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Capital Fringe Festival

The Opening Acts: Merriment, With Razor-Sharp Edges

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The low-rent, high-energy orgy that is Capital Fringe began in earnest Friday, challenging patrons to select among the day's 50 or so offerings (at \$15 a ticket) concentrated in Penn Quarter but spreading from H Street NE to Georgetown to Shirlington.

"Fringe World Domination" was scrawled on the handmade sign that festival director Julianne Brienza carried the night before, and indeed, as the Fringe kicks off its second incarnation, everything is up—artist participation, performances and sales. But Thursday's opening even felt largely ceremonial as Brienza led a small band of rum-beating supporters through the drizzle and up Seventh Street NW for the first-night party. It wasn't really Fringe until:

- Audiences actually gathered for early afternoon shows on Friday;
- The white board in the window of Unified Launch Theory—the Fringe box office at 507 Seventh St. NW—started posting sellout notices (among the first: the return of last year's well-received "Abstract Nude" and something called "Chocolate Jesus");
- The Scientarium, and almost-converted storefront space a few doors west of Woolly Mammoth on D Street NW, opened in time for its first performance;
- The box office's Internet connection went out for more than five hours;
- Laura Zam performing solo around 1 a.m. in a hot, grubby room ironically named the Colosseum, urged audience members to share a foot massage in the name of world peace. Seriously.

Zam and her amusing yet dead-earnest "Collaterally Damaged" really clinched it, because, after all, the shows are the thing. And there is a multitude of shows, more than a hundred in all during the 11-day fest. And they're all over the map. Friday's haul ranged from a couple of high-gloss productions at the Source Theatre to dud burlesque in the ever-buzzing Warehouse arts complex on Seventh Street NW.

Among the first out of the gate was "I Love U.S." (continuing through Friday), an iffy bit of political paranoia featuring reeducation camps and raunchy-looking tasers. In the not-too-distant future, America's international stature has waned, but its emotional combination of the citizenry has gone the whole totalitarian hog. The acting is rough but there's wit in the script, and the folksy, stammering voice-over of the commander-in-chief had the small lunchtime crowd laughing in Woolly Mammoth's Melton Rehearsal Hall.

Gwydion Suilebhan's "Abstract Nude" (through Friday) was well received when read at the Fringe last year, and Merry Alderman's production at Source may be hard to beat for polish. The play features John Lescault and Naomi Jacobson as a couple who are among several interesting characters rocked by a nude painting; it's insightful, funny, and extremely well acted.

Source is the setting for another gem: "Queen of the Bohemian Dream" (through Saturday), a dashing little cabaret featuring the lyrics of Ffran Landesman ("Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most"). Bobby Smith, Tracy McMullan and Margo Seibert make up the bright cast singing the droll and increasingly dark songs by Landesman and composer Simon Wallace. With its self-producing, uncurated ethic, a lot of the Fringe can feel like Theater Camp, but this is grown-up stuff.

So is "Air Heart" (through next Sunday) at the Scientarium, Mara Neimanis's dreamy, acrobatic meditation on Amelia Earhart. The centerpiece of Neimanis's show is a beautifully sculpted framework airplane, which Neimanis (well-sculpted herself) hoists herself in and around, spinning the plan or

dangling off a wing as she moves to ethereal music or recites letters she imagines Earhart writing to her friend Eleanor Roosevelt. It's absorbing and extremely disciplined.

Less so is "BurleyQ" (through next Sunday) in the Warehouse Next Door, which lured an audience in with the promise of nude puppets but stupefied patrons with its ineptitude. Go if you like awkward silence.

Upstairs in the Warehouse Colosseum, young John Hefner offered "The Hefner Monologues" (through next Sunday), recounting a series of mortifications as he wonders why he's not as cool as his dad and his dad's famous cousin (yep, that Hefner). It's a promising cross between stand-up comedy, identity monologue and storytelling.

Hefner may have learned a thing or two watching Zam later that night. Zam, too, is introspective and funny, but also fiercely aware of the world and her place in it. "Collaterally Damaged" (through next Sunday) opens with a provocation, as she impersonates noted journalist Philip Gourevitch grimly telling artists that they can't do anything to stop genocide. Zam doesn't take this lying down, heading back to Europe and her family's history in the Holocaust, along the way making smart jokes about arts funding and the basically manipulative nature of storytelling.

She's a Fringe opening act, kicking complacency in the teeth—but with a smile. For a complete listing, visit www.capfringe.org.