

# Fringe failures and hits



Sak Theatre: Street performance par excellence.

Photo Ron Checora

review by Matthew Hays

Fringe attendance didn't double this year, however they did reach a record 175,000 tickets sold. The festival is now secure in its placement as the largest annual theatre festival in North America.

But as far as local shows went, this year was somewhat disappointing.

Tiger Hill Theatre did a production of Sam Shepard's *Angel City*. I'm a big fan of Shepard, however this is definitely not one of his better works. This group of actors are so talented, I'd like to see them try something other than Shepard, to whom they seem perhaps a bit too loyal. Rumor has it, however, that the repertoire is considering disbanding and that the Tiger Hill is soon to be history.

Jeff Hirschfield's latest was also disappointing. *Elmo's Rainbow* told the story of Elmo Forbes, a child star washed up at thirty. What could have been an extremely funny scenario became a disjointed, pedantic, far from amusing or interesting mess. Perhaps the best thing about the show was the film opener. The following live sequences degenerated into a series of skits chronicling Elmo's demise (including spoofs of game shows and talk shows, making this show only too reminiscent of SCTV re-runs). I loved Hirschfield's remount of *Geeks in Love* earlier in the summer, though, and I eagerly await his next show.

A local winner was *The Rocky Horror Show*, which was one of the nine various shows involving drag queens. Juan Chioran headed a delightful cast in a somewhat sanitized version of Richard O'Brien's musical. The cast admirably braved energetic audience participation, a not-so-easy task (I always thought the audience involvement began with the later film, not with the play, but tell that to a Fringe audience). *Rocky Horror* is currently held over at Dancin' Shoes in the Mayfield Inn.

*Red Channels* was an amazing Vancouver production, which related the breakdown of a marriage in the fifties due to paranoia. While the relationship is falling apart, we hear TV segments from McCarthy's interrogations of alleged Communists. The writers, Jennifer Martin and Leslie Mildner, managed to brilliantly intertwine a tale of marital conflict with political events of the period.

The festival also boasted a number of Toronto productions, the best of which were *Lana Lust: The Bitch Stops Here* (an outrage-

ous drag show), and *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*.

Best of all, despite blessings from national and international media, funding from all levels of government, and corporate sponsorship from Carling O'Keefe and Seven Eleven, the Fringe managed to retain its underground flavour. In addition to nine shows involving transvestites, the festival featured two South African plays, a massage tent, a play about lesbian motherhood, an abundance of feminist themes, a play about prostitution, and a musical about Karl Marx and Mahatma Gandhi attempting to make it in Hollywood.

(A sidenote on *Karl and Mahatma*: When Bob Remington reviewed the show in the *Journal*, he said that it degenerated into a "boring mess". Later in the week, Remington reviewed a show he hated even more, and wrote that the second show "makes Karl and Mahatma look like the best show at the Fringe." Bryan Brodeur and Edgar Lyall, creators and stars of *Karl and Mahatma*, quickly designed a new poster and plastered it all over the Fringe grounds. The poster read: *Karl and Mahatma: Hollywood Bound*. "... the best show at the Fringe." — Bob Remington, *The Edmonton Journal*.)

Festival founder Brian Paisley has stated that he believes the festival has reached a plateau, and probably won't grow too much more. I doubt this very much; I suspect the festival will continue to grow, and fast. Who knows, if the weather allows, next year ticket sales may reach a quarter of a million. Yet the growth of the festival poses a problem for the Fringe Administration. There were fourteen venues at *Gone With the Fringe*, and there seemed to be some desperation on the part of festival organizers in finding new spaces. The old Ritchie Mill became a theatre, as did the Holy Trinity Church. Having Fringe plays in a church may or may not always be appropriate; for instance, questions were raised when *God Who?*, a play containing blasphemous dialogue, was placed at the Holy Trinity Church.

It's ironic that the Fringe, which has largely been responsible for the revitalization of the Old Strathcona area, has problems finding potential venues for that very reason. For instance, two previous Fringe stages, the Old Post Office and the building on the corner of 104th St. and Whyte, are now occupied by businesses.

The planning for next year's Fringe has already begun. The title for '88: "Fringe Daze".

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