between the popular and the political breaks down on the Fringe, ironically, because the festivals are *wholly* popular. Theatre on the Fringe does not simply (or always) borrow popular conventions – it *is* popular. It is created for, and produced in a popular festival. The result of this break down (in theory) is the continuing scholarly suspicion that Fringe production does not really constitute theatre, but rather perhaps an industry, or a paratheatrical event. This questioning accentuates a theoretical division between the popular and the theatre, a division which the Fringe, in practice, denies. Almost all Fringe *theatre* is created by people who have trained and studied the fine art of creating theatre in established institutions. There are other genre of performance produced on the Fringe: music, dance, opera, performance art and street performance. There are also far more people attending the Edmonton, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Montreal festivals, than there are people buying tickets to the individual

shows. These evident “paratheatrical” elements are not separate from the theatre that is produced, nor do they diminish its status as theatre.

Filewod’s lamentation on the lack of serious experimentation on the Fringe misrepresents the politics of these festivals. But seriousness, as Allon White suggests, “always has more to do with power than content [–] (t)he authority to designate what is to be taken seriously is a way of creating and maintaining power.”⁴⁵⁶ To question the status of Fringe theatre as theatre, or Fringe artists as artists, is to engage in cultural politics. Conversely, to resist, subvert, and “make fun of” the authority that raises these questions is to engage in the politics of popular culture.

Part One:

Fuck Art

The Madonna award for hype goes to... Chris Dafoe.⁴⁵⁷

Looking out over the seething crowd at the Fringe Festival, it appears as a mixed mob. Kate Zimmerman.⁴⁵⁸

Anything goes on the Fringe, and there is always the attempt to draw crowds by appealing to prurient curiosity. Ann Nothof.⁴⁵⁹

Bad is good. The badder the better, in fact, to a point. We’re not talking *product* here, you understand, but reputation. Bad (real nasty, offensive, call the vice squad) is news, and news is curiosity, and curiosity puts people in seats and dollars in the pockets of performers. Bruce Grierson.⁴⁶⁰

That’s art. So’s this show. And if you don’t think so you can fuck right off. The Three Dead Trolls.⁴⁶¹

‘Barbies on the Tundra’ and ‘The Juanabees’ Present the First Annual Fuck Art Party....Who: You. When: Saturday late until later. Where: 25th Street Theatre. What: Libations, nutrients, audio stimulants & snorkels (latex preferred – after all we’re going to Fuck Art, and we don’t know where it’s been). The Juanabees.⁴⁶²

At the 1991 inaugural Fuck Art Party in Saskatoon everyone was pasted with a sticky name tag reading “Fuck Art.” I was pasted with a tag that read “Searching for Art to Fuck.” While the name of this now annual party suggests a measure of

animosity and irreverence for “art,” the purpose of the celebration suggests something different. The Fuck Art party is an evening of drinking, talking, and dancing with one cardinal rule: No one is allowed to talk about art. Fringe artists, and especially touring artists, spend unusual amounts of time seeing each other’s productions, re-working their own, and talking with each other about the work. The Fuck Art party, like all celebrations, is an occasion for “taking time out.” This celebration characterizes one of the paradoxes contained in the Fringe Festivals. On the one hand, there is a definitively irreverent “fuck art attitude” on the Fringe. On the other hand, Fringe artists are evidently serious about, and committed to, each other’s and their own work – as art. This paradox represents a struggle around the meaningfulness of art. This struggle originates with the non-adjudicated programming and it emanates throughout the festivals. It is this struggle that most substantiates an analysis concerned with popular culture.

Popular Culture: Definitions

Popular culture is a concept of ideological contestation and variability, to be filled and emptied, to be articulated and disarticulated, in a range of different and competing ways. ... Popular culture is presented as that which keeps ‘the people’ from considered engagement with ‘real’ culture; and it is presented as that which holds ‘the people’ in thrall to the commercial ideological manipulations of the capitalist cultural industries. In both instances, popular culture is the debilitating other of culture; the dangerous shadow that haunts and tempts the progress of the real thing. John Storey.⁴⁶³

There are evident problems of definition and agreement within any discussion concerning popular culture as a concept. Discussing popular culture in relation to theatrical production is particularly difficult. This is because the various critical approaches to popular culture do not often involve themselves with theatre. Television, romance novels, magazines, Hollywood films, video arcades, and stars like Madonna are the more typical subjects of studies of popular culture. As well, most critical works dealing with the texts of popular culture are contained in books of

essays prefaced with lengthy introductions, which engage in past and ongoing debates about theories of popular culture and their development in the relatively new field of cultural studies. Such an introduction is impossible in this context. Instead, what follows is an overview of popular culture in its relationships to mass and high culture. This discussion defines my terms and points to some of the relevant theoretical debates. The final purpose here is to elaborate on the parallels between theories about popular culture and observations of Fringe reception and production as a process of culture. There are a number of phrases highlighted in order to preview the important links between this and the following discussion.

First, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, from an historical perspective a distinction has to be made between folk or common culture and popular culture: “Popular culture only emerged following industrialization and urbanization”⁴⁶⁴; This is an important starting point because it indicates that *popular culture depends on a capitalistic market economy*.

Popular and Mass Culture

While there is an intimate and reciprocal relationship between mass and popular culture, they are not one and the same. The distinctions between mass culture and popular culture are perhaps best articulated by thinking about the differences between production and reception (keeping in mind that the texts of popular culture can be “popularly produced” – zines and videos are two common examples). Mass culture refers generally to the production and distribution of cultural programs or texts designed to reach large audiences, hence the term “cultural industry”.⁴⁶⁵ In its relation to the cultural industries, *popular culture resides in reception*, in how people engage with and make meanings from mass produced texts.

Popular culture can also be understood, not as a category or by its texts, but rather as “*a way of specifying areas of resistance to dominant ideological forms.*”⁴⁶⁶ The cultural industries, it is often accepted, belong fully to capitalist interests and hence operate in the interest of the dominant ideology. The notion that popular culture successfully utilizes the products of the cultural industries in order to resist and subvert the ideological power of those industries introduces a significant paradox. This is in keeping with much theoretical debate about popular culture, which describes it as necessarily contradictory and paradoxical.

Popular and High Culture:

John Fiske uses the concept of distance as a key marker of difference between high and popular culture. High culture, or as Fiske would have it, “the culture of the socially advantaged and empowered,” relies on distance to mark itself as detached and “above”.⁴⁶⁷ Distance between the art object and the reader or spectator, distance between the experience of art works and the everyday life, distance from bodily sensations, and distance from economic necessity are each distinctive qualities of high culture. There is no such distancing in popular culture; “it denies categorical boundaries between art and life.”⁴⁶⁸ The effects of distance are qualitative. Creating distance between the art and the audience reflects an aesthetic sensibility that values universality. Distancing art from the everyday produces the pleasure of transcending historical and social specificities, including the body. The absence of distance in *popular culture reflects a sensibility that values socially specific readings*. Popular pleasures are derived from social and immediate experiences, in particular social allegiances that mark differences. Finally, the separation of the aesthetic from the economic is a practice of high culture, which, in Fiske’s analysis, “is the practice of those who can afford to ignore the constraints of material necessity.”⁴⁶⁹ In turn, *the materiality of popular culture is directly related to its specific economic conditions*.

Popular Culture on the Fringe

Reliance on a market economy, engagement with mass culture, and an aesthetic that values immediate involvement with the social and material are each highly visible on the Fringe. All Fringe companies rely on the market place production structure of the festivals, and some of the most popular companies sell T-shirts, hats, tapes, and posters as well as tickets. Most of the most popular productions either pirate and plagiarize, parody or satirize the texts of mass culture: movies, novels, the news and television shows. They typically present productions that elicit a strong physical response: side splitting laughter, horror, shock, and tears. Finally, the active world of everyday conversation and exchange, jokes and idioms, people making a do and marking an occasion, are integral to the Fringe aesthetic.

Art for 'The People':

The carnivalesque crowd in the market place or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. Bakhtin.⁴⁷⁰

Looking out over the seething crowd at the Fringe Festival, it appears a mixed mob. Patrons with Mohawk haircuts bend next to shiny patted grandfathers to read the daily list of what's sold out. Tow-headed children lie asleep in their parents arms as men in business suits hover about Strathcona park. Middle-aged women dressed in expensive ensembles line-up behind gaggles of girls in denim. Beside the brightly coloured 96 page program that most of them carry, *these people would seem to have little in common.* Kate Zimmerman.⁴⁷¹

What in part makes these events intriguing is that while at one moment they are a critique of the establishment (not simply in the arts, but in society) they at the same time attract an audience which by day identifies with these social and cultural structures. Bruce Willems -Braun.⁴⁷²

The Fringe is art for the people, all of the people. And the people really, really like it. Kate Zimmerman.⁴⁷³

Who are "the people"? According to appearances and most commentary, Fringe audiences consist of diverse groups of people with little in common. According to

surveys, for the most part, patrons share a common socio-economic position.⁴⁷⁴

Contrary to expectations,

... patrons come predominantly from regions of the city dominated by the affluent. They are predominantly young, well-educated, professional and middle class.⁴⁷⁵

Paradoxically, the festivals are at one moment a critique of the establishment, yet they attract an audience that normally identifies with the establishment. This contradictory nature of Fringe audiences provides the first link for thinking about Fringe reception in context with an analysis of popular culture.

An understanding of “the people” in relation to popular culture must direct itself toward what the people are *doing*, not *who* they are:

‘The people’ is not a stable sociological category; it cannot be identified in objective reality. The people, the popular, the popular forces, are a shifting set of social allegiances that cross all social categories; various individuals belong to different popular formations at different times, often moving between them quite fluidly. ... The various formations of the people move ... across social categories, and are capable of adopting apparently contradictory positions either alternately or simultaneously without too much sense of strain.⁴⁷⁶

Fringe audiences may represent people from common social and cultural backgrounds, but what they are *doing* is “re-presenting” themselves; through dress and behaviour and the shows they select, they become “a shifting matrix of social formations.”

The Fringe festival audiences are frequently identified as different from traditional theatre audiences because of their behaviour. In particular, they demonstrate a strong sense of camaraderie. Willems-Braun observes that the Fringes are an opportunity for individuals to “express solidarity *within* social groups.”⁴⁷⁷ While there is evidently an unusual amount of camaraderie at the festivals, there is equally an unusual amount of

oppositionality involved in these events. The productions that generate this oppositionality – those which cause confrontational debates on the Fringe and in the media – are frequently those which are the most offensive, or undisciplined, or gratuitous, or outrageous. They are also the most popular productions. These shows may not represent a majority of productions, but they do tell us something about the audience – they are the shows that “most of the people” want to see and discuss. They provide a common ground for shifting allegiances that contain as much of a sense of difference and oppositionality as collectivity and camaraderie.

The Market Place:

There is an invisible battle being fought between the rising tide of Fringe popularity and the fear of commercialization. Cam Fuller.⁴⁷⁸

For all the talk about alternatives, the fringe formula, with groups mounting their own shows and hoping to turn a profit at the box office, is as much a model of free-enterprise culture as *Phantom of the Opera*.... The fringe's greatest strength is festival-as-marketing-tool. Chris Dafoe.⁴⁷⁹

With the top ticket price of \$7, the legion of pilgrims in cutoffs and tank tops is enormous. 83rd. Avenue [...] looks like the midway of the Canadian National Exhibition, right down to the little concession that fries miniature donuts right before your eyes. The only difference is that the backdrop, instead of the roller coaster and the Ferris wheel, consists of impromptu street performers, strolling buskers and avid young men [sic] hawking the virtues of one show or another.... In a business where the untrammelled market place usually functions only at the high end, with big budget shows like *Phantom of the Opera*, the Fringe is perhaps the only example in Canada of small scale theatre capitalism. Ray Conlogue.⁴⁸⁰

Fringe artists are entrepreneurial; they invest their own moneys and produce themselves. Yet, the profit factor of capitalism is virtually non-existent: many do not earn enough to pay back their initial investments, few earn full wages, even fewer earn a profit. Despite the absence of profits, the market place economy of the Fringe has had an overarching influence on every aspect of the festivals. It was this economy that both necessitated and inspired the first promotional street performances, and in turn stimulated the festivities, the growth and camaraderie of the audiences, and in short, the

popularity of the festivals. The dozens of independent self-producing touring theatre companies that cross the country every summer could not exist without this type of economy. For a minimal initial investment, an average application fee of \$400.00 per Fringe, a company may earn as much as \$9000.00 per Fringe -- if their production is popular. For hundreds of theatre artists the Fringe deal is irresistible. For the festival producers this appeal is essential: the artists' fees provide the start-up moneys for renting venues and hiring technicians. For the audiences, the Fringe is truly a buyer's market: the competition is real, the choices are far-ranging, and the fixed maximum ticket price ensures that no matter how popular a production becomes, companies cannot raise their prices.

The aesthetic and critical legitimacy of the theatre produced on the Fringe has often been questioned in light of the market economy of the production structure. Filewod associates the rise of the Fringe market with the malaise of the other theatre communities; "As the regional are losing audiences; the small theatres are locked in desperate battles to retain funding ... the Fringe festivals are redefining the audience market."⁴⁸¹ In an earlier editorial, Filewod explains his understanding of the Fringe market; it is competitive and driven by "popular appeal for laughs and a good time."⁴⁸² The editorial pages of theatrum have also described the Fringes as a free market place, and have also perceived this as a threat to the larger theatre community. In an editorial titled "Who Killed Theatre Plus," Sarah Hood argues that most Fringe plays are undeserving of any kind of support, critical or financial. She concludes, "the fringe provides a dangerous model for government funding bodies which are already unsympathetic to the arts."⁴⁸³

Robert Wallace, who shares the opinion that the Fringes present a threat to theatrical standards, describes its audience as "much more *broadly based* than Edmonton's winter theatre-goers." He points out, "the event primarily serves *other* theatre artists who are

not part of Edmonton's theatre season." These two factors have undermined the possibility of the Fringe providing what, in his opinion, such an event should be providing: "real alternatives." Instead, Wallace writes:

What sells at the Fringe are shows that least challenge the audiences' expectations of theatre or themselves. Very little work is "fringe" in the sense of experimental, innovative or difficult -- either aesthetically or politically.⁴⁸⁴

The critique of the Fringe as an industry or a free-market is misleading. The real crux of the problem is that this market economy enables artists and public to side-step the normal criteria for creating, producing, and selling theatre. The audiences via the market place have replaced the traditional selection committee of peers. The "problem" with the Fringe "market" is that it provides for unevaluated theatre created by "other artists" that sells to a seemingly diverse theatre going audience. According to the position of the avant-garde critic, the results are two-fold: an abundance of "bad" theatre that robs the Fringe of its "real" potential.

Popular culture always presents a threat: it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are "not those preferred by the dominant ideology."⁴⁸⁵ On the Fringe, the market place criterion, what sells is what's good, is essential to creating this threat, which in turn is substantive to the process of popular culture. It is the received perception of the Fringe *as a threat* that, in part, inspires this analysis of the Fringe in its relation to popular culture.

The market place economy of the Fringe also raises a number of questions around the commodification and consumption of culture. A part of the "fear of the Fringe" arises as a fear of contamination of culture via capitalism: i.e., 'is it theatre or an industry?' The point needs to be made that all theatre in Canada exists in the same market-driven economy, which is shaped by government intervention in every realm.

Both Fringe theatre and the other theatre are purchased by a public; they are cultural commodities.⁴⁸⁶ That the cost of some theatre is born by arm's-length public funding should not obscure its nature as commodity. Professionalization of the arts is historically situated and can be viewed as a direct response to a society based upon commodity exchange.

The relations between commodities, consumption, and culture need to be clearly understood. Relying on de Certeau, Fiske delineates these relations. First he distinguishes it is theoretical issues that determine the differences between the activity of cultural reception and commodity consumption; these are not different activities, rather there are different ways of understanding the same activity. All commodities, cultural and material, can be used to construct meanings of self, of social identity and social relations:

In a consumer society, all commodities have cultural as well as functional values. To model this we need to extend the idea of an economy to include a cultural economy where the circulation is not one of money, but of meanings and pleasures. Here the audience ... becomes a producer, a producer of meanings and pleasures. The original commodity (be it a television program or a pair of jeans) is, in the cultural economy, a text, a discursive structure of potential meanings and pleasures that constitutes a major resource of popular culture. In this economy there are no consumers, only circulators of meanings, for meanings are the only elements in the process that can be neither commodified nor consumed: meanings can be produced, re-produced, and circulated only in that constant process that we call culture.⁴⁸⁷

The essence, or praxis of popular culture is *how* the people can turn cultural commodities to their own interests and find pleasure in using them to make their *own* meanings. Popular Fringe companies should not be considered analogous with the producers of cultural commodities. Rather, the parallels are located between how the people create their popular culture and Fringe production, and, between the artists (as

analogous with the people) and the established ideological and material systems of theatre production in Canada. I return to these parallels in the following section.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the market place economy of the production model has significant affect on the quality of work produced on the festivals. Fringe artists are keenly aware of "what sells." There are a number of reasons for this. The return of 100% of box office revenues to the artists is only the most obvious reason why some Fringe artists "are driven to appeal to the popular." More to the point, and in keeping with how popular culture is created, the market place economy of the Fringe is as integral to the exchange and circulation of popular meanings as it is to the purchasing of tickets and T-shirts.

The Active Everyday World on the Fringe

People have to make do with what they have, and everyday life is the art of making do. John Fiske.⁴⁸⁸

Although the modern city, with its rational articulation of space, can work to "administer and to control the practices of everyday life" (Frow 1991, p. 54.), the fringes seem to forward a certain disorder over efficiency and control. Bruce Willems-Brauns⁴⁸⁹

The interpretation and production of meaning on the Fringe are in part determined by and articulated through the everyday interaction of patrons: in the line-ups, the beer tents and Fringe clubs, the surrounding cafes, and in the streets. This interaction significantly enlarges the sphere of reception: the autonomy of performance is greatly reduced, closure around the art object is weakened, and authoritative and conclusive evaluation is destabilized (newspapers, radio, television). This is the most obvious context in which the active everyday world of the Fringe is of particular interest. The weakening of authoritative evaluation is only one of several significant aspects of the extension of the everyday into theatrical production and reception.

By introducing theories of everyday life, I want to begin to draw a parallel between “the people” as producers of their popular culture and popular Fringe productions in general. In order to observe the praxis of popular culture, how the people make their culture, Fiske directs attention toward the practices of everyday life. He explains “the ordinary social practices of ordinary people as a series of tactical evasions or resistance of the order that society tries to organize them into”:⁴⁹⁰

On one level this may be as simple as taking shortcuts across the grass instead of keeping to the paths that architects have provided; on a more complex level it involves using the resources provided by the social order (which are the only ones available) in ways that detach them from the system that produced them and that enable them to be turned back against the interest of the producers.⁴⁹¹

With an emphasis on conflict, particularly ones of strategy and tactics, of poaching, raiding and guileful ruses, de Certeau characterizes the culture of everyday life as “the art of making do” with what the system provides. Constant trickery is, for de Certeau, at the heart of popular culture:

The actual order of things is precisely what ‘popular’ tactics turn to their own ends, without any illusion that it will change anytime soon. Though elsewhere it is exploited by a dominant power or simply denied by an ideological discourse, here order is *tricked* by an art.⁴⁹²

In his discussion of the relations between the Fringe and the social organization of the city, cultural geographer Willems-Braun emphasizes how the city is rationally and strategically ordered according to the logic of prevailing systems of power. He describes the Fringe as “a tactical subversion of rationalized space.”⁴⁹³ The Fringes provide a space in which the people can readily evade or resist and play tricks with the social order of things *because* the festivals take place in public spaces that are imbued with that order: city squares, shopping malls, parks, warehouses, parking garages, in the streets, and even on city buses. To a great extent the popularity of the festivals

resides in this phenomenon. In turn, the Fringe artists who reach the popular zone are those who take full advantage of this aspect of the production structure. Significantly, how they do this is very much in keeping with “the art of making do.”

Jonathan K

Yes, Jonathan, I am mentioning your show.
Even though you dragged your audience through the proverbial ringer, making everyone participate in some kind of fashion during your improvisation.

Even though your technician laughed harder than anyone else.
I’m mentioning you because despite or rather because of all this, you also made us question the whole theatrical experience. You made us question who the actors really are in this world, who the audience really is, who is really watching who.
So thanks.⁴⁹⁴

Jonathan Kay’s work offers examples of the type of trickery de Certeau attributes to popular tactics. Jonathan Kay is a Fool from England who has been popular on the Fringe circuit since 1992. He is a gentle, soft spoken character whose performances have the unique ability to arouse a sense of calm and delightful innocence among his audiences. As is typical of the fool, Jonathan Kay persuades “the people” that there is logic and humanity in seeing things “his way.” He often ends his shows by inspiring (and then conspiring with) his audience to go out into public and disrupt things by behaving foolishly.

With Jonathan Kay in the lead, I have sung songs in a MacDonald’s, at lunch time, in downtown Victoria with 60 other people, and, in the middle of Main street Vancouver, during rush hour traffic, with over 100 people: I have also paid a visit to a stranger – with 70 other people.⁴⁹⁵ In each of these instances Jonathan Kay “used” (and abused) the normal ordering of public activities in a way that turned around the prevailing logic of things. We turned a fast food lunch break into a half hour of entertainment (and slowed down the *fast* service considerably). We “played a trick” on

rush hour traffic by “using” it to have fun. And, we turned a social visit into a public confrontation.

On each occasion there were people who became angry and agitated by our foolish behaviour. The stranger, confronted with a mob of 70 people at her door, threatened to phone the police and have us arrested. Some of the people trying to get home from work shouted threats. A few got out of their cars, cursed us and shook their fists. The young MacDonald’s manager was confused and embarrassed by his task of containing us. These occasions were instances of social confrontation; there were clashes between “us” and the “public”.

Jonathan Kay has offended the critical sensibilities of some Fringe reviewers as much as his audiences have offended the general public. Vancouver critic Lloyd Dykk provides an opinion of Jonathan Kay’s tactics that, ironically, augments de Certeau’s analogy for popular everyday tactics:

A couple of days ago while we were lining up for another show, comic Jonathan Kay’s audience was letting out. Leading his audience past us, he was making them go single-file with their arms on each others backs and bleat like sheep. They all looked the way Patty Hearst must have felt. I wish comedians would realize that the theatre’s fourth wall is there for a reason. *It should be defended by armed guards if necessary.*⁴⁹⁶

De Certeau also uses a military metaphor. Popular tactics, he argues, involve “spotting the weak points in the forces of the powerful and raiding them as guerrilla fighters [would].”⁴⁹⁷ Roberto Eco uses the same metaphor; he argues that “semiotic guerrilla warfare” is “the key to understanding popular culture and its ability to resist the dominant ideology.”⁴⁹⁸ These metaphors: the critic as “armed guard” and the Fringe performer as “guerrilla”, also work to illustrate the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always a part of popular culture. In this instance, the critic

contains these “raids” upon the order of things by suggesting that the people are mindlessly led into such tactics by a renegade comic who is ignorant of the rules of the theatre.

So why *do* Fringe audiences behave so disruptively in public ? What motivates them? Of course Jonathan Kay’s performance has an influence. In one sense, his show is an intellectual warm-up for these antics. But, it is simplistic to mark the audiences as dupes. Jonathan Kay’s audiences enjoy these confrontations. They find pleasure in being socially undisciplined, pleasure in the allegiances formed among them *and* in the antagonisms created between themselves and others. This is the type of pleasure Fiske is concerned with when he talks about the popular pleasures of resisting, avoiding, and offending social discipline. These he categorizes as the pleasures of evasion:

[E]scaping social control, even momentarily, produces a sense of freedom. That this freedom is often expressed in excessive, “irresponsible” (i.e., disruptive, or disorderly) behavior is evidence both of the vitality of these disruptive popular forces and the extent of their repression in everyday life. The pleasures of evasion tend to focus on the body. ⁴⁹⁹

There are significant parallels between the everyday tactics of the people and how popular Fringe artists “play tricks” with the products of mass culture *and* the boundaries of theatrical conventions. Engaging with and adapting the products of mass culture to create theatre is the most obvious parallel. Another is the corresponding acts of avoiding or offending the forces of both aesthetic and social discipline through trickery and adaptation. Popular Fringe artists are frequently offensive and undisciplined. They offend, dodge, and play tricks with the disciplinary boundaries of theatre production, reception and criticism. They blatantly steal texts, often entice their audiences to “act out,” and they are sometimes overtly offensive. In some instances the disciplinary forces of the “powers that be” have come into play. Fringe sponsors, the

police force, and the office of the attorney general have each attempted to contain and restrain Fringe production.⁵⁰⁰

Engaging with Mass Culture:

As the media extends its sphere of influence, so also does it come under the critical surveillance *and* usage of its subjects. Angela McRobbie.⁵⁰¹

Popular forces transform the cultural commodity into a cultural resource, pluralize the meanings and pleasures it offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts, fracture its homogeneity and coherence, raid or poach upon its terrain. John Fiske.⁵⁰²

The most obvious examples of engagement with mass culture on the Fringe are those productions that are theatrical adaptations of television shows. On the simplest level, when The Way Off Broadway Group produced *The Twilight Zone* (1991) the company was using a product of mass culture to appeal to a popular audience. The same is true of Michael O'Brien's production, *Christopher Robin's Final Temptation* (1993), The Three Dead Trolls' production of *Kevin Costner's Naked Butt* (1993), and many many other Fringe plays. "Twilight Zone," "Christopher Robin," and "Kevin Costner" are all products of mass culture. They are also the resources of popular culture.

The way in which the Trolls use "Kevin Costner" offers an example of the kinds of trickery and ruse involved in the art of making do with what the system provides. The title, *Kevin Costner's Naked Butt*, in no way reflects or comments on the context of the performance, as they make clear in their program notes: "Our show has nothing to do with Kevin Costner's Naked butt."⁵⁰³ The show has nothing to do with Costner whatsoever. The title is an obvious ruse. But who is being duped? Who, or what is being tricked? It is the system that produces Kevin Costner, which is the "butt" for this trickery. Consequently, what attracts the audience is the pleasure involved in tricking and offending that system -- not, as some critics seem to assume, Costner's naked butt!

In sharp contrast to the tactics of the Trolls, WOB's production of the *Twilight Zone* was reverently true to its title. The production was a theatrical copy-cat of two original television episodes -- right down to the Rod Serling voice over and the "doda doda" musical score. With this production WOB did not reach the popular zone. In their estimation, *Twilight Zone* failed to be popular because it was not original. In retrospect, Wener explained, "we had to realize that this was not the type of material people on the Fringe are interested in seeing, they want original work, not something they have already seen on TV."⁵⁰⁴ This appears to contradict the observation that what most popular Fringe shows have in common is some form of engagement with mass culture. However, it is not mass culture *per se* that attracts the popular Fringe audience, but rather *how* it is used.

After producing 2 Fringe hits, which were both unauthorized adaptations of the poetry of Charles Burkowski (*Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions* and *The Fuck Machine*), WOB went back to television for a source to create a third sell-out production: *The Scions of Hydra*. This play borrows characters and bits of infamous dialogue from various *Star Trek* episodes. With this adaptation WOB stayed true to their skill of reverent imitation. And they stayed true to the formal conventions of television drama: short tightly edited scenes, melodramatic musical underscoring, and spectacular effects. However, they chose to imitate William Shatner's acting techniques, not Captain Kirk. The action begins on the set of Shatner's latest movie where he is both director and actor. Suddenly, Shatner is "beamed-up" to Scion, a planet populated by two warring societies of women, which are both in desperate need of sperm. When the circumstances are explained to Shatner he exclaims: "But -- I'm *just* an actor!" Thus the premise for the play; William Shatner, the actor, finds himself in a real *Star Trek* dilemma. While maintaining the contextual framework of *Star Trek*, the play significantly alters the original text.

On one level, *Scions* is a play that inevitably creates a critique of *Star Trek* and accordingly could be categorized as a play that uses mass culture in order to criticize it. More pertinent for this discussion is that *Scions* is an *original* play created from an *old* television series, which “everybody” knows. This observation points to both the economy involved in using mass culture and a quality of intertextuality, which is common among Fringe companies who pirate and recycle the texts and conventions of mass culture. Reflecting on Fiske’s concept of the cultural economy, *Star Trek* is a valuable resource for the production and circulation of popular meanings and pleasures. It not only provides common reference points, which attract large numbers of people, but, conversely, people arrive at the theatre with different meanings derived from these common references. The opportunity to share, debate and discuss these differences is a great part of what makes the Fringe popular.

Through its engagement with mass culture, *Scions* is innately a polysemic text; its meaning is open-ended. Any one reading can only be partial because the play depends upon an intertextual reading with mass culture. This is true of all the Fringe plays that borrow from mass culture. To *become* popular a text must be polysemic because popular culture is a process of creating *oppositional* meanings. “The polysemic openness of popular texts is both required by social differences and is used to maintain, question, and think through those differences.”⁵⁰⁵ The meaningfulness of *Scions* depends partly upon social differences, and is in part produced through those differences. Again, this is true of most popular Fringe productions.

Along with the interplay of different texts, engagement with mass culture also includes playing with the conventional boundaries of genre. Stewart Lemoine’s work, which has been consistently the most popular among Edmonton audiences, has always been noted for its “genre mashing” style.⁵⁰⁶ This style is reminiscent of Susan Sontag’s analysis of camp: it is an act of appropriating “their” meanings for “our”

purposes.⁵⁰⁷ From a more general perspective, what is most significant is that new meanings are made by shifting the conventions and transgressing the boundaries that frame the old meanings.

When conventions are highlighted in performance, how they shape and contain meaning is also highlighted. Accordingly, a part of reception -- the production of meaning -- includes a heightened awareness of *how* conventions and generic boundaries work to shape meaning -- for “us”.

The Last Temptation of Christopher Robin

The play sends A. A. Milne’s fresh faced character and his stuffed friends Pooh and Piglet off to fight the Nazis, immersing them in the cruelty and degradation of army life. Chris Dafoe.⁵⁰⁸

“Christopher Robin” is a fictional reference point. For myself, he evokes positive sentiments of childhood innocence and joyful naiveté (for someone of a different background, he might just as easily represent a colonial figure and evoke negative sentiments around experiences of exclusion). In the play, *Christopher Robin’s Final Temptation*, Christopher Robin leaves the 100 acre forest with Pooh and Piglet to fight in the first world war. Piglet is eaten by German soldiers, and Pooh dies of hunger. In the process, my meanings of Christopher Robin are nullified and exposed as my own fictions. They became as fictional as is the character. Christopher Robin is taken out of context, and the reference points “I” have made of him are subverted. The effect of this is sensationally emotional. Many audience members cried and gasped throughout the performance. This sensational element is common to popular Fringe productions and is often created by a disruption of fictional coherence -- which in turn is dependent upon an intertextual relation with mass culture.⁵⁰⁹

Part Two:

The Politics of Pleasure on the Fringe:

THREE DEAD TROLLS IN A BAGGIE

Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie would like to take this opportunity to do a little advertising for some car companies. We sent impressive proposals to Ford, Chrysler, Subaru, G.M., Honda, Toyota, and Mazda, inviting them to give or lend us a van to tour in exchange for lots of really good publicity. They all told us "No Way!" So we would like to suggest that you, the public, never ever buy any of their products, especially Subaru, who didn't even have the courtesy to write back to us.

General Motors Sucks ! Honda Sucks! Toyota Sucks!

Ford Sucks! Chrysler sucks! Mazda Sucks!

Subaru Really Really Sucks!

Incidentally, if any of these car companies change their minds, however, we are certain the quality of their products will improve..⁵¹⁰

The Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie are one of the most popular Fringe touring companies. They have never *not* sold out a show on the Edmonton Fringe.⁵¹¹ Both the theatre they create and their Fringe fame offer a number of insights into the most evident popular politic on the Fringe. This politic, in part, revolves around "artfully" poaching, resisting, evading, offending, or playing tricks with the meaningfulness of "official" culture, or, as the Trolls say, "real art." The following excerpt from one of The Trolls' programs offers an example:

Art Lesson

This show is called "The Voice of Fire Comedy Hour." It was inspired by the painting "Voice of Fire" by Barnett Newman (who is dead), which was purchased by the National Art Gallery

in Ottawa for 1.8 Million Dollars. This made some people mad. They think the painting is stupid. We think the Voice of Fire is a great painting because it evokes unbridled passion, and stirs one's soul, but mostly because it's so easy to do. That's right, with only a tiny amount of work and materials, you too can build your own masterpiece of minimalist expressionism. All you have to do is get a canvas 18 feet high by 8 feet wide (if you don't want to build one that big, any canvas that is 9/4ths as high as it is wide will do). Next, a couple of cans of blue paint. Not just a cheap dull boring old blue, but the nicest, deepest, most exciting blue you can find. Don't be cheap! Remember this is a masterpiece. Also get a can of really neat fiery red paint, and at least two brushes or rollers. Then paint the two outer thirds of the canvas blue, and the centre third red. Take your time, and really put your heart into it, this isn't just a hallway you're painting, *this is art*. ...⁵¹²

Many of the Trolls' program notes contain comments on "real art" and their relationship to it. The above example is the most interesting because it so adeptly illuminates one of Fiske's observations about the politics of popular culture: popular culture manipulates open spots and mishaps in official culture.⁵¹³ The purchase of the "Voice of Fire" created an "open spot" for the National Art Gallery. It stimulated a public debate, which necessitated an official response around defining the value of "the canon". The officials of the National Art Gallery defended the expense of the purchase by explaining that to appreciate the value of this painting one needed to be able to appreciate its place within the canon of modern art. The Trolls find the value of the painting in its ability to be easily reproduced by *anyone*, and accordingly enjoyed by *everyone* in their own living rooms. Facetious as this may be, it is nonetheless exemplary of how the Trolls position themselves, and their work – they "play" outside (or between) the boundaries of *both* the status quo and its adversaries.

Saskatchebuzz

Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie, in their never ending quest to look like Real Artists, Present Justice, Pride, Honour and Ambition On the Prairies of Saskatchewan.⁵¹⁴

Saskatchebuzz can be read as a play about “the little guy” who uses the media to rise to power and fame, encountering and overcoming the forces of authority and hegemony on the way -- only to be felled by the very media that gave him the power to begin with. *Saskatchebuzz* is not only a popular Fringe play, produced by a company who are well known for their cultural politics of trickery and adaptation, it is also a play that provides provocative textual links to theories concerned with popular culture. On a number of levels it can be read as a play about how a popular text works.

The Story:

The four member cast cuts a wide path as it parodies far more than the plight of Saskatchewan wheat farming. The RCMP, Brian Mulroney, Princess Diana, Joe Clark, the Gulf War, Quebec and more are all grist for the Trolls’ ill [sic.] *In the end however, one is left wondering whether the Trolls intend the show primarily to support farmers, or to support less stringent marijuana laws?* John Lyons.⁵¹⁵

Saskatchewan farmers, Louie and Thelma Budd, (Wes Borg and Katheleen Rootsart) decide to plant 400 acres of pot, instead of wheat. Louie Budd has a plan: He will get himself arrested and the media will want his story, then, he will use the media to educate the people on the economic and environmental values of hemp. The R.C.M.P. (Neil Grahn) arrest Louie Budd. He spends eight months in prison, but the media pays no attention to him.

On the day of Louie’s release, his neighbor’s farm is being auctioned by the bank. When the entire farm is sold (to a bidder in the audience) for a mere thousand dollars,

Louie Budd makes a speech. His neighbor responds by suggesting, “with words like that, you oughta run for Premier.” Louie goes on the campaign trail. He sings songs, shakes hands (with the audience), and makes TV commercials. He wins the 1995 election and tells all the farmers, “starting tomorrow I want each and every one of you to go out to your fields and plant pot, and leave the rest up to me.”

The media fall in love with Louie Budd. They follow him everywhere exclaiming his virtues to the world. Between the hemp and the tourist industries, Saskatchewan becomes a world economic power. But, while Louie Budd is busy paying off the debt and giving “third world” countries the surplus, his son, Billy Budd (Joe Bird), is lonely for his Dad.

Billy Budd, in his depression, smokes a huge joint, gets really stoned, *and* decapitated by a threshing machine. The neighbor tells the media, “Drugs killed Billy Budd, I think the drugs blew his head right off.” The media tells the world, “the world is in shock, fear, revulsion and confusion over Billy Budd’s brutal death.” The U.N. declares that the cultivation of marijuana is an inhumane practice. The U.S. government announces that it has “never sat back while another government has brutally murdered its people.” The U.S. military announces a plan: *Prairie Storm*. They “liberate” the province in a week. Louie and Thelma Budd are shot dead. The U.S. President announces the victory: “This was a just war, a war between good and evil, we kicked evil’s ass.”

The final dialogue is played out with paper bag puppets. A father tells his son the end of the story: “When the U.N. forces burnt the marijuana crops, they didn’t anticipate 500,000 soldiers simultaneously getting stoned, and when they did the world consciousness was raised to such a point that suddenly everyone became aware that God never intended people to think of marijuana as evil, and you know son, every time you hear a bell ring it means an angel is getting stoned.”

The story line is simple. The analogies with contemporary social issues are obvious: the power relations between the “little guy” and the “big guys,” between media and politics, the U.S. and Canada, and between father and son are played out with broad sweeping brush strokes. The story is often excessive, employing cliché dialogue and images, and exaggerated plot twists. For example, the turning point in the story, when Billy Budd is decapitated, is played out simultaneously with a scene in which Louie Budd is giving C.P.R. to a dying puppy. Billy Budd’s head rolls across the stage and his decapitated body stumbles about as Louie Budd, surrounded by journalists and advisers, thumps on the chest of a stuffed puppy dog shouting “live damn you, live!!” The neighbor’s cliché conclusion, “the drugs blew his head right off,” is the beginning of the end of Louie Budd.

The obvious, the excessive, the exaggerated, and the cliché are the qualities of popular texts most often distinguished in order to characterize popular culture as simplistic or easy. It is precisely these qualities that are necessary if a text is to become a resource for popular culture. This is so because the obvious is open-ended; it offers no insightful explanation. The excessive is “meaning out of control,” meaning that “exceeds the norms.”⁵⁶ The obvious provides a common starting point for numerous and possibly conflicting explanations and insights; the excessive and the exaggerated expose the “normally” invisible boundaries and limitations of common sense. Common sense *does* govern “everyday” life. Popular culture relies on the obvious in order to be open and debatable, it relishes the excessive in order to reassess and reckon with common sense, and it uses clichés to expose the hidden power of common sense: “Drugs Kill” is a cliché that, in *Saskatchebuzz*, has the power to mobilize and moralize the forces of the media and the military.

The Play:

The stage is bare. A map of Saskatchewan stretches from the LX hang to the stage floor; it is large and green. When the lights come up, Wes Borg is smoking a joint, standing bare-footed with a baseball cap on his head. The audience immediately breaks into laughter. He butts out the joint on the stage floor with his bare foot, and we physically wince.

The design of the play is open and fluid. When Louie Budd's neighbor visits, he arrives with a piece of fence, sets it down, and they chat over the fence. Louie sells his "miracle hemp fabric" to the audience for \$10 bucks and a kick in the ass. Nobody actually gives him money, but people do kick him in the ass. They hold a telephone poll by passing out cellular phones to the audience. Louie goes on the campaign trail, kissing and shaking hands with the audience. When the neighbor discovers Billy, he runs off to find Louie (who "in reality" is just stage left, standing right beside the decapitated body, being interviewed by the media); he runs up through the house, out one exit door and in through another, back through the house and across the stage, right past Louie, circling through the auditorium three times. There are numerous examples of this performance principle throughout the play. Each and every time the action flows into the house, the audience erupts with laughter.

Incorporating the auditorium and audience into the playing space is a convention that is most often described as a transgression of the fourth wall. In popular Fringe shows the fourth wall is always weak and often fluid. In *Saskatchebuzz*, it comes and goes, the actors make use of it, or not, depending on the theatrical style of the scene. Whenever the illusion of a fourth wall is broken, the audience laughs. The greater the transgression, as when audience members kick Louie in the ass, or when the neighbor runs through the house, right past his destination three times, the louder and more

hearty the laughter. The audience is laughing with pleasure because conventions are being transgressed.

Theatrical conventions are the mechanisms which frame and contain both textual meanings and theatrical experience. In turn, conventions determine and control, to some extent, the boundaries of those meanings and experiences. The pleasures derived from breaking the framework, by abusing the mechanisms of convention, are “popular pleasures.” What defines pleasure as popular is its oppositional relationship to discipline, authority and control: social, moral, textual, aesthetic, and so on. In this instance, the fourth wall is a form of aesthetic discipline and the pleasure is one of evasion. The bodily elements in this example are abundant: the semiotic authority of the fourth wall is physically punctured by the kisses, handshakes, and kicks in the ass.

The Production of Meaning:

Popular productivity is a constant process of recombining and reusing the cultural products of capitalism in a form of bricolage.
John Fiske.⁵¹⁷

The Trolls use two distinctive performance principles in *Saskatchebuzz* that relate to Fiske’s observations on popular pleasures and productivity. One can be described as a performance principle that incorporates the formal conventions of both mass culture and high culture (for example, television commercials juxtaposed with abstract movement scenes), the other, as an intertextual praxis.

The first, engagement with the conventions of both mass and high culture, actually describes the extremes of a range of borrowed conventions used by the Trolls. *Saskatchebuzz* also incorporates the formal conventions of melodrama, film noir, musical theatre and paper bag puppetry. One of the results of this “borrowing” is that each time the conventional frame shifts, a potentially ironic moment is marked.⁵¹⁸ The best example of this occurs in the opening scene. Louie and Thelma are looking out

over their fields smoking a joint together. Louie matter of factually tells his wife, “Can’t grow wheat or barley, so I think tomorrow we should grow pot.” The lights dim and a musical score begins; the lights come up on three actors tilling and planting in abstract stylized choral movements that are suggestive of factory workers. The scene ends with a transformation of free-flowing movement expressing the budding of the pot seeds. The audiences’ response to this unexpected shift in conventions, from representational dialogue to abstract movement, was a transfixed silence which slowly and sporadically transformed into laughter. The playing of the movement scene was not in itself farcical or parodic, but rather well executed true to its form. There were many people in the house who, like myself, enjoyed the music, choreography, and the movement first, and then began laughing. It was not the imitative attributes of the actors that were the source of parody and humour, it was the shifting of conventions and the interplay of formal boundaries that caused “us” to laugh with delight.

Parody is central to the production of popular meanings because it “allows us to mock the conventional, to evade its ideological thrust, to turn norms back on themselves.”⁵¹⁹ In *Saskatchebuzz* parody is created by the ironic and repetitive borrowing of convention and resulting interplay of boundaries. It is the misuse, and by extension the abuse of conventional frameworks that is the source of humour. What is being mocked, evaded, and tuned back on itself, is the authority of conventions to determine meaningfulness. A second attribute of parody is its capacity to bring together the said and the unsaid, to create “a simultaneous perception of more than one meaning.”⁵²⁰ Popular culture relies upon the capacity of “the people” to make their own meanings. In turn, this process relies upon the possibility that meaningfulness is plural, contingent, and subjective.

The intertextual qualities of *Saskatchebuzz* offer the second example of a performance principle that relates to popular pleasures and productivity. The play is

rich with intertextual references. Louie Budd's campaign trial is played out in a series of extremely short overlapping scenes with a background of singing in a style that is cinematic and recalls Robert Altman's popular film about a fictional American presidential candidate, *Bob Roberts*. Billy Budd's death scene is juxtaposed with scenes of Louie Budd's mounting success as Premier. In these parallel scenes their separate fates are played out against a recalling of the myth of Iceruas (created with music, lighting, movement and sub-textual references). The death of Louie is played out in slow motion with a melodramatic underscore and special lighting: a man in a trench coat is spot-lighted in the audience (Neil Grahm), cigarette smoke curls around him creating a film noir image, as he shoots down Louie. Louie falls to his death into a cross of light, he lies "crucified" on the cross (created with a lighting gobo).

Saskatchebuzz also contains a certain amount of "Fringe intertextuality", in which the common textual or formal references are particular to Fringe production. For example, Billy Budd takes his name from the title of another sell-out show produced on the 1990 circuit by English Suitcase: *Billy Budd*⁵²¹; when the U.S. President declares that *Prairie Storm* was "a war between good and evil," this is an obvious reference to *Desert Storm*; and it is also a direct reference to the an earlier co-production between the Trolls and English Suitcase, *Justified Sinners* 1991. Coincidentally, the first line in *Saskatchebuzz*, "We live in desperate times," is almost identical with the first line of another sell-out Fringe show, *Pochsy's Lips*: "We live in scary times." *Cliché !!*

On one level, popular intertextuality is one way of "making do" with what is available. Intertextuality also adds to the potential for multiple readings.⁵²² In part, these readings depend on how spectators interpret the interplay of texts, which in turn depends on familiarity with the different references. The result is that "what the play means" is quite obviously going be different for different people. It is open-ended and polysemic. The formal aspects that make *Saskatchebuzz* a popular text: simplicity,

excessiveness, parody, transgressing conventional and textual boundaries, and intertextuality, each work toward opening up a plurality of possible interpretations.

Who manipulated who? Did the U.S. military manipulate the media; or, is it the media that orchestrates and activates both “popular resistance” and “containment”? Is Louie Budd’s death the destiny of the “little guy” who flies too close to the bright lights? Or, the demise of a father who neglects his family? As the critic so simply asked – what is this play about? – marijuana laws? – Prairie farmers? With these contradictory readings the play becomes a common reference point for marking social differences and alliances. The beer tents, the line-ups, and the festivity at the Fringe all cumulate to greatly heighten the potential for people to actively engage in debate and discussion over these different readings. Debating meaningfulness is an evidently pleasurable experience on the Fringe. This pleasure is one of the reasons the Fringe is popular.

Part Three:

Producing Popular Pleasure:

To be popular, the commodities of the cultural industries must not only be polysemic – that is capable of producing multiple meanings and pleasures – they must be distributed by media whose modes of consumption are equally open and flexible. John Fiske.⁵²³

The politics of popular pleasures, which are evident in the performance principles of *Saskatchebuzz*; evading discipline and producing meanings that are open-ended, are exemplary of the cultural politics of the Fringe at large. The formal conventions of *Saskatchebuzz*, which I have defined in relation to the pleasures of popular culture: simplicity, excessiveness, transgressing conventional boundaries, and intertextuality, are also each readily applicable to the Fringe production structure.

Simplicity & Excessiveness

The Fringe is both simple and excessive. On the opening of the inaugural Victoria Fringe, Brian Paisley was quoted as saying “The beauty of this thing is that it is so simple.” The “first-come first-served” selection process – in which no concern is given to the textual or performative contents of productions or the experience and professionalism of the companies – is most likely the simplest method possible for programming a festival. ‘Excessiveness’ is also a quality of the production structure. The 1994 Edmonton Fringe presented over 140 companies performing more than 800 times in ten days, and over 150 street performers. Audiences also have a tendency to over indulge by attending 3, 4, even 5 shows in a single day. By any standard, this amount of theatrical activity is excessive. The simplistic and excessive qualities of the production structure create an open-ended relationship between the festival and its audiences. The Fringe itself is indiscriminate. It is the audience who must discriminate. Confronted with the absence of explanation, and an excess of information, Fringe audiences actively seek out their own explanations in an event that is overflowing with possibilities.

Transgressions

The Fringe production structure creates an environment in which the boundaries between performance and reception can be hard to maintain – despite the intentions of the production. The street performers and beer tent debates stimulate a level of excitement and exhilaration that is carried into Fringe shows. The intrusive impositions of “present reality” on theatrical performance affects the potential of maintaining the illusion of distance, for both the actors and audiences. The amount and diversity of productions: dance, opera, vaudeville, stand-up comics, skits, improvisation, clowning, comedy, tragedy, drama, etc., broadens *and* diminishes the boundaries of

conventions. There are numerous, and often unpredictable, influences that intrude upon the autonomy of individual Fringe shows.

Intertextuality

Chris Johnson discusses different theories as to why Winnipeggers behave so “enthusiastically” at the Fringe. He concludes with his favorite theory;

It is an opportunity to make creative choices. For most fringe-goers, a fringe show does not stand in isolation as a cultural event, it is a part of the day at the fringe, and you get to choose the constituent parts, the juxtapositioning; you get to be artistic director for the day.⁵²⁴

This kind of audience participation and interaction around the performances can be understood in context with the production of meaning. The result is that individual Fringe performances are not autonomous, rather the event creates an intertextual relationship between productions. The meaning of performance is open; making meaning out of any one performance becomes relational to other performances and debates around meaning.

Most of the popular Fringe companies overtly capitalize on the inherent popular qualities of the production structure. Like the Trolls, many popular companies create work that incorporates, adapts, or plagiarizes the plots, characters, and genre of mass produced culture. Popular companies also have a tendency to make textual or performative references to other popular Fringe productions, or Fringe history: their own and others. Mump and Smoot are parodied in a Juanabees show. The title of a sell-out show, *The Happy Cunt*, appears on Philostrate’s play list in a Fringe production of *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*. When the Way Off Broadway Group produced two shows on the same circuit, *The Fuck Machine* and *Young Hitler* 1994, Hitler was a character in both. *The Fuck Machine* borrowed an entire monologue from their 1993 Fringe hit, *Erections, Ejaculations, and Exhibitions*. When Fringe artists

use these common reference points, from mass culture, high culture, or fringe culture, they are capitalizing on, or engaging with, the “already present” intertextual quality of the Fringe production structure.

The intertextual and transgressive qualities of the Fringe festivals emerged coincidentally with the production structure. They evolved from the theatrical and social circumstances that this structure created, and they have played a significant role in creating a space for (a) popular culture. Popular culture is concerned with the everyday: the socially relevant, the bodily and the immediate. Popular texts function primarily as agents in the circulation of meanings and pleasures that are social. Fiske argues that intertextual references are central to the popular productivity (creating meanings from texts); he contends that popular culture exists only in its intertextual circulation: “the culture consists only of meanings and pleasures in constant process”⁵²⁵ The Fringe production structure creates a space that is especially germane to this process.

Journal Excerpts:

15 Aug 1994, Edmonton: One of the “present realities” on the Fringe, inside and outside of the theatres, is the extent to which theatrical boundaries are transgressed and accordingly exposed: A dancer completes her performance, but she exits just short of the curtain. At the edge of the stage she wipes the sweat off her brow, takes a long thirsty drink from a coke, and prepares herself to re-enter. She exposes the boundary between on stage and backstage. At another venue an actor (Jonathan K) sits in the audience, but his voice is projected from the stage. He says “what are you all looking at? – What are we waiting for?” He exposes the boundary between expectations, anticipation and the empty stage. In another venue the poetry of a well-known beat-poet of the 60’s is transformed into

dramatic action, in another an episode of the TV. series *Star Trek* is presented as theatre. The boundaries of genre are exposed. Outside in the street three actors use a roll of masking tape to mark out a 6' x 8' rectangle; the flow of the crowd changes, no one steps into the space. The boundaries of everyday space and theatrical space are exposed. In another venue an actor has just finished a performance of the story of his childhood; he stands at the door shaking hands and touching the people who cannot stop crying. The boundaries between acting and authenticity are exposed. In another venue a man stands up in the middle of a radical feminist play and shouts threateningly, "this is nothing but a bunch of fucking crap"; the audience divides itself, some agree with him, others boo and hiss. In the end he leaves the theatre. The boundaries between community and theatre are exposed. When boundaries are exposed, so too are the mechanics of convention. How conventions frame and shape the process of making sense of things, of making meaning, is highlighted. The social constructedness of meaning is revealed.

⁴⁴² Carnival and Theatre 109.

⁴⁴³ "Self-imposed Marginality," CTR 82 (1995): 35.

⁴⁴⁴ Kathleen Rootsart, Interview, 1991.

⁴⁴⁵ In 1989 (CTR) Filewod related the aesthetics of the Edmonton Fringe Festival to other 'paratheatrical' experiences (for example, the West Edmonton Mall), and he compared the Fringe to "large international festivals". The Fringe, he said, "is part of the competitive 1980's marketplace where success means popular appeal. In large international festivals, appeal means novelty and accessibility, in the Fringe it more often means laughs and a good time." In a 1991 editorial, he noted that the "Fringe festivals are redefining the audience market and asked, is the Fringe a "theatrical phenomenon" or an "industry?" He pointed to the "recurring emphasis on clowning, [and] Fringe performance", and asked "how well is our theatre responding to its times?" In 1992 (CTR) Filewod associated the Fringe with the 'ghettoization' of new work and concluded that the Fringe is "a threat to the professional livelihood of artists."

⁴⁴⁶ Filewod, "Notes From Abroad," American Theater Review 19 July (1989): 50

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 51 (Italics mine).

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid. 51 (*italics mine*).

⁴⁴⁹ Robert Wallace, "Fringe Binge."

⁴⁵⁰ Filewod, "Erasing Historical Difference: The Alternative Orthodoxy in Canadian Theatre," Theatre Journal 41 .2 (1989) 210.

⁴⁵¹ "The Ideological Formation of Political Theatre in Canada," Theatre History in Canada (THC). 8. 2 (1987): 260

⁴⁵² Filewod, "Marginalization" 203.

⁴⁵³ Ibid. 202. During the 1980's the forum theatre methodology of Augusto Boal had a significant influence on the development of popular theatre, resulting in increasing numbers of groups working with facilitators and development educators.

⁴⁵⁴ Filewod, "Ideological" 210.

⁴⁵⁵ Filewod, Introduction, New Canadian Drama.

⁴⁵⁶ Allon White qtd. in "Mail Order Culture and its Critics", Cultural Studies, (New York : Routledge 1992) 525 (*italics mine*).

⁴⁵⁷ Chris Dafoe, "Raves and faves at the Fringe, Globe and Mail 17 Aug. 1993: A11.

⁴⁵⁸ Calgary Herald 9 Jan. 1989.

⁴⁵⁹ "Fringe Daze," CTR 58 (1989): 31.

⁴⁶⁰ "You can't say that at the Fringe! ; How the Way Off Broadway Group mastered the art of p**sing people off" MONDAY Magazine [Victoria] 6 Aug. 1993.

⁴⁶¹ Program notes for Kevin Costner's Naked Butt , Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie 1993.

⁴⁶² Public invitation to "The Annual Fuck Art Party", 1991. Printed by The Juanabeas.

⁴⁶³ John Storey, Cultural Theory and Popular Culture 181.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid. 16. A new culture emerges with the new working class of urban and industrial centres. "It was a culture of two main sources: (i) a culture supplied for profit by the new cultural entrepreneurs, and (ii) a culture made by and for political agitation by radical artisans, the new urban working class."

⁴⁶⁵ The Frankfurt School, which coined the term "cultural industry", argued that with the advent of mass media, popular culture itself had become an industry which, in effect, created a mass consciousness -- "reconciling consumers to the status quo" in order to serve the "interest of capitalism." Much like the safety valve theory applied to festivity, the masses, it is said, "are offered various forms

of easy, false, pleasure as a way of keeping them unaware of their own desperate vacuity." John Storey 101.

⁴⁶⁶ Colin MaCabe, Introduction, High Theory/Low Culture , 12.

⁴⁶⁷ John Fiske, "Cultural Studies and the Everyday of Life", Cultural Studies. 154.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Pam Morris, The Reader: : Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov, (London; New York: E. Arnold, 1994.): 225.

⁴⁷¹ Calgary Herald 29 Jan. 1989 (italics mine).

⁴⁷² "Fringe Festivals, Cultural Politics, and The Negotiation of Subjectivity" (Thesis), MA. thesis, University of British Columbia, September 1991.

⁴⁷³ Calgary Herald 20 Aug. 1988.

⁴⁷⁴ Willems-Braun, "Fringe Festivals and the Production of Spaces of Intersubjectivity", Environment and Planning D: Society and Space. 12 : 1994, 6. "Participants are often distinguished not so much by diversity as by similarity.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid. "In Vancouver, 68% of patrons were administrators, managers, or professionals .. Blue collar workers accounted for only 8%. Fifty-three percent of patrons had at least a bachelor degree, in contrast with 12% of the population of the city of Vancouver."

⁴⁷⁶ John Fiske, Understanding 24 "Such allegiances may coincide with class and other social categories, but they don't necessarily. They can often cut across these categories, or often ignore them. So that while there clearly are interrelationships between the structure of the social system and cultural allegiances, they are not rigidly determinate ones at all."

⁴⁷⁷ Willems-Braun, "Thesis" 26.

⁴⁷⁸ "Bigger not better for the Fringe," The Star Phoenix [Saskatoon] 31 July 1992: A1.

⁴⁷⁹ "All fringe, no frills; festival keeps to the edge," Globe and Mail [Toronto] 18 Sept. 1993: A2.

⁴⁸⁰ Globe and Mail 23 Aug. 1989.

⁴⁸¹ Filewod, "Issues in Performance," CTR 61 (1989).

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Sara Hood, theatrum 26 (1991).

⁴⁸⁴ Robert Wallace, "Edmonton Fringe Binge," CTR 49 (1986) 118 (Italics mine).

⁴⁸⁵ Fiske, Reading 2.

⁴⁸⁶ Profit and culture are not mutually exclusive terms; what is profitable for some is cultural for others.

⁴⁸⁷ Fiske, Reading 27.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid. 34.

⁴⁸⁹ "Production of Space" 1994 7 (Italics mine).

⁴⁹⁰ Fiske, Reading 135.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid. (italics mine).

⁴⁹² Qtd in Fiske, Reading 38.

⁴⁹³ Willems-Braun, "Production of Space" 7. In his analysis, the Fringe is largely of interest as a cultural event which is potentially disruptive of systems of power in general, and in particular, "as sites where social identities are contested."

⁴⁹⁴ Erika Smishek, "Audience run through the ringer," Star Phoenix [Saskatoon] 6 Aug. 1992: D2.

⁴⁹⁵ Because shows are scheduled from noon to midnight, it is possible to disrupt rush hour traffic.

⁴⁹⁶ Lloyd Dykk, "Monologues make liberating experience," Vancouver Sun 19 Sept. 1992: E15.

⁴⁹⁷ Fiske, Reading 19.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid. 69.

⁵⁰⁰ Both the Way Off Broadway Group, (*The Fuck Machine*, 1993) and The English Madhatters, (*The Happy Cunt - a true story* 1994) were under investigation in relation to accusations of "corrupting community standards" (which is a federal offense). In Edmonton a venue sponsor threatened to close the venue in which *The Happy Cunt* was playing. And, Police in Saskatoon threatened to prevent the English Madhatters from leaving the province until their investigation was complete.

⁵⁰¹ Postmodernism and Popular Culture (London ; New York : Routledge, 1994): 23..

⁵⁰² Reading, 28.

⁵⁰³ Program notes; Kevin Costner's Naked Butt, 1993 Edmonton Fringe. Further in the Troll's program notes they use a photocopy of a Picasso painting to play the same kind of trick with the system that produces high culture. The show, they say; "also has nothing to do with an Eskimo boy and his seal. What it does have to do with is this (the Picasso picture) That's Picasso. That's art. So's this show. And if you don't think so you can fuck right off.."

⁵⁰⁴ Michael Wener, Interview, 1991.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid. 30.

⁵⁰⁶ "No Edmonton Fringe would be complete, it seems, without a play by Steward Lemoine. Swift Hotel is another genre-mashing (Hollywood, Oscar Wilde and Charles Ludlum) exercise by the Edmonton playwright and director." Liam Lacy, Globe and Mail [Toronto] 24 Aug. 1990.

⁵⁰⁷ Winfried Fluck makes the interesting point that camp, "as an attitude" which "has re-aestheticized popular culture may be a limited phenomenon in itself, but I think that the change in attitude which it signals is part of a general and irreversible cultural development. . . . the trend toward a growing awareness of the fictionality of popular texts has by now become a general characteristic of media use." "Fiction and Fictionality in Popular Culture", Journal of Popular Culture 21 4 (1988):. 61.

⁵⁰⁸ "Are street acts pushing theater crowd to the fringe?" Globe and Mail [Toronto] 26 July 1991: A 10.

⁵⁰⁹ It is worth noting that most of the reviews of this sell-out play acknowledged the powerful effects of fictionality, yet they criticized the production for its simplicity: "The show juxtaposes the insanity/brutality of war with all our cozy thumb-sucking and deeply ingrained memories of Winnie the Pooh. And its shocking contrast ...works to devastating effect. ... But, it is a one-trick pony, and the trick is revealed in the first 10 minutes." [Marie Maclean, Edmonton Journal 22 Aug. 1991 : T3]. "This hard-hitting play shows the brutal and bitter erosion of high ideas. The shows single flaw lies in its artistic self-indulgence. We get overkill with gratuitous scenes." [Donna Marie Artuso, Edmonton Sun, 19 Aug. 1991 : 19]. "It's a clever idea, but ... [it] seems simplistic and unsatisfying in the end. [Chris Dafoe Globe and Mail [Toronto] 26 Aug. 1991: A2].

⁵¹⁰ Program notes for Saskatchebuzz , Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie, 1994.

⁵¹¹ Interview with the Trolls; Kathleen Rootsart, Wes Borg, Neil Grahn, Joe Bird 1991

⁵¹² Program notes for *The Voice O' Fire Comedy Hour*, Three Dead Troll's in a Baggie, 1990 (Italics mine).

⁵¹³ Fiske, Reading 101.

⁵¹⁴ Program notes, Saskatchebuzz.

⁵¹⁵ Winnipeg Free Press 19 July 1992 (italics mine).

⁵¹⁶ Fiske, Reading 117.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid. 150. "Bricolage is, according to Lévi-Strauss, the everyday practice of tribal peoples who creatively combine materials and resources at hand to make objects, signs, or rituals that meet their immediate needs."

⁵¹⁸ Robert Nunn has made interesting comments on the amount and nature of Canadian theatre which incorporates mass culture into performance, both textually and formally. He argues that "even in theatre works which most thoroughly incorporate mass culture", the formal oppositions between theatre and mass culture, "are always available as a source of irony and critical reflection." (CTR 58 (1989 :49).

⁵¹⁹ Fiske, Reading 114.

⁵²⁰ Hutcheon, Irony's Edge: the theory and politics of irony London : Routledge, 1994) 60.

⁵²¹ An adaptation of Herman Meville's Novel by the same title.

⁵²² "Intertexts are modalities of perception: it is as if the interpreter takes "inferential walks" through various intertextual frames to pick up any useful intertextual information." Hutcheon, Irony's Edge 144.

⁵²³ Fiske, Reading 158.

⁵²⁴ Chris Johnston, "Turning and Turning in the Widening Fringe," Border Crossings, (1988.) 37-38.

⁵²⁵ Fiske, Reading 126.

Chapter Eight:

ex-centric culture -- the fringe & the postmodern

Shows such as Yvette Nolan's *Blade* -- a play depicting the sexual assault and subsequent murder of a young woman, which destabilized the construction of 'woman', 'native', 'prostitute', Winnipeg's 'inner city', and the articulatory practices that link them -- are evidence that the fringes allow writers, producers, and actors to appropriate space for a variety of purposes. That the writer was a Metis woman -- positioned on the margins of Canadian culture -- furthers the view that the fringes permit a particularist theatre, where "points of view that would otherwise get lost in the dominant discourse find visibility" (Schechner, 1989, page 5), and which challenges the production of homogeneity in Canadian theatres (Wallace, 1990). In such a context the construction of gender, race, class, even place, may be contested and representations produced by marginalized individuals legitimated. Bruce Willems-Braun⁵²⁶

To render the particular concrete, to glory in a (defining) local ex-centricity -- this is the Canadian postmodern. Linda Hutcheon.⁵²⁷

[T]he laissez-faire, poor, local Fringe festival -- has repudiated the humanism of the Massey Commission. Alan Filewod.⁵²⁸

I introduced this study by suggesting that the Fringe festivals be considered in context with the larger independent self-producing small theatre movement that emerged in the late 1970s. I qualified the term "independent" as defining artists who typically produce their work without Canada Council funding and often outside established or conventional theatrical venues. This movement can be characterized by an urge to break the rules of form and content by presenting work that challenges theatrical conventions and critical standards -- in nightclubs and cafés, art galleries, conferences, and festivals. I pointed to feminist theatre to indicate the type of identity politics behind much of this activity. Women, and other excluded artists, believed they were excluded from the benefits of both academic criticism and arts council funding. For the most part, they agreed that the roots of their exclusion were founded in established beliefs about what constitutes artistic quality, value, excellence, universality -- and indeed, the "human condition." Artists who wanted to challenge these "norms" had to create

different production opportunities. Festivals, I suggested, were important for this movement because they provided a production model that employs its own criteria for inclusion and its own terms of evaluation.

While the Fringe festivals are a part of this independent movement, ideologically as well as chronologically, they also stand apart in important ways. The Fringe is unique in that it embraces all the constituent parts: feminist, black, native, and gay, political, popular, and experimental theatre, as well as a great deal of more traditional and less challenging work – *but* it represents none of them. While these events are remarkably democratic in their organizing principles, from the perspective of the critic and historian, there is no majority – no centre to grasp and interrogate. Rather, to quote Arrell once more – there is only “the play of differences.” In this respect, these events are reflective of a postmodern aesthetic experience – an experience that results from the leveling of traditional hierarchies of production, and which Arrell describes as “floating free of standards.” In conclusion I want to bring together some of the threads of this study, and try to account for the “Canadianess” and popular success and longevity of the Fringes, by positioning them within a postmodern context concerned with “ex-centric culture.”

The Ex-Centric

These events [the Fringe festivals], I suggest, are justifiably presented as exemplary interventions in the relations that frame Canadian theatre – enabling the (dis)articulatory practices of a radical cultural politics. Bruce Willems-Braun.⁵²⁹

Within the numerous and multi-disciplined debates about what defines the postmodern there are two generally agreed upon characteristics that are relevant to this discussion. One is that the postmodern condition depends upon a “crisis in legitimation.” The other is the effacement of the boundary between “high culture” and “low culture” – what Andreas Huyssen has called “the breakdown of the great

divide.”⁵³⁰ Both of these features of postmodernism are related to the new social movements that came out of the 1960s: feminism, black and gay rights, aboriginal self-determination, and minority rights groups – what Hutcheon terms the “ex-centric”.⁵³¹

The Crisis in Legitimation:

Her honesty was compelling. I thought ‘is it *theatre*?’ Yes, it is.
Vit Wagner.⁵³²

I think the Fringe is as close as theatre comes to making critics irrelevant. Colin Thomas.⁵³³

... it [the Fringe] breaks down preconceived notions of how you make those [critical] choices and where you get your information. Mira Friedlander.⁵³⁴

...the Fringe is almost a frontal attack on authority – *de facto* it becomes that Ray Conlogue.⁵³⁵

The crisis in legitimation *begins* with the counter-culture challenge to authority and institutions: “the basic postmodernist stance – of a questioning of authority – obviously is a result of the ethos of the 1960s”⁵³⁶ However, as Hutcheon argues, in many ways postmodernism is a response to what *did not* happen after the emancipatory movements of the 1960s. An example of what she means can be provided by looking at the situation in the theatre.

The alternatives proceeded to create a Canadian canon for the theatre, which was a necessary step in the process of legitimating these theatres as the new mainstream.⁵³⁷ However, other than introducing *Canadian* as a critical term, the critical process that determined the boundaries of the canon, and indeed, production and reception, did not change. When the challenge to authority was taken up by “other” artists, academics and critics in the 1970s and 1980s, a different target came into focus. The *means*, the *process*, the *ways* in which the canon, or in postmodern terms “the centre” legitimates itself becomes the target of critical questioning.⁵³⁸ The emerging ex-centric response in many ways saw the alternative movement as a failure:

Despite the innovative influence of the alternate theatre movement in terms of Canadian content and experimental forms, the great male revolution of the Sixties and Seventies did not improve the status of women in theatre. Alternative theatre, like the mainstream, was male-dominated ... the boys were in control, and still are.⁵³⁹

Beginning in the mid 1980s, a number of articles appeared in Canadian Theatre Review and Theatre Research in Canada, which demonstrate the emergence of an ex-centric point of view in Canadian theatre practice and criticism, and a concurrent crisis in legitimization. Ann Wilson examined the assumptions that legitimated the process of adjudication used by the Canada Council. She called into question the criteria of excellence in a context concerned with power relations: “the applicant [for C.C. funding] is lulled into assuming that ... a sense of what constitutes ‘excellence’ is shared.”⁵⁴⁰ Pointing to the inherent exclusiveness of the prevailing standard of universality – “does the work transcend its historic moment and reveal some timeless truth about the human condition?” – she argued that universality “posits that if social conditioning is stripped away, so too is difference.” Her central concern was with the erasure of the social, political, and historical forces that shape theatre production and reception. She argued that an adjudication process that requires a standard of excellence based on universal truth “masks” a *process* which “appears unbiased,” but in actuality, “dismisses many artistic projects that cannot be read from a humanistic perspective.”

Wilson’s essay, while ex-centric, is not an isolated example. The same type of questioning is found in a number of essays and articles concerning various aspects of the theatre.

Paul Leonard challenged “our” idea of objectivity in relation to criticism:

The belief in objectivity as a genuine possibility has been sustained by collective will; in effect, because we all assent to the idea, we make ‘objectivity’ an accepted critical value through our culture. The

questions ... however, are ‘Who is the *we*,’ and ‘what is *our* culture?’⁵⁴¹

Arrell pointed to questions concerning realism and representation: “for them [the postmodernist], realism with its claim to present the truth was a kind of propaganda for the status quo.”⁵⁴² Henry Gomez asked from a black artist’s perspective, “Who determines what is great art ...?” “Who is qualified to determine what impact that art has on a given community?”⁵⁴³ As Leonard points out, “to ask these questions is to grapple with ... the ‘crisis in legitimation.’”⁵⁴⁴

The ex-centric, then, presents a serious interrogation of once accepted certainties of liberal humanism: universals, autonomy, unity, objectivity, and logic. In practice, the ex-centric challenge has been to expose the social and cultural boundaries that “hold together” the centre by linking race, gender, and sexuality with questions of authority -- in other words, to make visible the social construction of reality.⁵⁴⁵

On the Fringe, the absence of any kind of adjudication or selection process -- combined with all the different production strategies that incite audiences to experiment with their selections and debate their opinions -- not only presents a challenge to the power relations that govern the production and reception of theatre, but perhaps more significantly, it invites and legitimates an ex-centric voice. The festivals create a space in which uniqueness, closure, and authority give way to the pleasures of difference. In the process of festivity, the social construction of “norms” and “rules” are both exposed and scrutinized. The eventfulness and festivity on the Fringe provide for numerous opportunities to express, debate, even change one’s mind, about what *we* know. In this way, these festivals celebrate “the crisis in legitimation” that underlines so much postmodern practice and theory.

The High/Low Convene

The boundaries between high art and mass culture have become increasingly blurred, and we should begin to see that process as one of opportunity rather than lamenting loss of quality and failure of nerve. Linda Hutcheon.⁵⁴⁶

High art played an essential role in legitimating hegemony, ... support[ing] a cultural establishment and its claim to aesthetic truth and knowledge. This separation does not make sense to those who stand outside the establishment. Andreas Huyssen.⁵⁴⁷

The other aspect of postmodernism that relates to both the ex-centric and the Fringe festivals is the diminished concern for, or significance of, the distinction between high and low culture. Since the 1960s this bias has become difficult to maintain. Beginning with “Pop art” in the galleries and “Happenings” in the theatres, artistic activities have increasingly challenged critical boundaries between the popular and the high, the social event and the aesthetic. Hutcheon argues that, in this context, “the 1960s were crucial in developing a different concept of art, one that would contest the ‘Arnoldian’ or humanist moral view with its élitist class bias.”⁵⁴⁸

In Canadian theatre there has been an evident and enduring desire to engage with a popular audience. Filewod writes that in the 1970s collective creation, “combined with the populist desire to define local subjects” was “the key which for the first time enabled Canadian artists to define indigenous theatre in terms of a popular audience instead of an educated elite.”⁵⁴⁹ In this study, his focus is on the urge to be popular in context with “post-colonial nationalism”: “the evolution of Canadian culture from colonialism to cultural autonomy.”⁵⁵⁰ Filewod argues that post-colonial nationalism provoked the need to “express cultural realities overlooked or repudiated by the received colonial traditions.”⁵⁵¹ The alternative theatre artists turned to collective creation and the regional, the local, the everyday and the popular, as a way to reject “colonial structures of thought and methods of theatrical creation”⁵⁵²

By adopting the semiotic conventions of familiar popular culture, the troupes declared their alignment with an audience consciousness that normally would reject 'high culture' as an imposition.⁵⁵³

Bessai described this audience as “[f]armers in plaid jackets and John Deere caps.”⁵⁵⁴
John Gray called them “practical people”.⁵⁵⁵

The crisis in legitimation begins in the late 1960s, and so too did the break-down between the high and the low. The emerging ex-centric artists and critics of the 1980s pushed the critique of colonialism and the concurrent validation of the popular harder and further. From an ex-centric point of view, in their quest to be popular, the alternatives offered a limited vision of different historical possibilities. Theirs was essentially a romantic yearning for a shared identity rooted in regional and local popular cultures – an identity that did not account for differences in race, gender, and sexuality. In part, this limited vision of the possibilities of popular culture to enliven a post-colonial critique arises because of the prevailing condemnation of mass produced culture: “the assumptions that ... mass culture was merely a form of deception, pacification, and diversion were widely accepted by people committed to radical political positions ... during the 1960s and early 1970s”⁵⁵⁶ (A commitment to indigenous drama was considered radical at that time). For the alternatives, local popular culture provided a means of expressing an indigenous culture *and* a defense against American commercial culture. Both popular forms and practices would come to be re-conceptualized by ex-centric artists.

Conclusions / Commencements

There are a number of evident parallels between postmodernism, as an aesthetic and a set of social and cultural circumstances, and the Fringe festivals. The Fringe as a *structure* for theatre, undermines the authority of criticism and challenges the idea of evaluation based on a predetermined or universal set of artistic criteria. The artistic

affinity with the popular, the low, the mass produced and the everyday, and the concurrent critical concern for the absence of “seriousness” creates a tension that highlights the disciplinary nature of conventions and boundaries. This, in turn, invites the deviant, undisciplined and the ex-centric. As a festive *event*, the Fringe provides a time and space in which people collectively agree to experiment with the boundaries of *normal* social behaviour, and in this process the symbolic nature of those boundaries is exposed – made visible and held up for scrutiny. These, are the “given circumstances” of all Fringe productions – the “good” and the “bad”, the bold and the boring, the overtly political and the subversly satirical.

△△△△△

Journal Excerpts

10 Oct 1991, Victoria: Reading Linda Hutcheon, she raises interesting and perhaps relevant questions. In my words: what happens when universal autonomy meets the particularly political? What happens when the “marginal” create their own centre? What happened to the social revolution of the 1960s?

The Fringe challenges – and many Fringe plays are actively involved in articulating the boundaries of this challenge, some overtly, some coincidentally. But, what is the *object* of the challenge?

10 Oct 1992, Victoria: The Fringe exposes the mechanisms: the actors, the make-shift theatre’s, the turn around time – all of it works to expose the work behind the work. The humanness. The constructed.

10 Oct 1994, Victoria: The Fringe opens up questions about the domain of theatre. Ironically, because it asks no questions of theatre, makes no demands, other than working within its inherent production limitations. Limitations that create crisis, crisis that invite and challenge innovative solutions.

10 Oct 1995, Montreal: For me, it is how the Fringe makes sense of theatre – not my making sense of Fringe performance – that is most interesting and revealing. This is why I look so closely at the production structure – the processes of the Fringe becoming – it is within these processes that I find the most meaning.

10 Oct 1996, Montreal: It is important to be clear: I am not suggesting, not for a moment, that Fringe artists represent a collectively involved group who have come together with a common political, aesthetic, or ideological cause. Not at all – they are too different from one another – too diverse. Fringe plays become all the more outstanding by virtue of their difference(s). But, at the same time, the absence of structure, administration, organization, selection, programming and facilities creates a *common* experience, an experience of crisis and innovation.

Difference, ‘unlike others’ has no exact opposite against which to define itself. On the Fringe everyone is Different: feminist work, or black work, is not the ‘other’.

I don’t think the festivals are arenas of postmodernists artists, rather the Fringe artists are working within a postmodern cultural performance.

10 Oct 1997, Victoria: Michelle passed away this evening.

The end.

⁵²⁶ “Production of Space.”

⁵²⁷ The Canadian Postmodern: a study in contemporary Canadian fiction, (Toronto: Oxford Univ P, 1988): 19.

⁵²⁸ Filewod, “Theatre, Navy, and the Narrative of True Canadianism,” Theatre Research in Canada (TRC) 13. 1/2 (1992): 104.

⁵²⁹ “Production of Spaces” 4.

⁵³⁰ “Ever since the mid 19th century, the culture of modernity has been characterized by a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture.... Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and

engulfing mass culture. ... [M]odernism's insistence on the autonomy of the art work, its obsessive hostility to mass culture, its radical separation from the culture of everyday life, and its pragmatic distance from political, economic, and social concerns was always challenged as soon as it arose." Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide, 1986, pp vii/viii.

⁵³¹ Hutcheon, Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies, (Toronto: Oxford Univ P, 1991) 70-71.

⁵³² Vit Wagner, "Portrait of an artists working the fringes," Toronto Star 29 June 1990: E3.

⁵³³ Colin Thomas, Interview, 1992.

⁵³⁴ Mira Friedlander, Interview, 1991.

⁵³⁵ Ray Conlogue, Interview, 1991.

⁵³⁶ Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, New York: Routledge, 1988 202.

⁵³⁷ See Denis Johnston, Up The Mainstream.

⁵³⁸ The postmodern concept of "the centre" encompasses any dominant ideology; "Euro, andro, phallo, ethnic centrisims" Hutcheon, Poetics 202..

⁵³⁹ Amanda Hall, "Dialectics of Drama" 83.

⁵⁴⁰ Ann Wilson, "A Jury of Her Peers," CTR 51 (1987), the following un-cited quotes are from the same article.

⁵⁴¹ CTR 58 12.

⁵⁴² Arrell, CTR 57 23.

⁵⁴³ CTR 83 15.

⁵⁴⁴ CTR 57 8.

⁵⁴⁵ See Hutcheon, Canadian Postmodern 69

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid. Introduction ix.

⁵⁴⁷ Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern.," Postmodern Reader 120.

⁵⁴⁸ Canadian Postmodern 33.

⁵⁴⁹ Filewod, Encounters 185.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid. vii.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid. 184.

⁵⁵² Ibid. viii.

⁵⁵³ "Ideological Formation" 260.

⁵⁵⁴ "Discovering the Popular Audience," Canadian Literature 118 (1988): 7.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁶ Richard Gruneau, ed. Introduction, Popular Culture and Political Practices (1988) 11.

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geste pour happy cunt

Three characters; One is there as an academic, at an academic conference, to talk to other academics about he/r research on the Fringe Festivals. One is there as a director to talk to the same people about directing *The Happy Cunt* on the Fringe. And, one is there in spirit, s/he is there to perform. There is a large screen video which both the director and academic utilize in their discussions, and with which the performer interacts.

This is an experiment with, and a performance of, boundaries and borders/ with intertextuality and experientially: It is meant to entertain, to make people both laugh and wonder at the ways we create meaning. It is also community theatre: for a community of academics in theatre research.

THE PERFORMANCE

geste pour happy cunt:

**Performed for the Association for Canadian Theatre Research
University of Montreal and Quebec.
Learned's Conference May 1995.**

'Geste Pour Happy Cunt' is a story about working on the annual Cross-Canada Fringe Festival told in 40 minutes by three characters: The Actor, The Director, and The Academic. *take a pause - read these stage directions -..... (OUT-LOUD).*
Errol Wood, Basil Vasiliou, and Erika Paterson.

'Cunt' is a very old word. Admittedly, a difficult word to find in a dictionary of etymology. An erased word, a de-faced word. The Latin roots of cunt, like the word cunning, are indicative of knowledge and wisdom; at that time, the word was not

gendered. By Anglo Saxon times cunt had become a gendered term that defined “Quintessential Female Glory”. Sometime in the 15th or 16th century the word, along with its meaningfulness, became derogatory, nasty, and eventually unspeakable by women. It was replaced, in polite society and by the medical profession, with the common term “vagina”. A “vagina” is a part of a sheath for a sword. It is the little (*make gestures while describing*) ornamental piece at the mouth of the sheath, often jeweled to indicate wealth and status.

This performance was created specifically for this occasion, for you people, for this day, for this one time only, *take a breath*, for a number of reasons, which cumulate in an overarching desire to entertain. ‘

Black-out please. *leave the stage.*

~~~~~

**Pre-set:** *Video 1 Centre stage : 8' x 6': screen is red - blood - drippin' - pro-creatin' blood.*

**Scene 1:**

**ACTOR** *Center-stage: crouched in a ball behind the video screen..*

**Live voice:** *from booth over microphone : panting.*

**ACTOR** *emerges from under the screen, panting . opens h/is eyes and slowly, erotically, pro-creationally - opens h/er body*

**Sound effect :** *gasp.*

**Video 1:** *Fade out.*

**Scene Two:**

**DIRECTOR** *enters with a video camera, in its case, sets it up on a tripod and focuses on the audience* If I had had my way, “The Happy Cunt” would have opened with a scene just like that. But, it did not.

**ACTOR** *enters -: Takes a BIG bow, forces applauds - and skips off stage.*

**Director:** The Happy Cunt was a collaboration, between three of us.

*This* show is also a collaboration. But, today we are three different people, so we begin with the birth scene that I’ve always wanted to see. *This* is also a story: It’s an important his-torical story. We made his-story with the happy cunt; The Globe and Mail printed the word ‘cunt’ for the first time in his-story, and C.B.C. – Regina, of all appropriate places, said the word out loud - on the air waves

.....cunt...cunt....cunt...cunt....cunt.....

And, *that could* be the beginning and the end of the story.

*Exits, and gets the T.V.. rolls it on stage, hooks up video to TV.*

**ACTOR:** *enters and takes a second bow. EXITS.*

**DIRECTOR:** The happy cunt was a parody engaged in many texts, in many ways.

We took the texts of philosopher/theologian Mary Daly and put them into a context - a world created by the characters we created – Hag and Nag. It was an un-innocent metafeminist metafiction situating itself in theatrical/public/social discourse, and splintering off, like a single cell entity, into an array of different contexts : “What about the children?” “What about the Fringe sponsors?”, “What about your futures?” We survived by refusing to surrender our autonomy as fiction.

*This* is also a parody; an intertextual celebration of appropriation and fragmentation -- Hutcheon style.

*This* is also a workshop of an unfinished story, a first draft, a work in progress; hence you are a workshop audience, an unfinished audience, an audience in progress. If you believe that, then this play is not a real play, and you are not a real audience.

Stand-by LX 3

I am the director of this story.

LX 3 - GO.

This was a prologue.

*blackout.*

**Scene Three:**

**ACADEMIC** *enters with a podium, sets herself up for her lecture.*

**ACTOR** : *Enters with chair - turns on the TV.*

**ACADEMIC** : The power is out. *long pause.* There is no power. Can any body back here do something about the power situation?

**DIRECTOR** : *enters* TV. works, lets try the video.

**Video 2:** *Excerpts from a TV. special that interviewed the English Madhatters – no sound.*

Ah, mizzzz Diana Dent....

O.K. We've got the TV. and the video, it's authentic enough for me. *exits.*

**ACADEMIC**: I can't see my text.

*A blast of light.*

I can't see the video.

*Black-out.*

**DIRECTOR** : *enters:* Keep the video, kill the lights, your voice is all we need.

Your running out of time - catch: *throws her a flashlight.* Academic reads the following while audience watches the video.

**ACADEMIC**: The English Madhatters, creators of *The Happy Cunt; a true story*, saw themselves as multivalent collaborators. When they came together to create this show, they were each independent and well-seasoned Fringe artists. Their knowledge of Fringe audiences encouraged them to take risks, and inspired them to experiment. Theatrical process led them to plagiarize - slash- intertextualize material. The radical elemental feminist politic of the material they "pirated" gave them, I think, courage.

Each of these things influenced both their process and their concept of collaboration. It, collaborating, became as much a mode of social behavior, as theatrical praxis. For these three artists, as their tour proceeded from Montreal toward Victoria, collaboration began to extend far beyond the process of performance — performance extended far beyond their Fringe venues. This is not a unique experience, especially on the Fringe tour. However, in this case, collaboration transformed into conspiracy. Performance extended into their relationships with the Fringe producers, Fringe lawyers, and board members. Performance extended into their interviews with police investigators and businessmen's associations, and as can be expected, performance expanded into their media relations- slash- publicity - slash marketing ploys. And finally performance evolved into their post-show audience participation - slash- discussion in the streets and in the beer tents. For the most part, the English Madhatters were not who they appeared to be.

*VIDEO - FADE OUT.*

**DIRECTOR** *enters watches the TV and his watch, and rewinds the tape in camera.*

**ACADEMIC:** What I find most interesting about the happy cunt project, is the revelation that not one of these three artists was or is a Radical Elemental Feminist — as was the material they pirated and the performances that transpired.

This is particularly interesting in light of the question poised earlier in the plenary: “To whom is feminist theatre addressed? And, how does it impact an audience without antagonizing it?” In this instance does the question become - *By whom is feminist theatre created, produced, and performed?* , And, how does feminist theatre impact a non-feminist actor, without antagonizing her slash him ?

What happens to the relationship between theatre and audience in a situation such as this?

**Transition # 1:**

**DIRECTOR:** black-out please.

**DIRECTOR** *plays tape on monitor. TV. is the only light on stage. Whispers to academic as he leads her off stage:: nice finish - good timing.*

**ACADEMIC:** *whispers* : I'm not finished

**DIRECTOR** *whispers* I thought it was an excellent finish, nice and dramatic-inclusive -open-ended - leave them with questions - I like that. *Whispers in the dark to the actor:* What do you think, How does it look ?

**ACTOR:** *Turns TV. to director, i.e.: towards audience also.*

**DIRECTOR** oh. Standby by Lx 8.....

*Actor and Director carry the director's desk on stage: Down stage right of center stage.. Director sits at desk. Lx 8 go.*

### **Scene Four:**

**DIRECTOR:** The Happy Cunt began with a prologue. Because it was a collaboration, the prologue became our anchor for creating the piece, and, it was the only piece of script that remained relatively stable through-out the process of touring the show. *Shows them the prologue.*

In Montreal, *shows them a map*, when we opened, *shows them a calendar*, HAG and NAG delivered the prologue on stage. We were lucky. We opened opening night of the Fringe at 10 o'clock, you couldn't ask for a better time; the house was packed, it was hot, people were excited, our pre-press was great, our technician was totally open-minded, I was running the lights, my hands were shaking, and the audience laughed on the first line.

Albeit, nervous laughter.

But, we didn't want them to laugh quite so soon and certainly not so easily. So, on the second night, HAG and NAG played the prologue as they approached the stage -- coming through the audience -- from behind them. Nobody laughed during the prologue that evening. It became spooky, a little threatening for some, for others, they delighted in becoming a part of the conspiracy. Watch. Standby Lx 9 Sound

Q 5 Actor ? Stand-by video. GO !! : *large screen video - HAG and NAG :on stage.* Actor ?

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*Actor: enters, responds, interacts, with the Video.*

*Director films audience during the 'prologue'*

**Video : Hag & Nag :** The Happy Cunt is not a story of feminine eroticism. Although, it hardly excludes this from its concerns. This is a mission of feminist erraticism. Erratic: having no fixed course. Nomadic or wandering. Happy Cunts are wanderlusty. Happy cunts are known for fierce resistance to being fixed. We are the conjurers of a different course. Staggering on the edge of a doomed world. We are members of a raging race breaking free into ecstatic space. Our journey will be a quest for life-lust to escape the patriarchy. Transcending the nation of stags, the state of stagnation. Our weapons are our own wild wisdom a wit. Our craft is a wicked weaving of words for undeceiving. Our fuel is E-motion. We bound out of the state of bondage into our background, homeland, Country of the Strange. Wild women are strange - fanatic, enthusiastic, eccentric, idiosyncratic women. We laugh at such labels as Quack. We quack back and quack away at the cockaludicrous snoolishness of cockocracy.

*Music*

By the Magic of musing/re-membering, join us. Leave the dismembered state. Cast your lot, life with the trees and the winds, with the sands and the tides. You are now outcaste, casting yourselves outward, inward, break out of the casts of phallocracy's fabricated/fictions. Move out of the maze of mediated experience. As you lurch/leap into the starlight your tears will become tidal, your cackles cosmic, your laughter lusty. Your quest implies constant creation. Your destination - The other side of the moon.

**VIDEO - Fade-out.**

**Actor : exits**

**Transition #2:**

**DIRECTOR :** Standby LX 10 *Turns off the camera and Rewinds tape in camera.*

And LX 10 GO.

**ACTOR/ACADEMIC:** *create a scene behind the scene : shadows on the video screen – as the director speaks – they CLOWN around.*

**Scene Five:**

**DIRECTOR:** First, we find our text, it can be anything: music, visual, or words. We use the text to create a context. In rehearsal, we use the *actor's* performative response to the text, and my response to her performance, to create a context for *character* – and eventually character creates narrative.

Initially we worked with dozens of texts of different genres, eventually HAG and NAG emerged in Deb and Diana's response to the text's of Mary Daly. *Shows them the texts.* Ultimately, it was "in character" from which we created our script - with Mary's words.

We worked in rehearsals like that for four months *before* we had an audience to work with, so we were naturally/unfortunately attached to our script -- certainly much more than we appear to be now.

We put an aluminum ladder on stage, with a couple of dozen small candles underneath it, a fog machine behind it, and with 36 LX cues; that was our scenography. (Next time, we will add a bubble-making machine.) The ladder was HAG and NAG's craft. In Toronto I thought about replacing the ladder with a shopping cart, for the sake of movement. But: shopping carts, bag ladies, shopping malls; women destitute or domesticated. Deb and Diana liked the idea, from a purely performative point of view - the ladder *was* static. Nevertheless, HAG and NAG did not. The ladder remained an object of debate right across the country. But, it never moved.

In Montreal we had a small three-sided stage, on the floor, and shaped by the seats. The lighting and sound board were nestled right in the far corner of the audience. I was surrounded on two sides, and diagonal to the third group of seats. I could look up from the lighting board and see the expressions on about 80 faces. It was hot hot

hot in Montreal. The venue was becoming unbearable, I could see the sweat dripping off chins. St. Laurent was closed to traffic for a merchant's fair when I made a deal to buy 200 Chinese fans - *shows them the fan*, for 20 cents each = \$40.00. That evening the theatre was alive with the rustling of fans. It looked beautiful. It sounded like hundreds of butterflies..... (*laughter, from behind the screen .. it begins as a small giggle and grows.* Excuse me. Black-out ..... please.

### **Transition # 3**

**ACADEMIC:** *at podium - now down stage left.* The clown's performance is a parabais and a parataxis that disrupts and interrupts customary frames and expected logic and syntax and creates a reflexive and ironic dialogue, an open space for questioning.

**ACTOR**..... I'm not a clown.... I am..... : *as the academic speaks the following lines, the actor, centre stage - in a single light - responds by repeating I am not a clown, I am ...actor improvises.depending on the actor's reality, ie : I am Black, I am Male, I am white.....*

**ACADEMIC:** It's your ludic element which most fascinates me. It is the ludic element which is at the base of all questions of transformation. *It is the play frame that embraces all performances, whether imitative, representational, transformational, whether firm or light, whether cosmic or mundane, enduring or fleeting, personal or collective, whether we snicker or are terrified, indifferent or carried away. The ludic is neither true nor false, neither pleasure or pain. It simply points us to the power, and the inevitability of our ...*

**DIRECTOR:** *enters with another podium, places it upstage left. Leads the academic to the podium: Interrupts Academic: That is not your position.*

**Academic :** oh.

### **SCENE Six:**

**DIRECTOR** : *Turns on the TV. and faces it toward the audience and focuses the camera on academic. Gives her a cue to begin. Settles in his chair.*

**ACTOR** : *follows academic with the camera.*

**ACADEMIC** : *lecture notes are attached to the podium, she scrutinizes them with her flashlight for a moment, : I'm not too sure about these stage directions: Academic locates the people in the audience whom she is about to quote. With flashlight she enters the audience and stands behind the other academic whom s/he is quoting: shining h/er light on them, one by one. Director films her while she does this - monitor is centre stage: audience watches themselves watching h/im in the audience.*

(Reid Gilbert).“The question of whether a director approaches a project from a particular ideological position or within a particular performance theory or aesthetic immediately raises a competing question. Are directors in Canada free to make such choices?” Are we free to make such choices ?

**DIRECTOR** : As the director of the Happy Cunt project, I designed and directed the process. In the beginning, I sought out two actors who were not particularly concerned with feminism, and had not identified themselves with feminism in the theatre. Seeking non-feminist with which to create a radical piece of feminist theatre was an integral part of the politics of my process, as it happened, and in retrospect, the very foundations of the project rested on Deb's (HAG) and Diana's (NAG) absence of commitment to feminism. If they had been politically engaged in feminism, they would have had very serious questions and doubts about this project - right from the beginning. Mary Daly, *shows them her books*, is a white, middle-class, lesbian, radical, elemental feminist -- no apologies: not everyone's brand of feminism. On the tour, when things got really tough, when the lawyers and the cops got involved, Deb and Diana became more and more committed to their right to *perform* feminists - and *coincidentally*, they began to identify with themselves as feminist, on a quest -- just like HAG and NAG. This turn of events/ identities/

personal politics was fueled by the enthusiasm they received from audiences, *and* the biting biting criticisms that came in print form. The point is, they never fully questioned the ‘politics’ of the project until they began to *live* them.

**ACADEMIC:** (Richard Knowles.) “Do the options deny the possibility of a politically engaged process that foregrounds the personal and political investments of practitioners and audiences alike?”

**Director:** We began with research -- in three different cities: London, Vancouver, and Victoria. When we came together to work, the very first thing we did was chose a title. Titles are interesting. If you title a piece, *after* you’ve created it, than the title is not going to have much influence on the process -- is it? On the Fringe there are hundreds of titles, and even more unknown artists. Audiences are initially, before word of mouth kicks in, selecting what plays to see by their titles. So, title’s *should* have a significant influence on the process and performance. Along with posters and handbills, the title is one of your central marketing/publicity tools. *Shows them the poster and handbills for The Happy Cunt : a true story.*

**Academic:** (Alan Filewod.) “It is easier to justify a situation in which artists pay for the privilege of working for free, when the imposed poverty is concealed by the warm fuzzy blanket of community.”

**DIRECTOR :** There is no funding. There are no budgets. We are one of over 150 companies, in Edmonton. Some of the Festivals average 35% houses across the board -- that’s a total. We averaged across the tour, 87% houses. For 56 performances over four months in seven cities, our total box office was \$46,000. At the end of the tour, I put \$1,650.00 in my bank account. Which becomes my investment for next year’s tour.

The title has to be worth a couple of grand, anyway.

After we chose the title, I imagined an episodic piece about a secret society of women, ‘ The Happy Cunt’s’ -- with a plot to destroy the patriarchy -- which has

existed through-out the centuries, and is only now ready to succeed, in a docu-drama frame-work, which would keep dissolving -- the framework I mean. Deb imagined camp style housewives, super-heroines and amazons; she wanted the Happy Cunt's to be cartoons characters. Diana imagined being striped naked and shaved bald and burned at the stake by a grotesque gigantic puppet conquistador -- on stage. In the end, HAG and NAG were indeed cartoon characters, and there was a lot of flame on stage - and lotsa smoke.

**ACADEMIC :** "The empty space does not exist."

#### **Transition # 4**

**Voice over:** You have assembled with certain shared expectations. What happens to you when the activity of watching a live performance is combined in some way with the experience of other media ?

**VIDEO 4 :** *Headlines from the The Happy Cunt tour.*

*newspapers, in single sheets, fall to the stage.*

#### **Scene Seven:**

**ACTOR:** *on stage*

**DIRECTOR** Standby Lx 20 Lx 20 Go.

*Newspapers/Video stop - silence.*

**ACTOR :reading :** The Fringe show with the rudest name (a reference to female genitalia) is intended to be a wickedly wild exploration of the liberated female psyche. The performances are superb -- unfortunately, the show is utter dribble. Call me a male chauvinist bacon-muncher if you will, or as this show puts it ' one of the dum dums of daddydum'. But, 60 minutes of nonsensical fem-babble wears mighty thin after 10 minutes.

**DIRECTOR:** Adrian Chamberland, Victoria Colonist - my home town.

**ACTOR:** On the eve of the Fringe, a poster is raising blood pressure in Old Strathcona. “It is deliberately controversial says Diana Dent. She explains that the show and it’s title constitute a serious attempt to “reclaim our language”.

**DIRECTOR** Edmonton Journal.

**ACTOR:** I can emphasize with feminist politics – as long as its not Andrea Dworkin advocating the mandatory castration of all heterosexual males. But, making bad theatre in the name of feminism or any other political cause is another matter.

**DIRECTOR:** Victoria Colonist.

**ACTOR:** The Happy Cunt: Not bad as a sort of sound-image dance-poem with two weird women in leather. But, the message : Patriarchy bad, woman good, is 20 years out of date, and was simplistic even then.

**DIRECTOR:** Toronto, Globe and Mail.

**ACTOR:** This show temps one to say it sets feminism back twenty years. It only sets feminism back ten years, because 20 years ago the movement had more important things to do then indulge in this kind of wretched excess.....

**ACADEMIC :** *steps out from behind the video screen* Oh yeh! Let’s see....*what were we doing 20 years ago ???* hmmm, oh, I remember – taking off our bras !!!!- ‘the good old days of feminism’. Shit’.

*Actor gives her the paper – She reads* What’s truly annoying is that the English Madhatters maintain their title is a liberating feminist reclamation of language.

**ACTOR:** *Reading from his paper* : C- is nothing but a nasty swear word used to insult people of either sex.

**ACADEMIC:** *Picks up a paper:* The English Madhatters have been warned.

**ACTOR:** *Picks up a paper.* Hooray for the English Madhatters.

**ACADEMIC:** That putting up their posters in public makes them vulnerable.

**ACTOR:** Their commando tactic feminism provided a moment.

**ACADEMIC:** Diana Dent’s attempt to have women regain control.

**ACTOR:** The Fringe gives actors a change to be rebels

**ACADEMIC :** over the English language.

**ACTOR:** even if they don't have a cause.

**ACADEMIC:** has landed the Fringe performer in trouble.

**ACTOR:** Are the Fringe sponsors happy?

**ACADEMIC:** with the law

**ACTOR** With the Happy C - ?

**ACADEMIC:** The police are investigating.

**ACTOR :** Police in Edmonton declared

**ACADEMIC:** a poster to determine if

**ACTOR:** the poster is a contribution to

**ACADEMIC:** it is criminally obscene

**ACTOR:** the corruption of community morals.

**ACADEMIC:** The Play, The Happy C... is about female empowerment.

**ACTOR:** That is an indictable offense.

### **Transition # 5**

**DIRECTOR** Black-out please *whispers to Academic as he leads her to exit:* Hey, that was good.

**ACADEMIC** Did you like that? The way I came out like that - it *was* spontaneous. I *was* really pissed off when he read that review. I *was really* acting - I *felt* it. *exits.*

**DIRECTOR:** Now we're really screwed for time.

### **Scene Eight :**

**DIRECTOR :** Every year the local critics in Saskatoon participate in an outrageously hilarious competition. At the Annual Opening Ceremonies of the Saskatoon Fringe Festival they agree to be physically abused, laughed at, and judged, in a competition designed by the Fringe Festival. In 1991 the critics participated in the Human Velcro Throwing Contest: They were dressed in Velcro suits, and then catapulted against a

Velcro wall, off a titter-totter devise. .. An actor would jump on the other side of the titter totter, and the critic's body would go flying through the air. A panel of judges, utilizing artistic criteria concerned with form and flight - determine the winning critic.

In '92 it was the "Human Bowling Ball Contest" The critics were well- greased and then Pulled, pushed, rolled, and scrunched along a piece of plastic all greased up with cooking oil - until they collided with a set of pins, or, slipped off the stage - whoooosh....goes the critic...plop. The Jell-O Olympics in '94 was a real test of endurance. There was so much Jell-o, the critics bodies were slipping and sliding all over the place, like puppets with a drunken master. As we laughed and hooted, they appeared to be in real danger of cracking their skulls on the pavement.

**ACADEMIC :** Why do the Saskatoon critics not only agree, but appear to experience great pleasure as well, in engaging in a physically bizarre, potentially dangerous, and obvious parody of themselves as judges? Indeed, a carnivalization of their authority as critics. Why do we laugh so hard at the sight of this spectacle? Even now, as I think about watching the Human Velcro Throwing contest, I giggle at the memory.

**LX: 23 - *Spot on Actor - center-stage - 10 count cross-over. While the academic speaks he actor chants "the body, the body" a single spot of light. In the end he stands naked before the audience.***

**ACADEMIC:** The degradation of carnival is literally a bringing down of all to the equality of the body principle. The body is the physical site of social control; of discipline and punishment. The body may appear to be where we are most individual, it is also the material form of the body politic. The body is where the social is most convincingly represented as the individual, and where politics can best disguise itself as human nature.

The carnivalesque manifests itself in popular festivities as the 'social body' out of control. The body out of control on these occasions is the 'critic's body'.

However, carnival is concerned *not* with the individual body, but with the 'body principle'. This travesty of the critic's body in Saskatoon, symbolically transforms the abstract authority of criticism into 'flesh and matter'.

**ACTOR:** *picks up the Academic and carries her off stage- On the way she holds onto the Directors chair and wheels him off stage with them.*

**Black-out.**