

Actors and Audiences Alike Are Fringe Beneficiaries in Burlington

State of the Arts
BY ERIK ESKILSEN

The **Off Center for the Dramatic Arts**' second annual **Burlington Fringe Festival**, which opens on Thursday, August 2, poses an interesting semantic question: If a venue succeeds in enabling "fringe"-type shows to become the veritable mainstream of a theater scene, is it still accurate to call a showcase of these acts "fringe"?

In major theater cities, such as Edinburgh, Scotland, home to the largest and oldest festival of this kind, the "fringe" designation suggests nonmainstream productions — that is, original works along a wide spectrum of artistic experimentation. In just two years of operation, the Off Center has created such an inviting — and affordable — home for budget-conscious thespians that edgy works are beginning to redefine the local theater norm.



Potato Sack Pants Theater

According to **Meredith Gordon** of **Potato Sack Pants Theater**, Off Center's hospitable rental rates inspired her crew to get an act together in the first place. "When we heard about Off Center and saw how awesome their processes were, we were able to start a troupe," she says. "We finally had a place and an opportunity to form our group because of Off Center."

Gordon and her husband, **Andy Gordon**, will represent Potato Sack on opening night of the Fringe Festival with a series of four comic sketches. The pieces are unconnected, but three of them deal with the topic of pregnancy. They're short works of comic art imitating the expectant couple's present life. The Gordons will join 15 other acts at the festival, which is bigger than the 2011 Fringe by one or two shows per night.

The program is a who's who of local theater artists and Off Center regulars — including playwrights **Maura Campbell** and **Stephen Goldberg**, and the **Green Candle Theatre Company**. But, as Off Center cofounder **John D. Alexander** notes, the strong response to the Fringe call this year will bring several newcomers — to the venue or to the Fringe — such as **Donny Osman**, the **Absurdist Artichoke Players** and the **House of LeMay**. Even with the slightly expanded program, Alexander adds, each evening is a rich but not overly long night of theater. The genres and styles represented in the festival — comedy, drama, dance, music, performance art, multimedia — are well distributed through the nights so that each audience will see a good deal of variety, he says. A different MC will preside over each evening — **Aaron Masi**, **Syndi Zook** and **Jordan Gullikson**, respectively.

In the spirit of artistic risk, Alexander and his Off Center cohorts accepted the bulk of the festival's submissions sight unseen, trusting the theater artists to "surprise us and the audience in a positive way," he says. "That I'm aware of, that's not a common fringe-festival tradition, but it certainly does make it more fringe-y in perhaps an even newer way: the surprise package."

That openness and a generally laid-back approach to hosting theater have been surprising theater troupes since Off Center opened its doors in June 2010. As Meredith Gordon recalls of the show "Character Flaws," which Potato Sack mounted in May 2011, "We were so shocked when we brought our set in. [They said], 'When we give you the keys to this space, it's your space. If you want to screw into the floors, screw into the floors.'" What's more, Andy Gordon adds, "There are people running it who get our humor."

Off Center's flourishing is the culmination of Alexander and co.'s efforts over more than 10 years to establish an affordable home for independent theater in Burlington. Alexander says the steady rental traffic at the Old North End black-box venue — in the same building as the **North End Studio** and **CCTV** — attests to the substantial number of "artistically completely viable" theater companies with more enthusiasm for quality work than interest in reaping profits. He calls the response to the Fringe "a vindication of our goals. We wanted to be here for these very performers, and they came to Off Center. It's a really nice symbiosis," Alexander says.

Andy Gordon heard the invitation this way: "Do what you love to do, and we'll put it all together into a wacky night of entertainment," he says. "It's a big mix of whatever."

The Second Annual Burlington Fringe Festival. Thursday through Saturday, August 2-4, 8 p.m. at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts in Burlington. \$15 per night, at the door or online at brownpapertickets.com/event/260450.