

Fringe festival: Feasting on the Fringe

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Four days at the Fringe Festival saw both the most impressive peaks of talent, and

performers who should be charged with felony-level crimes against art. I laughed to the point of breathlessness and was moved to tears. If you've never gone to a play or dance performance, you owe yourself a trip to the Fringe—plus, there's enough comedy to pack the ER with cracked ribs.

TOP PICKS



"American Drama: Pocket Edition"

American theater classics ("Streetcar Named Desire," "The Crucible," "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?") plus musicals ("West Side Story" and "Guys and Dolls") compressed into one hilarious hour. Familiarity with these plays is unnecessary, as this well-oiled comedy machine grabs and won't let go until you're limp with laughter.

"Baghdad Burning"

Four actresses dramatize the story of a real-life female blogger in Baghdad known as "Riverbend." Humor vies with the horrific in her observations about Iraqis' daily life and the escalating theocratic oppression against women there. This performance reveals what CNN doesn't.



"Bent"



Martin Sherman's play about two gay men in Hitler's concentration camps qualifies as first-rate drama anywhere. Local actors Sasha Andreev (Max) and Joseph Bombard (Horst) give extraordinary performances as the lovers, while Jim Thomas' SS Captain chills beyond the bone. The 'sex scene without touching' creates more real passion than 90% of cinematic nudity does. Don't miss this profoundly moving play.

"Welcome to Dystopia"

In this State-controlled future, your name is a numbered color code, everyone must wear a "Good Time Boot" and even librarians don't read books. But one secret bookworm escapes. This darkly funny sendup of what could be an original Star Trek episode makes you think while never sacrificing a chance to laugh.



"Wonderland"



Everywhere I went people raved about this gay version of Lewis Carroll's classic and they were right! "Alex" travels to a disco Wonderland with DJ White Rabbit, a drag Queen of Hearts, a dominatrix and sexy male dancers. Non-stop humor.

If you think you don't like dance, these shows will change your mind.

"African Roads, American Streets"

Live drummers, beatboxers and African and hip-hop dancers of all ages create an absolutely exhilarating experience. This show convinced me that breakdancing should be added to the Olympics' gymnastics category. Incredibly uplifting and highly recommended for all ages.



"When God Was Fun"



Playwright/actor Nancy Couger creates one of the best solo performances at the Fringe in this provocative and comic look at religion. From the game show "What Was God Thinking?" to dialing 1-900-GOD-SHOP, Couger embodies a range of characters including a Gen-X hacker, preppy game-show host and God Himself—with a Russian accent.

"Dance Hall Days"

A delightful romp through the first half of the 20th century: ragtime, early jazz, tango, swing and 1950s rock and roll are all represented. Vintage costumes, mostly live music and projected black and white images make this a great all-ages show.



Laughter: Another Kind of Prayer?

Lake Harriet United Methodist Church hosts the "Spiritual Fringe." Resurgent fundamentalism and the politicizing of religion make this series relevant and timely. Here are two shows that can lure anyone into a pew.



"Goddess"

Holly Davis reprises her "Spiritual Buffet" show, but "Goddess" is the one to see: 5,000 years of the feminine Divine, from hunter-gatherers to "The Da Vinci Code" with humor, dance and a memorable Jeopardy game thrown in.

"I Got a Fundamentalist Up My Ass"

It's not at the church venue but Eskit's alter-ego Right (Wing) Reverend Hickey makes hellfire hilarious as he skewers the Christian Coalition, turning a sermon into great standup. His satirical songs make him the heir to Tom Lehrer.



Visible Fringe: Hip-Hop Art Ain't Just Graffiti

Jack Pavlik's sculpture with sound is truly imaginative, while Shannon Brady's fine ink drawings have a mythic, multicultural twist. But, my #1 pick for most surprising and totally accessible visual art is '**B-Girl Be**' at Intermedia Arts (through Sept.9th). This show presents the female side of hip-hop culture, breaking MTV booty stereotypes and brimming with talent. You won't be able to take your eyes off Kristen Franklin's collage paintings. Michelle Spaise' photographic color portraits of women in hip-hop include locals Desdamaona and Isis. A savvy museum should grab up the urban landscapes by Faith 47 for their permanent collection. Anira Ali's sculpture "Hajib B-Girl" is marvelous.

Youth Plays To Love



I usually avoid plays by kids but both of these shows are sharply written and these teens can REALLY act: "**The 9/11 Tapes**" draws on personal reactions and news reports. "**Angst**" looks at high school cliques, taking on sex, drugs and MySpace.

Identity Politics: Shining Solos

Allegra J. Lingo is a lesbian storyteller whose "**A Heap of Broken Images**" is a wonderful road trip. Lingo meets various characters (including herself) on the way to the RV Hall of Fame.

"**Condoleeza's Rites**" is Ericka Deenis' tragic-comic exploration of ghetto poverty and the rise of African-American conservatives. Bill Cosby, Chris Rock, Charles Dickens and the Nation of Islam make guest appearances.



AVOID LIKE THE PLAGUE

I'd prefer to just ignore these shows, but the public has a right to know.



Yolanda Cotterall is obviously a good actress but she can't single-handedly save "**Miss Margarida's Way**." In this meditation on authoritarianism, the title character is a hybrid of Ken Kesey's Nurse Ratchet and John Ashcroft. Recommended only for masochists desperate for someone to verbally humiliate them.

I'm a card-carrying feminist, but "**Resisting the Birthmark**" literally drove me from the theater. Accurately subtitled "A Feminist Theory Play," it was like being repeatedly bludgeoned with a heavy textbook.

Bypass "**Struggle: The True Story of Ex-Inmates**," a series of self-indulgent lectures that reinforce every racial stereotype while illuminating nothing about the crisis of America's prisons.

Worst of the Fringe goes to "**It's Hard Being Tall—Blackman Changing Hats**" Kelechi Jaavaid (aka The Late Night Poet) performs embarrassingly bad poetry that a lovesick teenager wouldn't mail anonymously. Even worse, the self-indulgent complaining he calls "stand-up comedy" isn't funny.

