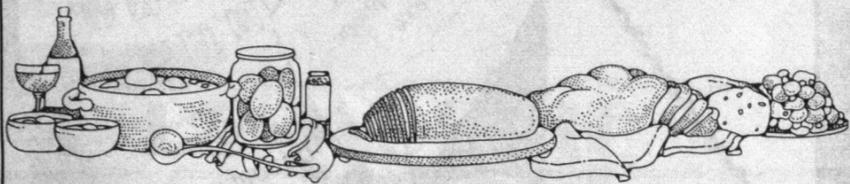


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## The Gateway

# What a Fringe feeling

by Michael Maitland

Michael Maitland wrote and produced the Fringe show *Shopping Spree*

The Fringe Festival: ten days of mind boggling — and possibly mind altering — entertainment, beginning at noon and ending when the last curtain is drawn, sometime before dawn. The Fringe is a North American mecca for both experienced and novice street buskers, playwrights, producers, and actors.

So what does it take to be in the Fringe? Besides a demented mind, the prescribed ingredients for semi-success include: sweat, dedication, perseverance, and the luck of the draw, since evening shows tend to draw larger crowds. You also have to be crazy enough to invest \$300.00 (non-refundable — of course) for the chance to produce a play, written by an unknown playwright, with no cast, no crew, and above all, without confirmation either of venue or length of the run! Gimme Vegas any day.

So as the deadline for entries quickly approaches during the dead of February, you scrape up the necessary money for a festival six months down the road. Your script is somewhere between your ears and numerous, illegible scraps of beer-and-coffee-stained pieces of paper. But this burning desire to tell the world your story forces you to press on. Oscar Wilde look out.

Finally, first draft is complete. Now the fun really begins. It's time to hunt down a cast and crew. The object of the game is to find the best cast and crew possible before everyone else does. And considering that *Gone With the Fringe* featured one hundred and twenty eight shows this year — many of them locally written and produced — finding the right cast is a game indeed, especially for the amateur producer.

So up go the audition notices, and surprise surprise, people do respond. Suddenly an overwhelming trickle of actors, set designers, directors, and stage managers vying for your undivided attention. Resumes, complete with pictures of stunningly beautiful women are placed surreptitiously in your mailbox. The phone continually rings off the hook (at least once a week), with an unknown voice on the other end of the line. Unusual, untapped talent waits for this one play, a ticket to stardom. There are inquiries about audition dates, rehearsal schedules and rehearsal location. Ooops, better find a rehearsal location first.

Finally the location, the bus barns, is confirmed, and auditions begin. Three months until opening night, or day as the case may be in the Fringe. Lots of time, right? Wrong!

The director concludes that the script needs work. The lead male and female actors are yet to be found. Actors come in and out of rehearsal as if through a revolving door. None seem to fit the character. But you press on.

You pound the pavement after work and before rehearsal, searching for sponsors, props and set material. Following rehearsal, you rewrite the script and follow up on leads for actors. Scenes are blocked, characters are analyzed and developed, the script is memorized. Once-a-week production meetings tackle set design, costumes, props, parties and all.

However, there are always unexpected problems which seem to crop up just as you think everything is under control. For instance, the leading lady announces, just four

weeks before opening night, that her mother has bought her a ticket to London, England. Bye, bye, leading lady. May the London fog sweep you into the Thames.

Then, on a hot July night, rumours of an actor coup echo in the hallways of the Fine Arts Building. "It's either us or the director," they say. Being a staunch believer in the power of numbers, the director is kindly — and quickly — shown the door. A new director steps in, but we still haven't found Myron, our leading man, the wimpy, nerdy, grocery clerk. But just like the time the last nickels and dimes in your pockets let you buy that final beer in RATT, Myron shows up in the nick of time — three weeks before opening night.

Rehearsals intensify. Somber, serious faces enter the rehearsal room, endure the crack of the director's whip, and leave exhausted at the end of the night. And this is supposed to be a comedy! The script requires additional changes. I dig deeper into my pocket as the set designer begins construction. A three hundred dollar investment quickly becomes nine hundred dollars out of my pocket. (There goes tuition.) Luckily, we have drawn an excellent venue, premium times, and six performance dates. I couldn't have asked for better if I were Brian Paisley.

One week before opening night and the show stumbles along like two virgins in the back seat of an Austin mini. And suddenly, less than twenty four hours before opening night, everything comes together. It's like pulling an all nighter in the library and then having everything you thought you didn't know, rush from the brain and onto the examination paper.

Opening night is a sellout. The flaws in the show are, at times, obvious. But that's the fun of the Fringe. After all, where else in North America can aspiring writers and actors hone their skills, risk new and innovative shows, with such minimal risk?

The review is mixed, but positive, which is encouraging considering the fact that the range of acting experience of our cast varies from an Equity member to one who's acting experience has been limited to standing on tables and singing in the Commercial Hotel.

Second night is also a sellout, and the performance is not quite stellar, but a great improvement. Maybe the fact that the beer tent is so close has something to do with it. Then the rains come. Try selling tickets to a show on a Monday afternoon, in the drizzle and cold, when the only potential customers are those rushing to their cars to avoid the lovely Alberta summer. After a three day break, which gives us the opportunity to spend all of our potential profits on other Fringe shows and in the beer tents, we transfer to shows at twelve thirty a.m. Great times for selling out, but try going to work the next day when you haven't made it to bed until three in the morning. A word of advice: have a sympathetic boss if you're going to be in the Fringe, even if it requires complimentary tickets.

Okay, so we only sold out four out of six nights. Not quite Broadway, but not exactly the Cecil Hotel either. At least I got back my initial investment. I calculated my return of one hundred and eighty four dollars (and twenty-one cents) to be an hourly rate of seventy three point six cents for the time that I spent writing, producing, hustling, and acting for this damn show. But if you think that this year was fun, just wait until next year, appropriately called Fringe Daze. See you at Fringe '88.

Photo Ron Chocora

