

On the edge of the Fringe

by P. J. Groeneveldt and Rosa Jackson

Being an overview sort of article, you might have expected this piece to begin with "Yet another Fringe is history" or "Once again, Paisley rocks Old Strathcona". No such inanities shall appear here. Those of you who follow the news will already know of the record-breaking crowds and late-breaking clouds at this year's festival and those of you who don't probably don't care. What follows is what you wanted to skip ahead and read in the first place — a series of short reviews of lots of shows, interspersed with general comments.

ILLUSTRATED MEN, LIVE! (Toronto)

The \$6 & 6 rule works here. (If a performance charges nearly \$6 and has nearly 6 performances, it's probably good.) Even so, their show started off with a flop in their poorly conceived straight improv scene. Ignoring all the rules of better comedy improvisation, they went right ahead and took about eight audience suggestions, several of which were stupid to begin with. These were written on a large white sheet of paper, fumbled with for five minutes straight. They unfortunately fell into the trap many out of town acts had already fallen into — making a joke about a certain ex-patriate hockey player or saying the Peter P-word to guarantee an audience response. They were much better at their semi-scripted skits, namely the one in which a recently widowed man, a building contractor, and a funeral home director repeatedly confuse each other with each other. The hypnotist bit, which was far too realistic and tedious at nearly half-an-hour, was well done. The "subjects" of the hypnotist were a clever blend of genuine audience members and troupe members. In all, a satisfying performance.

BEST . . . beards: Mud Bay Jugglers

MOTEL (Fred's Bicycle Repair Shop, Toronto)

If you have ever stayed in one of those faceless, interchangeable motels off the highway and wondered who else had slept in the bed, Fred's Bicycle Repair Shop can tell you. Two people on their way through Ohio have been there, trapped because the motel proprietors have somehow gained control of the couple's motorhome keys. The problem is that the motel owners are just too (damn) nice. You can't just walk in and ask for the keys. That would be rude. A cricket that was still under warranty. (Yeah, crickets. The bugs, but big ones.) This was a great premise for a show, refreshing and surreal. Every character sketch tied in at the end to form a logical sequence.

BEST . . . masks/costumes: David Secunda's macrame for *Theatre Of Giants*.

THE WOODS (Remember Theatre, Vancouver)

Yet another crummy play by the self-indulgent David Mamet (there were, what? three this year?) I admit reluctantly that *Duck Variations* was all right, but this turkey should have stayed where it came from. There were two abusive, stupid characters hollering at each other about bears and vaginal lubrication. I honestly could not tell whether Jennifer Clements (Ruth) was portraying an extremely pin-headed unreal female character or whether she was merely a poor actress. She is to be commended for her job of memorization, though, as Mamet's lengthy monologues (tirades, I mean) had little train of thought. Jamie Norris overcame these many obstacles to give a convincing performance as Nick. The show was smoothly presented, but then so is a healthy bowel movement. (What's the difference between a Mamet two-ander and two hours of solid boredom: About fifteen minutes.) Great program, though. Upside down the word **WOODS** could almost read **SODOM**.

BEST . . . ham sandwich: Incredible Edibles

THE FOUR-NOTE OPERA (Small Range Theatre, Edmonton)

Not at all to be confused with the legendary locals with the rhyming name, Small Range was assembled only to put this show together. What can you say? It certainly was an opera, and there indeed

COX AND BOX Pastime Productions

This production was not one which would appeal to a wide audience, but in a theatre which only seated about 90 (Acacia Hall) this didn't matter too much. I've never had an opportunity to see a Gilbert and Sullivan production, and I found this



The Mud Bay Jugglers display their talents at this year's Fringe

were only four notes (A, B, D, and E, if I remember correctly). Everything was clearly enunciated, easily heard and understood by the small but appreciative audience. Every line from every character was a verbal confirmation of action. For example, the words to the soprano's first aria were primarily about the fact that the singer was a soprano, and this indeed was her first aria of the show, and another would come up later. The tenor mostly sang about the troubles of being a tenor and not getting that many parts to sing. The baritone wore a delightfully evil cape and moustache and hid behind pillars in the most endearing way. My favorite part was the section in which the audience was warned repeatedly that the famous woodblock part was coming, and it mustn't be missed. The ending was great. Everybody died (this is tradition in opera). There was a hanging, a stabbing, a poisoning (all self-inflicted), and the baritone stuck his head in a gas barbecue.

BEST . . . left untouched: Rational Enquirer

RATIONAL ENQUIRER (Far too large a cast with no collective name, Edmonton)

WAY, way, way too long. During the short intermission after the first hour-and-a-half, most voices I heard were debating whether to sneak off. Some did. The cast was huge (twelve! Nowhere but the Fringe!) Cutting out all of the worst actors would have made it a nice, manageable five. Most interesting performances: Donovan Workup's "Harlan Sol", greasily portrayed with vigor; John Rusich's charmingly slavish "Brooker Jones", and Brock Armstrong as Garrett Lewis the sperm donor. He hasn't played many parts, but his part in this play was to play with his parts, and he brought it off well.

BEST . . . publicity: Tied. *Motel's* omnipresent construction paper ties and *Two by Stein by Stein's* chalk-outline murder victim outline poster locations (sadly obliterated by rain).



30 minute piece by one half of the pair (Sullivan) a refreshing change from the usual Fringe fare. Rather than leaning towards the bizarre, it brought back to life a traditional form of theatre, the Victorian musical farce. The plot revolved around two men, Mr. Cox and Mr. Box, who unknowingly shared the same apartment. As one worked a night shift and one a day shift, they had only encountered each other on the stairs until one day Mr. Cox was sent home from work early. To his surprise, he found Mr. Box preparing a meal for himself and resting in his bed. They confronted their landlord, who admitted to having made the arrangement for extra profit, and then confronted each other, only to make another strange discovery: that they also shared the same woman. The singing and acting were both comical and effective, and the movement was well incorporated. Mr. Cox (Edwin Thornton) especially had a youthful verve. I'm not sure if I would have enjoyed this particular brand of entertainment for longer than half an hour, but all in all it was a good diversion.

DAVID ROCHE: ROTTEN TO THE CORE (Toronto)

Rotten to the Core? Pretty much. The first segment, *Perversion of Tools: New Uses for Household Equipment*, was badly rehearsed and unfunny. Desk Acting was a guy sitting at a desk talking into a phone. Yawn. It was too long, inconclusive, and rushed. The Letter, adapted from W. Somerset Maugham, was quite interesting, with Roche playing every role. Also good was his lip-synch routine dressed as a nun. Although he was far from the best female impersonator seen, he **did** look a lot like Julie Andrews.

BEST . . . image: that of waking to find a salamander eating the sleep from a man's eyes. *Tear of a Dinosaur*

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