

At Off Center, Burlington's Fringe Fest Is Back

By Sadie Williams

The Burlington Fringe Festival at Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, which bills itself as "the fourth annual," began five years ago. No, that's not a trick or a math error. The ostensibly yearly event, which started in 2012, took a hiatus last year. Now it's back in force: Thursday through Sunday, October 13 through 16, the Old North End venue will host 24 original performances by Vermont theater artists.

In theater lingo, the term "fringe" refers to performances that are experimental or nontraditional in style or subject. Fringe fests take place around the world. The best known and largest is the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which was born on the streets of that Scottish city in 1947. It was literally on the periphery of the then-new Edinburgh International Festival, intended as a showcase for postwar European culture. Rather than submit to the scrutiny of a panel of judges, eight rogue theater groups simply set up outside the venues of the larger event. True to that legacy, Burlington's Fringe is unjuried: The first 24 applicants were accepted with no questions asked.

This year's event marks a turning point for the venue itself. Over the past few months, Off Center welcomed 11 new members to its board. The goal is to assist cofounding director Paul Schnabel in uplifting the organization and fulfilling its mission to support the production of original theater work in the state.

Schnabel is grateful for the help. "I think the community collectively realized the resource we have here," he said in a recent interview. Off Center opened in 2010 with four founders, but, "in the way this thing evolved," Schnabel continued, "it was kind of left that I was running the whole thing myself."

David Schein is one of the new board members who stepped up to the plate. "We love this place, because there's no other place to do your work," he said. "And there's a lot of theater artists here who work all over. We needed a home."

The board members got together this past summer and began planning a collective management structure, discussing grants and brainstorming annual events — such as the Fringe.

As usual, it will be a diverse affair. Some performers will offer excerpts from past productions, while others will present works-in-progress. In that way, Schein said, "it might show what [will be] going on in theater from Vermont artists in the next few years."

Lyric Theatre executive director Syndi Zook will emcee on Thursday evening, when actor G. Richard Ames is one of the six performers who will appear onstage. The verbose lyricist is dusting off a few songs from his



David Schein and Paul Schnabel Photo: Sadie Williams

March performance, Out of My Head, for the new piece "Mental Notes." "My central issue is peace and love and happiness," he said, "and hopefully humor to go along with it."

Waterbury-based Moxie Productions will close that evening with "How the West Was Worn," an excerpt from Jeanne Beckwith's original musical Rodeo Gals. The script is a mashup of costume history, rodeo culture and romance — with a car crash for extra drama.

On Friday night, Alex Dostie and Aaron Masi of Green Candle Theatre will host, taking on the personae of various characters from works by Burlington playwright Stephen Goldberg. (The Off Center cofounder will perform that same night.) Later, the MCs will end the evening with an excerpt from Masi's The Pirate Play, which will be staged in full next year.

On Saturday night, actor Schein and Vermont poet Geof Hewitt will perform — with squirrel puppets — an excerpt from a musical they wrote about global warming, titled Hotball. "We've got squirrels who just don't know when to mate anymore," Schein explained, "or have litters, or anything, because the climate is really weird."

Saturday night's lineup also includes the return of the Potato Sack Pants Theater, a sketch comedy troupe that got its start at the first Burlington Fringe. Member Meredith Gordon noted that the group has been on hiatus for three years. They'll perform a trio of new sketches, she said.

Sunday's late-afternoon show, hosted by actor-musician Allan Nicholls, will wrap up this year's Fringe. Kim Bent of Montpelier's Lost Nation Theater will give it a literary edge by reading an excerpt from W.H. Auden's long poem *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest*. Bent has been enchanted by the passage ("Caliban to the Audience") since his days as a "dewy-eyed, poetry-reading actor," he said. "It's a heady, heartfelt, dramatically framed meditation about the intersection between, and the overlapping nature of, the real world and the world of the imagination."

That space between imagination and reality is where organizations like Off Center and events like Fringe thrive. "We have great resources with the Flynn [Center for the Performing Arts], and Main Street Landing [Performing Arts Center] down on the waterfront, but they can't do what we do," Schein said. "[Off Center] is an essential link in the cultural food chain."