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D.C. Fringe a 'Capital' Affair

July 21, 2006

By **Barbara Gross**

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- There's nothing second-string about the excitement being generated in the Washington theatre community by the inaugural Capital Fringe Festival, running July 20-30. Over 90 arts groups will present nearly 400 performances in 28 venues, most in and around the recently gentrified Penn Quarter neighborhood.

The area just north of Pennsylvania Avenue N.W., not far from the Capitol, will be alive not just with theatre, but with dancers, singers, mimes, and acrobats. No protesters are expected -- except perhaps patrons shut out of standing-room-only performances. Happy hours and late-night parties at trendy local restaurants will allow audience members and actors to mingle. Something called the Fringe Training Factory will offer panel discussions on design and producing and workshops on belly dancing and hip-hop theatre.

The [festival](#) is the brainchild of Executive Director Damian Sinclair and his business partner, Festival Director Julianne Brienza, who both relocated from Philadelphia about three years ago. "We were active in Philly's fringe festival and missed looking forward to the community feeling and creative excitement," Sinclair says. "We also believed Washington needed new outlets for experimental work." Sinclair and Brienza procured not only substantial private and government grants and donations to mount the festival, but also a list of local sponsors, who share their hope that the event will attract new audiences. According to Sinclair, Washington is the 76th city worldwide to initiate a fringe festival. The partners founded Capital Fringe as a nonprofit

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BACK STAGE BULLETINS

An Evening With... 'The Last

King Of Scotland'

September 13, 2006

Back Stage, in conjunction with The Hollywood Reporter, is proud to present a special free Los Angeles screening of the upcoming Fox Searchlight's *The Last King of Scotland*, starring Forest Whitaker.

group, and they plan to collaborate on other arts projects in the area. While Sinclair's main focus is fundraising and marketing, Brienza coordinates the myriad details with the help of a small staff and many volunteers.

Capital Fringe, like many fringe festivals, is not curated. "We took almost everyone who applied," says Sinclair, "unless they had space or technical requirements we couldn't meet." Participating groups advertised their auditions and staff needs on a blog, [DC Arts Jobs](#).

The official guide, meanwhile, reveals the festival's remarkable diversity, with installations, aerial artistry, puppetry, cabaret, and dance. Most shows run about an hour; the average ticket price is \$15. Eighty percent of the participants are Washington-based; the rest hail mostly from other parts of the United States and Canada.

The Tradition Continues

Although new to the fringe idea, Washington has a history of supporting summer theatre marathons. For more than 20 years, starting in 1981, the Source Theatre Company produced its annual Washington Theatre Festival. An incubator for new plays, it frequently overflowed its space on the 14th Street corridor into venues throughout the city. The festival nurtured several generations of theatre professionals and provided must-see entertainment for theatre buffs.

Callie Kimball, an actor and playwright, had her first play produced as part of Source's 10-minute-play competition. "I worked with them from 1999 to 2000," she says. "The festivals were wonderful, bringing the community together to try new stuff in the middle of the hot Washington summer. But now that Source is gone, the Fringe is here to offer young artists the chance to try new work without the necessity of being bankrolled or supported by a full-fledged theatre company." The inaugural Capital Fringe Festival will feature the world premiere of Kimball's two-hander *May 39th*, billed as "a voyeuristic peek at dating in D.C. in the year 3006." For a reasonable fee, she says, "Capital Fringe provides the venue and the liability insurance, and they're extremely well organized."

No theatre festival in the nation's capital would be complete without political satire. Rick Fiori fills the bill with his solo show *The Worst President Ever*, at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company's Rehearsal Hall. The festival marks a homecoming for Fiori, whose career developed during seven years with Woolly Mammoth, partly as a director of, as he puts it, "crazy new plays." Seeking a way to explore political and social issues, he turned to performance art. While honing his show, he cobbles together a living by coaching and producing life events such as weddings. Although Fiori performs his monologue once a month at Washington's Warehouse arts complex, he looks forward to greater exposure as part of Capital Fringe.

Washington-based actor Holly Bass has received rave reviews for her solo show *Diary of a Baby Diva*, which she has performed in cities as far afield as New York, Chicago, and Seattle. "Like a traveling salesperson," she says, she can pack her semiautobiographical show into "one large duffel bag with wheels." Used to one- or two-night runs, Bass is looking forward to five consecutive performances at Calvary Baptist Church's Woodward Hall. She's grateful the festival is providing her with an opportunity to fine-tune the show in front of diverse audiences, a step closer to her dream of an extended tour or a long-running gig in one venue.

Although most of the companies and artists are performing in the venues assigned to them, they can also opt to find their own. For example, MuseFire Productions, a theatre and film production company, is presenting *Stupid Frailty*, written and performed by Laura Zam and directed by Ian-Julian Williams, at Sweet Mango Café, a Jamaican restaurant. Zam, who has been developing the piece, billed as "a funny, poignant play about Internet dating, death, and hairless backs," since 2004, believes in adapting to her environment. Though the show's "crucial music is German," she says, in honor of the venue's cuisine -- a jerk chicken dinner is included in the \$28 ticket price -- she has blended several reggae songs into the mix.

After the festival, Sinclair says, he and Brienza look forward to a break before they start working on next year's Capital Fringe. Applications will be available later this year at www.capfringe.org.

Advance tickets can be purchased online up to two hours before each performance, by phone at (866) 811-4111, or at the festival box office at the Warehouse Downtown Arts Complex, 1017-21 Seventh St. N.W. Sales at the door one hour prior to performance are cash-only. There is no late seating. Festival guides can be downloaded from www.capfringe.org.

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