



20 YEARS AND COUNTING

THIS MAY, THE 2011 ORLANDO INTERNATIONAL FRINGE THEATRE FESTIVAL CELEBRATES TWO DECADES OF ON-THE-EDGE PERFORMANCES.

BY DENISE BATES ENOS



Where were you in the spring of 1991? Were you a just a kid toddling off to elementary school? A high schooler wondering who you'd be going to prom with? Or a wage earner hard at work at your nine-to-five, wishing there were something cool, creative and cultural to do in Orlando? If you were in the latter category, your wish was granted that year.

It was 1991 when the Fringe Festival started in Central Florida, and it's been back every year since. In fact, the Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival is the oldest and the third-largest of its kind in the United States. It's one of the more than 80 Fringe Festivals that belong to the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals (CAFF). What distinguishes members of CAFF from similar festivals is that 100 percent of their box-office receipts go to the artists; operating expenses come from button sales and fundraising. Producing Artistic Director Beth Marshall says that Orlando's festival captures the true Fringe spirit: "We're 100 percent uncensored and 100 percent unjuried. We've got it going on."

Twenty years later, the Orlando Fringe is celebrating its two decades of success with a "20th High School Reunion" theme. "We're a little bit out of control with it," Marshall laughs. Every event will have a nostalgic high school connection, with Marshall herself having been dubbed "Head Cheerleader" and General Manager

George Wallace serving as "Prom Queen." "Yes," says Marshall, "we went there."

In January, the Fringe held an open call for a "reunion" photograph for the festival's poster and program, and more than 100 people showed up. In keeping with the theme, the program will look like a yearbook, the festival preview will have a pep rally vibe, the gala will be styled after a homecoming dance—you get the picture. Feel free to wear your own letter jacket; this is, after all, the Fringe Festival, where just about anything goes.

MORE THAN EVER

The Fringe Festival will be held at Loch Haven Park again, and there's even more in store for patrons. "Each year, we get bigger and better," says Wallace. "Our tag line has been '12 days of theatre, art, music, dance and madness.' Well, starting this year, we are actually 13 days." The fun begins on May 18 with Fringe's annual VIP gala celebration and ribbon cutting. "That evening, we are holding a first-ever fundraiser on opening night, complete with a

documentary of the past 20 years, live entertainment, and special guests from Fringe's past," adds Wallace.

The Festival continues with theatrical performances, visual art, kids' fun and more through May 30. This year features the inaugural Fringe Fashion Show, courtesy of Be Boutique & Hair Design in Thornton Park. Local celebrity and Fringe favorite, Pepe, will act as the official host of the outdoor stage. Open daily during the festival, the almost-anything-goes outdoor stage offers free entertainment, including live music and dance performances, poetry smackdowns and toasts, as well as other acts. Veteran Fringers know that the outdoor stage is located next to the infamous Orlando Fringe Beer Tent, the festival's popular watering hole. (Fringe trivia tidbit: Both Marshall and Wallace got their start by volunteering at the Beer Tent.)





PERFORMANCES at Orlando Fringe range from mild to wild, like this one from past Patron's Pick award winner, VariE TEASE baby bluestar LLC.

RENE FERRER



ERIC ESTEBAN PHOTOGRAPHY

OOPS—THEY'RE DOING IT AGAIN

Dennis Giacino and Fiely Matias are The Oops Guys, a comedy duo who've amused Orlando Fringers for the past six years with such performances as "The Naked Guy" and "Asian Sings the Blues." They return to Fringe in 2011 with "Bitches of the Kingdom," a riotous musical about how the princesses of an entertainment kingdom (whose crown prince is a rodent) exploited them for profit. Written by Giacino, the show won the 2010 New Jersey Playwrights Contest. Broadway actress Michelle Knight (center) leads the Orlando cast as she portrays a brassy Snow White. Tickets are \$10. For more information, check out the show's Facebook fan page at www.facebook.com/disenchantedmusal.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Offerings at Fringe are limited only by the imaginations of the artists, which means that the boundaries are constantly challenged—and expanded. "One of the things that I personally love is the diversity of performances," says Wallace. "You can see a polished veteran and then go see a first-time emerging artist. It is so exciting! Fringe has something for everyone."

Marshall adds, "Many of our Fringe artists, visual and performing, are returning this year; it's perfect timing."

One notable Fringe favorite, The Oops Guys, are coming back to the city and event where their fame and fortune really began, to present their award-winning show, *Disenchanted: Bitches of the Kingdom* (see the sidebar on this page). For Tim Mooney's sixth Fringe appearance, he presents *Lot O' Shakespeare*, in which he performs one randomly selected monologue from every Shakespeare play.

Also returning are global Fringe touring artists Rob Gee, Jimmy Hogg and Martin Dockery. Orlando Fringe regulars will be thrilled to see staple performers John DiDonna, Michael Wanzie and Tod Kimbro again, but those seeking potential breakout stars will have a chance to see a number of first-time Fringer performers. "We are excited to see the next wave of Orlando's emerging artists," says Wallace.

Orlando Lutheran Towers makes its Fringe debut with the show *Stayin' Alive*. Comprised of a cast whose ages range from 75 to 90, the group puts a unique spin on tunes by Madonna, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé and other top pop stars. And in honor of Fringe's 20th anniversary, local performance artist Brian Feldman is putting on a different show every day of the festival, including a "lottery" during the March 18 gala. Also performing at Fringe 2011 is the Orlando Youth Theatre, which is presenting its own version of the Broadway musical hit *13*.

There are national newbies, too. An actor and writer from New York City, John Grady makes his debut at Orlando Fringe with the East Coast premiere of his one-man show, *Fear Factor Canine Edition*, which chronicles his life and misadventures with his certified therapy dog, Abby, a Bernese Mountain Dog. Comedian Sherri Sutton presents *Don't Make Fun of Jesus*, which she wrote about her "struggle to come out of a cult, marriage, poverty and a closet."



FRINGE VETERAN Martin Dockery will present his new monologue, *The Holy Land Experience*.

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For something fabulous and free, check out a trio of no-cost events: Visual Fringe, the Fringe Poetry Smackdown and the Fabby Awards. Visual Fringe is an uncensored art show located in the lobby and the Patrons Room of the Lowndes Shakespeare Center. All works are for sale, and in Fringe spirit, 100% of the proceeds go directly to the artists. The annual open-mic poetry slam, Fringe Poetry Smackdown, takes place each Saturday at 10 p.m. on the outdoor stage. The Fabby Awards, or Fabbies, happen Sunday, May 29, at 10 p.m. A popular festival component, these patrons' picks spotlight the audiences' favorite performers.

And for children in grades K-5, Kids Fringe offers fun and educational activities on weekends from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Each day has a different theme, including Multicultural Day on May 22 and Pirate and Fairy Day on May 28.



FROM STORYTELLING and puppet performances to hands-on crafts and classic toys such as jump ropes and hula hoops, Kids Fringe offers creative children's activities all weekend long.

DIXIE LEE PHOTOGRAPHY

Want to get the whole Fringe experience in just one performance? This year's Fringe Abridged will recap the entire festival in a mere 40 minutes at 10 p.m. on May 30. Tickets for this fundraising event are \$10 each.

GIVING BACK

The Fringe Festival brings much more to the Orlando area than envelope-pushing performances. "Orlando Fringe has such an important impact on the community," says Wallace. "Surveys indicate that more than \$1.3 million was pumped into the local economy last year."

Those dollars come from Fringe attendees—approximately 23,000 in 2010, with a possible increase to more than 25,000 this year, thanks in part to the excitement around the festival's 20th anniversary. "Orlando Fringe is an inexpensive way for artists to get a large amount of people to see their shows in a format that is unjuried and uncensored, which is important to the artists and the patrons," notes Wallace.

Everybody benefits at an event like the Fringe: the festival gives artists, vendors and patrons alike the opportunity to enjoy the energy, excitement and eccentric offerings of Orlando's most unique cultural event. **OAM**

Orlando-based freelance writer Denise Bates Enos contributes to several publications, including OAM, Orlando magazine and Pool & Spa Living magazine.



DIZZI DOG, owned by Fringe photographer Kristen Wheeler, is an unofficial festival mascot.

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THE BASICS

WHEN The 20th annual Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival takes place May 18-30. On weekdays, shows begin at 5 p.m., with the last ones starting at midnight. On weekends, shows start at 10 a.m., with the day's last shows beginning at midnight.

WHERE Various venues in and around Orlando's Loch Haven Park, 900 East Princeton Street.

HOW MUCH Show tickets range from free to \$10 each, and they're available at all Fringe venues and box offices, which are located at the side lobby of the Orlando Repertory Theatre and the lower lobby of the John & Rita Lowndes Shakespeare Center. To avoid waiting in long lines, purchase tickets in advance through the official Fringe Website at www.orlandofringe.org (tickets are not available by phone). To attend Fringe, you must have (and wear) an official 2011 Orlando Fringe Button, which costs \$8 and can be purchased at the festival.

TIP Allow 30 minutes for parking. If you can't find street parking close to the festival, go to the Orlando Science Center or Florida Hospital parking decks. Both charge a small fee, but it beats circling endlessly in search of a free spot.