

Entertainment

The best of theatre on the Fringe

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by Scott Gordon

August 16: 9:05 a.m. Gazebo Park in Old Strathcona looks like a bomb hit it. The entire area around the bus barns and the Chinook and Walterdale theatres looks like scene from *The Omega Man*. I sit and calmly attack my first coffee of the day and wonder how the hell I am going to cover roughly 130 plays in nine days and still work my shifts as a volunteer beer pourer. Suddenly, a shot rings out . . .

Well, actually it didn't, but it seemed appropriate to use that line. Suddenly, a shadow reared overhead and I spilled my coffee. No great loss, it was pretty bad. A huge death-killer-radioactive-nihilistic-inflatable puffin rises above me. Yikes!

No need to worry. It's all a part of the Fringe. This giant sardine-eating critter is part of the parade that kicked off this year's festival. The Entity was used for the Commonwealth Games opening ceremonies, so I was told. As it floated above and beckoned one and all to the terminus of the parade that went down Whyte Avenue, the crowd thickened, as did the plot. Not only were people gathering to watch the parade, they were also gathering to get into the first plays of the Fringe.

The parade was great. Actors and a goodly number of kids bounced down the avenue to the tunes of fiddlers, spoon players, and chants of 'Elvis for Mayor of Strathcona'.

Weird costumes and even weirder people wound their way to Gazebo Park handing out pamphlets and flyers for various productions. Some of the more original, and useful, ads came from Phoenix Theatre and Northern Light Theatre in the form of fans.

There were stilts, Greeks, Romeos, Juliets and kids all dancing and enjoying the atmosphere of this fest of the weird, the wonderful, the bizarre, and the fun.

Atmosphere. That is the key ingredient and the operative word here. This article is not going to be mini-reviews or criticisms. There is going to be no star system like the one produced and published in a venerable local paper. That is just not fair to the people involved. It is not fair to the time and effort and dedication that they demonstrated to one and all. Instead, this is going to be a celebration of the people who either went to see the plays, acted or helped out on the plays, and the people that just went to feel the atmosphere and taste the electricity in the air.

Back to the parade. Once that was over, Brian Paisley of Chinook Theatre (and organizer of this event) gathered everyone into the park and held a draw for a Superstar. The lucky winner would be able to get into any play for free. Even as this was going on, lines were forming at some of the theatres. It was only 10:30 a.m. and the first performances started at noon.

As the Gazebo gathering dispersed, the lines grew larger, and I bumped into Brian Paisley, who was shaking his head and saying "I've never seen anything like this! It's close to eleven and people are lining up for tickets for plays at noon! This is the first day!" He wandered off, still shaking his head.

I looked around and I began shaking my head. Slowly the lineups built and the street began to fill. What is going on? I wondered. I was, in the next few days, to discover exactly what was going on.

I bopped around looking for the Atmosphere of *The Fringe*. I was on a quest. I wanted to find out what made this event the event that it was. I was on a mission for the Gateway.

I spent most of that Saturday, and the rest of *The Fringe*, wandering up and down Whyte Avenue to the various stages, just to talk to the volunteers in an attempt to find Atmosphere and Meaning. Even at the two theatres that were the farthest away from Fringe Central (Gazebo Park and environs), the old Ming's Restaurant at 105 and Whyte



Hal C. Sisson in Jacques Strapp's *Last Crepe*. Rude, crude and enjoyable.

and King Edward School, there were lineups. I caught a very pleasant kids/adults play at Ming's, stage 8, called *The Mulberry Bush*. It was about the aftermath of *The Pied Piper* story and was entertaining. A good start to what was to prove a very hectic and draining run at covering *The Fringe*.

Off to the Beer Tent, the on site office of the Gateway. If anyone wanted to get Atmosphere and Meaning at *The Fringe*, it was to be found and experienced at the beer tent.

Unfortunately, I still couldn't find it. But while there, I ran into many old friends and acquaintances that were in productions and I promised to go to them. Sorry, folks, that I didn't make it to every one that I said I would go to, but there is a matter of time and not enough of it. Time was to prove to be a much sought after and precious commodity in the days to come.

My first shift at the beer tents was that night and I thought I could find that elusive A and M there. Again, I was disappointed. But then again I was right into the swing of things and felt that I was getting closer to the answer.

What a zoo! What a good time! And, man, did that beer at the end of my shift at midnight taste good! We must have poured enough beer and wine, before we ran out of the latter, to keep every fraternity member and rugby player west of Elbow, Saskatchewan happy and drunk for at least five and a half hours. If I had chewed my shirt, I would have gotten hammered from what had spilled on me from opening beers. I decided to bathe as soon as I got home that night.

Well, I didn't bathe that night because I feel asleep almost immediately and wound up bathing on Sunday. On that Sunday I looked through my hastily scribbled notes

and finally remembered this great elderly couple that helped out at one of the beer tents.

I don't remember their names and I can't read my notes, and I apologize to them for this. They live around Fringe Central and their story is just wild.

They had lived in Strathcona for years, and spent their time between their farm and buying and renovating houses in the area every time they got sick of farm life. Then they would get sick of city life, sell the house, and go back to their farm, and so on.

They decided to get involved in *The Fringe* because last year they had seen all these young people wandering about Strathcona looking like they were having a good time, and decided that they would like to 'help out. So they found out about *The Fringe* and wondered in March if they needed volunteers.

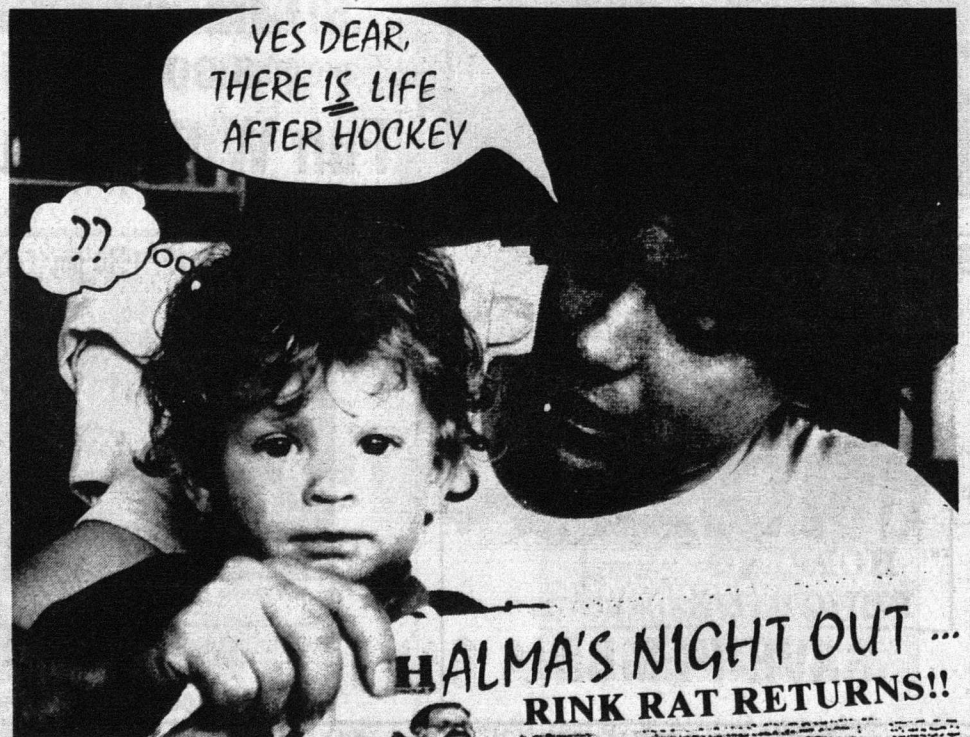
They were told to come back in July, which they did. They had never poured beer before and had never worked front of house, much less knowing what that term meant. They wanted to get involved and have a good time. Well, they got involved and they had a wonderful time. I hope that they will do the same next year and I hope that I get to work with them again. They ran us young people into the ground.

The next few days I just booted about and caught a few plays and talked to all kinds of people. One play that I saw during that time was presented by Crybaby Killer Theatre, and was called *'Big Poets, Small Plays'*. Well, if this is modern and meaningful theatre, I guess I'm just an old fart with the I.Q. of a dead '57 Chevy. I couldn't follow it, understand it, or find any redeeming qualities at all about it. And sitting in the beer tent, I heard the same thing about it. Of course, these people as well as myself were expressing opinions. So be it.

Tuesday was my next shift in the tents and it was a little calmer, but still hectic, and, in general, the people were great that were imbibing and the volunteers were wonderful.

The Fringe couldn't survive without the volunteers, and these people cannot be sufficiently applauded. Also, the coordinators and troubleshooters from the Chinook that wandered around for up to 14 hours a day with walkie-talkies surgically attached to their hands and ears were marvellous. They were calm, helpful, tired, the walking dead and the walking wounded all rolled into one . . . and they kept their cool. They seemed to be everywhere and they seemed to have everything in control and every answer to every question. If that wasn't the case, then they acted damn well. Even Brian Paisley was whizzing about all the time, helping wherever he could.

More plays, both on stages and in the park. I was rapidly being burnt out and was approaching a comatose state. Fortunately, when the beer tents were packed, the Whyte Avenue bars were not. Rest and Relaxation. Come on, now. I had to keep up my image of a drunken, two-fisted reporter that I remember seeing in old movies late at night. At times I was so tempted to shout 'Stop the presses! I've got a scoop!' or 'Hold the front page!' that I had to get out of the crowds at Fringe Central and revive in the Strath or the Commercial. Thank heavens for those peo-



One of the Fringe's big hits: *Alma's Night Out*