



South Philly Review

The Alternative Route

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Aug. 31 begins the Philly Fringe and Live Arts Festival with a slate of performances featuring residents representing their roots.

The stage is set, costumes pressed, make-up done and the curtain moments from rising. A faint buzz hovers over the workweek, as Friday brings the opening of Philly Fringe and the Live Arts

Festival. Residents — in unprecedented numbers — are among the sea of talent that make the next two weeks unlike any other for the city's arts scene.

In the second of a two-part series, the Review highlights neighborhood performers whose passion for expression unleashes a new set of one-of-a-kind productions.

Thirteen has proven lucky for The Waitstaff. In its fourth year in the Fringe, the 60 minutes of sketch comedy dished up in "Served the Way You Like It!" by the 13-member troupe "runs the gamut from silly to sophisticated and ridiculous to raucous," group writer/performer/General Manager Kurt Runco of the 900 block of Bainbridge Street said.

Runco calls the group, who joined forces when they met at the Brick Playhouse, 623 South St., "a true Philadelphia success story." Jumping into sketch comedy, The Waitstaff consistently sold out shows at the Brick, and eventually moved to the bigger Five Spot in Old City before it burned down.

The show's material is completely new and characters are taken right from the streets, since "they're so distinctive and recognizable," Runco said. Past sketches have included the pain of being an Eagles fan and the destruction of Veterans Stadium.

Members' backgrounds include directing, producing, dance, music, acting and, of course, improv and each has collaborated to write material for the show, which premieres Aug. 31. The piece spans cultural satire to slapstick dance, a type of performance Runco says is unique to the event.

“The Fringe is a safe environment to do something risky. That goes for the audience as well as the performers,” he said. “With the Fringe tickets so inexpensive and the shows usually only an hour long, someone doesn’t have to plop down a lot of money or time. They can risk going to a show they might never normally see.”

Keeping in line with a lighter performance is New Paradise Laboratories (NPL) “BATCH: An American Bachelor/ette Party Spectacle.” Opening Aug. 31 as part of the Live Arts Festival, this bawdy and sometimes suggestive twist on the popular pre-marital tradition uses the talents of six actors — including Jeb Kreager of the 200 block of Federal Street and Lee Etzold of the 800 block of Pemberton Street — playing three characters each in the story of a betrothed couple who have never touched.

“BATCH” co-creator/director/sound designer Whit MacLaughlin, who also is NPL’s artistic director, started the company in Virginia and brought it to Philly, now their home base.

MacLaughlin said, while it’s good to bring theater everywhere, for this part-performance art, part-sporting event show in particular the area is key. “South Philly is the center of the bachelor/bachelorette party universe,” she said.

And, as far as residents go, they are just the type to be cast in an NPL show.

“In South Philly, the men are men and the women are women,” she said. “We really mess around with that idea, but we respect it nonetheless.”

Natasha Lee Martin is bringing good karma to the neighborhood that welcomed her to Hoffman and Front streets three years ago.

“I moved here literally a few days after I lost my mom to cancer,” the co-producer/writer said. “I was amazed by the support and selflessness of my neighbors who didn’t even know what I had been through until later. I feel it is right to give something back that is a reflection of them.”

The actress, along with a cast and crew of 14 make up Trajectories Theater Group. “Acts of Sediton,” opening Sept. 5, consists of original pieces, stand-up comedy, live music, burlesque and video montage that comes together by way of “no topic too scared to explore” Martin said, citing terrorism, consumerism and ethnic diversity as just a few. By presenting an array of issues, the show relates to the “common, hard-working American having a say in what’s happening in their own neighborhoods,” Martin said.

For their third year in the Fringe, Martin strives to give her neighbors an event like no other.

“Aside from the Mummers’ Parade once a year, most of the South Philly audience come to see a show expecting for it to exist within the confines of a theater where they are observers of an experience, but not a part of it,” she said. “The Fringe Festival is a great addition to allowing South Philly’s audience to participate in an unconventional performance ... such as outside in an alley, or inside someone’s bedroom or a local South Philly restaurant.”

OK, so vacation time is almost over, but those looking to take a trip half-way around the world will relish “Tar.” Charles Anderson’s Live Arts contribution has 11 dancers and 10 collaborators bringing the traditional African and trickster tales that later became part of American folklore in “Uncle Remus” and “Br’er Rabbit” to the stage starting Sept. 5. As artistic director and founder, Anderson, from Broad and Reed streets, dancer Michael Velez, of Broad and Federal, and costume designer Heidi Barr of Moyamensing Avenue and Ellsworth Street, represent the area Anderson said has been literally experiencing an arts movement since the late 1990s.

“Since then, I have seen a huge number of my former students at both Temple University and Muhlenberg College move here because there is such a strong artists’ community,” he said.

“Some of my strongest artistic relationships were forged and nurtured here.”

The piece, presented at the 2006 Live Arts Festival as a work-in-progress, is set to the beat of traditional African drumming and song, remixed Southern blues and recitations of folklorist Joel Chandler Harris.

Living in an art-friendly neighborhood allowed Anderson to form bonds he said helped him “develop a rhythmic exploration” for the piece.

“I don’t think it’s about bringing performance to South Philly, but more to the point, performance thrives in South Philly,” he said. “This area boasts some of the most prolific and interesting artists in Philadelphia. If anything, it is important to bring greater attention to how much performance takes place here.”

Michael Passafiume is a newcomer to the Fringe and his one-man show is inspired by another known for his solo stage performances. “Swimming to Spalding,” premiering Sept. 6, was penned by the resident of 21st and Jackson streets after the 2004 suicide of monologist Spalding Gray.

Although written while living in Brooklyn, Passafiume draws a great deal of motivation from his home turf.

“I like the diversity and watching it as an area, such as Passyunk Avenue, transform right before your eyes,” he said, “but mostly I draw inspiration from the people. Sometimes they’re so stereotypical, like some of the folks who gather at the Starbucks at Broad and Jackson streets. It’s like they just walked off the set of ‘The Sopranos’ and yet those people aren’t stereotypical at all: there’s a real genuineness to them. And I’m equally inspired by how approachable folks in South Philly are — whether it’s a silent smile as you walk by, a quick ‘hello’ or a conversation when you’re least expecting it from the least likely of candidates.”

The Fringe is a perfect outlet, despite the obstacles.

“I like the variety of the shows and performers, and the fact that the Fringe is open to anyone,” he said, “but it’s definitely a challenge putting a show together with limited resources.”

New York City transfer Stone Soup Theatre Arts makes its Fringe debut with “Stone Soup by Edward Bond” Sept. 7. The piece, based on the fable of cooperation during difficult times, has a young man delivering a stone to a mason’s house that ultimately is a journey to find his place in the world. A corruptive and chilling tale, it is told through original music, iconographic costumes and a striptease.

Managing director/producer Leigh Goldenberg said, upon moving to the area in June, she wanted some place with a sense of community and history, both of which she found in the 1400 block of Franklin Street.

“South Philly has the perfect balance of historical pride and community-driven growth, along with being affordable, adorable and convenient,” she said.

The four-member group met in college in Manhattan. Their concept, which they first tried in China six years ago, was to create by targeting a specific area, going there and writing and performing. Jumping back to the States, and Franklin Street, Goldenberg said she was greeted with open arms — literally.

“When we pulled our moving van into our street, the entire block came out to greet us and immediately started carrying our furniture into our new house,” she said. “I had never seen such a welcoming group of people that actually want to know about you and look you in the eye when you pass them on the street.”

Despite the uproot from New York, Goldenberg likes what she has seen of the Fringe.

“From the perspective of a spectator up until now, it has proven to have the highest caliber of work I’ve seen in any festival of its kind,” she said. “The artists are unafraid to make a statement and amaze me with their talent. It is a much more genuine support network than we have found in New York City.”

As if putting together one show isn’t enough, The Collaborative’s Artists’ Collective goes for a twofer with “‘Heebs in the House:’ Word to Your Zada!” and “‘Heebs in the House:’ Oy, the Drama” Sept. 8 and 9, respectively. The Jewish performance group features two actors — Matt Sutin of the 2600 block of Carlisle Street and Molly Russakoff of the 1000 block of Ninth Street — who bring spoken word, poetry, monologues and music to the shows. Director Ross Berkowitz said the productions “combine a Jewish sensibility with concepts born of living in a multiethnic, diverse community.”

By using “heeb” — an empowering form of “hebe,” a slur against a Jewish person — Berkowitz said the troupe is reclaiming the fun and humor found within Judaism.

“Zada” is a mix of melodies and spoken word with topics from romance to stream-of-consciousness. Several guest collaborators, including Q102 on-air personalities and musician Todd Young and his Rock Band, will be on hand as well. “Drama,” featuring theater company Tongue & Groove, takes a slightly different approach with monologues becoming long-form improv.

As a Fringe first-timer, Sutin used past experiences to make the transition from audience to stage.

“As an audience member, I always wanted to experience quality creativity that I would not normally see,” he said. “As I gear up for my performance, I go through my poetry and find the poems that will speak to the spectators. Philadelphians don’t just walk into a pretty art gallery with landscape paintings. They want something edgy and they have an entire festival for this.”

A tragic car crash splits people into two quasi-existences that go back and forth between a miniature world of dolls and a relay race of unattractive, self-important characters.

The dark comedy “Machine World Gospel” takes screens, projectors, lights, cameras and even puppets, using it all to make the stage come alive.

Writer/director/performer David Commander, of Third and Wharton streets, housemate and fellow performer Violet Sweet, and actors Jimi Mooney, of 13th Street and Passyunk, and Gwen Witherspoon, of 18th Street and Washington Avenue, are part of the six cast members that



share several roles, as well as backstage duties, like live video mixing, moving screens, and controlling lighting and puppets.

The work in putting the 45-minute piece together is “exhausting,” Commander said. “There is an endless amount of work to do and an ever-approaching army of deadlines to meet. Fortunately, there is a very strong support network in Philly that manages to make the most impossible things happen.”

And it’s the people in these areas Commander and crew are targeting in the show, which opens Sept. 12.

“Most of the people I cast ... [are] kind of more homegrown performers,” he said. “Less formal training and more of a blue-collar work ethic. It’s a more hands-on approach to performing that I think the South Philly resident can relate to.”

It’s all Greek to Tribe of Fools and evident in “Echo,” their second year in the Fringe marked by a myth about a female nymph known for her beautiful voice. Six artists — with five of them local, including Managing Director Terry Brennan of the 700 block of Reed; director Adrienne Mackey of the 200 block of Snyder Avenue; actress Kate DeRosa of the 1700 block of 11th Street; actress Karina Kacala of 12th and Clarion streets; and actor David Sweeney of the 600 block of Reed — perform multiple roles in the production that has gods Hera, Zeus and Narcissus in a movement-based piece that begins its run Sept. 12.

Although the telling of this ancient story won’t be modernized, Brennan said it is interesting and accessible to a 21st-century audience.

“I’ve found that a lot of people in South Philly, especially the older folks, have a really great understanding for and appreciation of classical work,” Brennan, who began performing during a break between high school and college, said.

DeRosa added it is these people, as well as their neighbors, she’d like to see at this year’s festival.

“It seems that the audience base is growing steadily as the Fringe reaches into more and more neighborhoods,” she said, “but I do wish more people would realize that the Fringe is for them, too, not just artists.”