

Burlington Fringe Festival Returns to Off Center



(Photo: BRENT HALLENBECK/FREE PRESS)

The Burlington Fringe Festival went beyond the fringe last year – the event based at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts didn't happen in 2015.

The founders of the Off Center had largely moved on since the theatrical petri dish in the Old North End began in 2010, with actors John D. Alexander going to New York City and Genevra MacPhail returning to school and having a baby and playwright Stephen Goldberg spending much of his time in Florida. That left president/co-founding actor Paul Schnabel to run the festival himself, and a four-day event with two dozen performances - not to mention overseeing the entire performing-arts venue - became too much for one man to handle.

The Burlington Fringe Festival has been revived by a newly organized board of directors who hope the once-annual event will help carry the Off Center into the next phase of its existence. "We want to brand ourselves and tell the community, 'We're here,'" said David Schein, a theater artist who's on the Off Center board and is producing this week's Burlington Fringe Festival.

Alexander, who remains a member of the Off Center board, said the revived festival is "part of the renaissance" of the 6-year-old space.

"The direction that the Off Center is going is the very direction we hoped it would go," he said, referring to a number of local theater participants taking an active role in overseeing the venue. "One person can't continue to run a space like that in perpetuity."

Branding a 65-seat venue that caters to nascent, often avant-garde productions is complicated. How far above ground can a space that occupies the theatrical underground go?

"We need people to see our shows," Schein said. He noted that Vermont musician Anais Mitchell launched her folk opera "Hadestown" a decade ago in the tiny Langdon Street Café in Montpelier before her production became a Grammy-nominated album and off-Broadway hit. The Off Center, he said, can inspire similar grassroots success stories.



Laura Roald presents "Thoughts and Prayers" Friday at the Burlington Fringe Festival. (Photo: COURTESY)

"This is where that kind of art starts," said Schein, a Burlington native who performed in California for 40 years before returning to Vermont. "This is the incubator. In this kind of town with a big university, this will work."

The meaning of "fringe" is elusive. "The way we define 'fringe' is someone who wants to be in the festival," Schein joked.

This year's participants represent a sort of all-star team of local theater performers who approach their crafts from a variety of perspectives. A piece by Schein and poet Geof Hewitt will use music and squirrel puppets to tell a tale of climate change. Burlington resident Allan Nicholls, who appeared in the classic 1975 movie "Nashville," offers a 15-minute solo piece. The Green Candle Theatre Company will present scenes from an in-the-works pirate-themed production.

The festival kicks off a run of higher-profile events at the Off Center that will include a Dec. 3 celebration at the North Winooski Avenue space featuring music, food and a presentation highlighting the center's offerings.



Schein said the Burlington Fringe Festival is an important step in calling the broader community's attention to the Off Center, but it's also important for the creative community to have a place to feed off of each other's energy.

"It's sort of like coming home to mama," Schein said. "We've got to do this every year and see what we're up to."

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G. Richard Ames presents his show "Mental Notes" tonight at the Burlington Fringe Festival. (Photo: COURTESY)