

A lot of acts will be out on the Fringe this year; Performers around the metro get ready for the nation's largest non-juried performing arts festival.

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New Hope dance choreographer Edna Stevens Talton was just looking for an audience when she took the stage at the Minnesota Fringe Festival for the first time last year.

Like most newcomers at the nation's largest nonjuried performing arts festival, she didn't really know what to expect when she recruited a few dozen of the best students and professionals from her New Hope dance company, Universal Dance Destiny, and produced "African Roads, American Streets."

She didn't expect the diverse showcase of multicultural dance and hip-hop would be a smash hit, or that it would be one of just four Fringe shows (out of 172) to land at the newly opened Guthrie Theatre's first "Fringe Encore" last year.

Universal Dance is dedicated to mixing things up and taking chances - like blending traditional West African dance with reggae and breaking (the legit term for breakdancing), which might be what makes it a natural act for the Fringe.

The Fringe's mission is to bring together, well, just about anyone and everyone who wants to do just about anything. Some are veteran pros; some are amateurs just itching for a stage. All a hopeful performer has to do is submit an application and win a lottery. That leaves the door open to plenty of success stories and often a few failures.

Isaiah Waid of Circle Pines has seen both.

The Centennial graduate and former student at Anoka-Ramsey Community College made his Fringe acting debut in 2005 in what he describes as "a musical version of '12 Angry Men,' except really bad."

Last year he landed another role, in the top seller "Google: The Musical," and ended up at the Guthrie along with Universal Dance.

Now Waid is taking another leap and writing his own original Fringe performance, a comedy that tries to answer the question "is pro-American comedy possible?" More to the point, Waid says, is pro-American comedy possible when your government recruits your sketch-comedy team to put a fun spin on current events, including secret prisons, wiretaps and the abortion debate?

Stevens Talton and Universal Dance Destiny are returning to the Fringe with "The Spiritual Battle," a blend of martial arts, Afro modern, lyrical, krumping and hip-hop dance styles with drummers, dancers, singers and other performers acting out the unseen battle between good and evil.

Though competition for an audience will be tough - there are 162 shows to choose from over 11 days this year - the huge size of the Fringe can most benefit the smaller and newer performers who can't draw a large audience on reputation alone.

"Really small theater in the cities is only going to survive and thrive if people band together and make a concentrated effort to get audiences instead of fighting for them all the time," said Chris McGahan of the St. Louis Park-based Bad Attitude Productions, which returns to the Fringe this year with a satirical live news show, "KRAS News."

"It puts everybody on a level playing field, to a point," he said. "Despite being a company that nobody had heard of and had no connections [in 2005], we sold out three of our five shows. ... It's the little man's circuit."

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MORE INFO The Minnesota Fringe Festival 2007 runs Thursday through Aug. 12. Performances are held at locations throughout Minneapolis. For more information, schedules and locations, see www.fringefestival.org.