

Calgary's New Fringe

By Sean McLennan



Fringe is coming to Calgary! In a big way. We may be a little behind the curve—after all even Swift Current beat us on this front—but from all indications this year's festival will not be a cautious first attempt nor a pale rip-off of its world renown cousin to the north. Nor will it be the Red Mile (more on that later). No, The Calgary Fringe Festival, August 11-20, promises to be a full-scale, vibrant, and uniquely Calgarian event.

Chances are that you've heard of the Edmonton Fringe Festival (it's the second largest in the world, drawing on the order of 800,000 people a year!) but unless you've actually had the opportunity to attend a Fringe Festival, you might not have a good idea of what Fringe is. A Fringe Festival is "an

uncensored, non-juried theatre festival." That means that anyone, emerging and professional artists alike, can participate and do pretty much anything they want.

That may sound a little anarchic, and in a way it is, but the point is to provide affordable opportunities for aspiring artists, to give visibility to less traditional ideas, and to improve accessibility to the public. The formula has proven to draw crowds and there's a longer history to Fringe than most people realize—the first Fringe Festival took place in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1947. Edmonton's was the first in Canada in 1982 and its success inspired the creation of Fringe Festivals all across North America. At first, the festivals were only loosely affiliated—eventually in 1994, a governing body, the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals (CAFF) was instituted to formalize and enforce the four fundamental principles of Fringe:

1. Participants will be selected on a non-juried basis, through a first-come, first served process, a lottery or other method approved by the Association.
2. In order to ensure Criteria One (above), the audiences must have the option to pay a ticket price, 100% of which goes directly to the artists.
3. Fringe Festival producers have no control over the artistic content of each performance. The artistic freedom of the participants is unrestrained.
4. Festivals must provide an easily accessible opportunity for all audiences and all artists to participate in Fringe Festivals.

Principle #2 is perhaps the most startling and unique aspect of Fringe Festivals—how often do artists get to see 100 per cent of their ticket sales? CAFF is a non-profit organization and it and the festivals themselves run on sponsorship, donations, vendors at the festivals, and the token entry fees artists are charged (in the case of street performers, even those fees are returned if they show up to their venue on time). Where they can, they will pay for services in kind—advertising for instance—and although they do not aggressively pursue government money and grants, sometimes that is a source of income.

Calgary has hosted *Fringe* before—in 2001 and 2002, the Loose Moose Theatre hosted two festivals in Inglewood. Unfortunately, because of the closure of two major Inglewood venues, the Garry Theatre and the New Dance Theatre, the Loose Moose was driven out of Inglewood and declined to produce further Fringes. By comparison, those two festivals were also fairly small in scope (no disrespect to the Loose Moose intended). They only included theatre performance and by comparison were much smaller than this year's festival, which boasts a much larger budget and a more central location, 17th Avenue. It is also expanded to include much more than theatre: film, music, dance, visual art, street performance and even body painting will all be represented.

The driving force behind this new Fringe is Blair Gallant, a native of Lethbridge, who is a bit of a latecomer to the arts but has been active in the Calgary theatre community for a few years. It's immediately apparent that Blair is a classic overachiever: father, businessman, director/producer, festival producer...taiko drummer. He's not the kind of guy that you can imagine lying on a beach somewhere soaking up the sun. After his first child was born, he felt the need to make a pretty big life change, and got out of his previous occupations centered on land development, chain stores, and brokerages and began working for the AO Shirley Foundation—a non-profit organization that supports primarily the arts, the environment, and children. Subsequently, Blair caught the theatre bug and started directing and producing, realizing just how much power theatre has to inspire change within people. From there, it was a natural step to Fringe. At this point, though, I'm not sure he's seeing much change in pace from before what he jokingly refers to as his *retirement*. Organizing a festival on this scale is hardly a laid-back endeavour! Old habits die hard.

The Calgary Fringe Festival started out with just three people and now the organizing committee has grown to fifty-five, with an additional 110 volunteers. Blair's experience in business translates well into this context and it is gratifying to hear him already talking about sustainability and succession planning. It's clear that he is planning beyond 2006 and intends to put something in place that will be able to succeed long after he's moved on. That is one of the reasons for the scale of this year's festival—Blair doesn't believe in gradually growing something like this over time. He says you need to have a *critical mass* of size and structure to make it both successful and sustainable.

So what can you expect at the Fringe Festival this year? The primary center will be on and around 17th Avenue between Fifth and Eighth streets (with potentially a downtown component that has yet to be confirmed) and there will be thirty-seven indoor theatre productions, forty-four independent films, fifty to sixty touring street performers, twelve body painters, and more than fifteen musical acts that are a combination of local, national and international artists. Plus, there will be another six professional performance groups, local street vendors and other special events. By any criteria, it should be one hell of a show!

Blair says that the city is genuinely putting in an effort to be more arts friendly—a change over the last five to ten years that he attributes to the influx of people from across Canada and around the world. Not only is the population growing to a size that can support such events, but also there is a much richer diversity of expectations about the arts. Apparently, the biggest barrier that he and the organizing committee have encountered is the (somewhat bizarre) association of the Festival with the Red Mile. Myself, I find it hard to imagine what they have in common—but I guess that some local communities simply associate *red* with crowds and 17th Avenue and that's had them a little spooked. Also I suppose the word *fringe* might have some sketchy, if not down-right pejorative connotations in some people's minds. Blair is confident that it will only take one year to make the difference clear and that the festival will be a welcome addition to the inner city.

As of this writing, there is still space open for some categories—applications are available on the website: calgaryfringefestival.com. They're always looking for volunteers. So, if you have a little time on your hands and the desire to help Calgary take this step out from under the Edmonton arts shadow, surf on over and drop them a line. However, the best way to support the Festival is to show up! Come August, plan to keep that week free to enjoy some truly unique performances. ▼

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